

ROME AND CHINA:
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TWO GREAT ANCIENT EMPIRES

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Connections between ancient Rome and China are difficult to identify due to the lack of available evidence. However, various historians and geographers in antiquity and in the modern era have identified numerous interactions between ancient Rome and China. While nearly all of the interactions were indirect, brokered mostly by Parthian and Kushan intermediaries, both the Romans and the Chinese were very likely aware of each other. Most of this awareness came from the various trade goods that flowed along the Silk Road, including goods gathered from various parts of the respective empires and their neighbors. In addition to physical goods, cultural aspects such as clothing, religion, philosophy, medical techniques, and military strategy may have diffused between Rome and China as well. It is possible, according to some historians, that the Romans and Chinese had direct interaction on a limited scale, but such interaction lacks ample supporting evidence. Substantial extant evidence does show, however, that ancient Rome and China enjoyed a great deal of indirect contact over a span of several decades at the beginning of the *Pax Romana* and more infrequent contact for a few centuries afterward.

Contact between ancient Rome and China could not have been possible without Rome's relentless expansion. After securing the Italian peninsula, Rome defeated Carthage during the Punic Wars (264-146 BC), eliminating a powerful rival. Rome concurrently expanded eastward through victories in the Macedonian Wars (214-148 BC), the Roman-Syrian War (192-188 BC), and the conquest of Greece at Corinth (146 BC). Egypt and the Macedonians had previously formed an alliance under Philip V (c. 200 BC), so the Roman victory over Macedonia gave Rome a foothold in Egypt that it would never relinquish. This expansion gave Rome control over the Mediterranean Sea region and opened trade routes to the East that would eventually reach across Asia to China.

Securing access to the key eastward trade centers and their trade routes involved decades of Roman military and political maneuvering. Powerful Roman generals such as Lucullus, Pompey, and Crassus continued Rome's eastward expansion into Asia once Rome had secured most of southern Europe and northern Africa. In the early and mid-first century BC, Rome expanded its sphere of influence into eastern Asia Minor, Armenia, the Levant, Syria, and Egypt. During the Third Mithridatic War (75-63 BC), Lucullus and Pompey defeated Mithridates VI of Pontus, giving Rome nearly all of Asia Minor and the Black Sea region.¹ This acquisition provided Rome a northern trade route to the East. Lucullus invaded Armenia in 69 BC in pursuit of Mithridates, pushing Roman influence further eastward beyond the Black Sea and exposing Rome to the formidable Parthian Empire. Pompey replaced Lucullus as commander in 66 BC and joined forces with the Parthians against Armenia.² This signaled the beginning of a long love-hate relationship between the Romans and the Parthians.

Pompey continued south into Syria in 64 BC and seized territory along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. His legate, Aulus Gabinius, was appointed governor of Syria in 57 BC. Within the next year, Gabinius invaded Parthia, withdrew his invasion to meddle in the political affairs of Egypt on behalf of Pompey, and attacked the Nabataeans of Petra.³ In the years that followed, the military and political maneuverings of Julius Caesar and Octavian brought Egypt firmly under Roman control by 30 BC, allowing unfettered access to the great trade capital of Alexandria. Thus, the cities of Antioch, Palmyra, Damascus, Petra, and Alexandria fell under

¹ Frederick John Teggart, *Rome and China: A Study of Correlations in Historical Events* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

Roman control, or at least became accessible to Rome, forming the “distribution centers” of a trade network that connected Rome and the East.⁴

As Octavian became Augustus in 27 BC, the *Pax Romana* brought peace and stability to the new Roman Empire. During this time, the cities of Alexandria and Antioch emerged as the primary trading conduits with the East. Alexandria, with its access to the Mediterranean and Red Seas, became the principle link to the sea trade with Arabia, East Africa, and India. Antioch became the principle overland route, linking Rome with Parthia, south-central Asia, India, and China.⁵ Rome did not necessarily have direct contact with such faraway civilizations as India and China, but they almost certainly had indirect contact through various intermediaries along the trade routes.

There were two predominate methods of exporting and importing goods by sea through Alexandria. Using the Nile route, goods flowed up the Nile to Coptos (now Qift, north of Luxor), where caravans walked the items to seaports at Myos Hormos or Berenice Panchrysos on the Red Sea. The second method navigated branches, canals, and lakes of the Nile Delta to Arsinoe on the Gulf of Suez. Because this route was infested with pirates, had shifting shoals, and had an annoying southerly wind, the route to Myos Hormos or Berenice was preferred. Both methods of sailing from Alexandria were dangerous, however, so Augustus enacted a system of military supervision over Myos Hormos and Berenice to ensure security.⁶ Ethiopians, Axumites, various Arab tribes, and the Nabataeans of Petra charged high fees to serve as intermediaries. In addition, they sometimes attacked Alexandrian caravans and ships out of fear that Rome would undercut their own trade profits by trading directly with the East. Rome spent considerable time and effort

⁴ John Thorley, “The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” *Greece and Rome, Second Series* 16, no. 2 (October 1969): 217, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642851> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

dealing with these civilizations to facilitate smooth commerce. By a stroke of good fortune, the Romans discovered how to use the monsoon winds to cross the Indian Ocean, thus avoiding Arabian intermediaries altogether.⁷ Despite this advancement and success with pacifying competitors and intermediaries, the majority of trade between Rome and the East passed over land, not the sea.

Land routes from Roman-controlled Antioch led into Parthia by crossing the Euphrates at Zeugma (in southeastern Turkey).⁸ Roman-Parthian relations had been strained for decades, but Augustus improved ties with this vital trade partner in 20 BC, securing the eastern frontier and expanding trade in items such as Chinese silk.⁹ Trade from Antioch and Palmyra passed through Parthia to the “Stone Tower” (possibly Tashkurgan in Tajik Autonomous County, Xinjiang, China) in the Tarim Basin of western China, where Parthian intermediaries met with Chinese merchants. According to Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, the distance from the Euphrates to the Stone Tower was 26,280 stadia.¹⁰ From the Stone Tower to Sera, the capital city of the Seres (Chinese),¹¹ an additional seven-month journey of 36,200 stadia was required.¹² At 625 feet in a stade,¹³ the distance between the Euphrates at the crossing at Zeugma and the Stone Tower on modern China’s western border would have been approximately 3100 miles. The journey required an additional 4,285 miles to reach the Chinese capital.

⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁹ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰ Ptol. Geo. 1.11.4.

¹¹ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews' edition of *Freund's Latin Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=seres&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059> (accessed July 5, 2014), s.v. “Seres.”

¹² Ptol. Geo. 1.11.4.

¹³ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1286365/measurement-system/13612/Greeks-and-Romans> (accessed July 22, 2014), s. v. “measurement system.”

The trade route often lengthened considerably because of fluctuations in the relationship between Rome and Parthia. When travel through Parthia was restricted, Roman merchants used alternate routes to the East. A northern route traveled around or across the Caspian Sea, across land to the Aral Sea, and down the Oxus River (Amu Darya) to the Stone Tower.¹⁴ Once the Romans subdued Petra, a southern route through Petra provided another option. Clearly, land transport between Rome and China was a complicated enterprise.

Between Rome and China, at least during the time of Augustus and his first century successors, the Parthians and the Kushans controlled most of the land trade. Parthia was essentially at the heart of the former Persian Empire that Alexander the Great conquered in the late-300s BC. It stretched from Mesopotamia in the west to the modern Iranian-Afghan and Iranian-Pakistani borders in the east and from the Caspian and Aral Seas in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. On Parthia's eastern border, the Kushan Empire controlled lands roughly located over modern Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and northern India along the great river valleys. The eastern border of Kushan territory bordered the western extremities of Chinese territory. The Chinese knew the Kushans as the Yueh-chi (Yuezhi).¹⁵ In the third century BC, the Kushans/Yueh-chi were displaced from their home in the Tarim Basin due to harassments from the Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu). In a classic example of the "billiard ball theory" of migration, the Kushans moved out of the Tarim Basin and settled east of the Parthians, displacing the Greeks from Bactria.¹⁶ This migration, and China's reaction to it, may have led to the great indirect relationship between Rome and China.

¹⁴ Thorley, "The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus," 215.

¹⁵ John Thorley, "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, 'Circa' A. D. 90-130," *Greece and Rome, Second Series* 18, no. 1 (April 1971): 72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642389> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹⁶ G. F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relationships from the Earliest Times to 1800* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1931), 58-60.

In the late-second century BC, just as Rome conquered Macedonia, Greece, and parts of western Asia Minor, China's Han dynasty learned about lands west of China through the stories of Zhang Qian (Chang Ch'ien). An official of Han emperor Wu (Wudi), Zhang Qian accepted a mission from his emperor to build alliances with some of the western provinces, including the newly settled Yueh-chi. Emperor Wu was disturbed by reports that the Hsiung-nu captured and murdered the Yueh-chi king, making a drinking cup out of his skull. In 128 BC, Zhang Qian set out to meet with the Yue-chi.¹⁷ Unfortunately, to do so meant that he must travel through Hsiung-nu territory. He was captured and imprisoned, but eventually returned to the Han court with tales of faraway foreign lands.

According to the *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)* written by Sima Qian in the first century BC, Zhang Qian personally visited the lands of Dayuan (Ferghana Valley in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), Kangju (Sogdiana near Tashkent, Uzbekistan), the Great Yuezhi (Yueh-chi or Kushan lands in Bactria and Kashmir), and Daxia (Greek Bactria).¹⁸ He also sent envoys to Anxi (Parthia), Shendu (Pakistan), Yutian (Khotan in the Tarim Basin), Yumo (?), and "other neighbouring states."¹⁹ One of those neighboring states was the Wusun, who lived just north of the Tarim Basin. Upon his return to Wu's court, Zhang Qian explained about a fledgling trade network that extended far to the west.²⁰ The particular mention of the Yuezhi (Kushans) and Anxi (Parthians) indicates that the Chinese had contact with Rome's two great land intermediaries by 128 BC through Zhang Qian and his envoys. During the successive decades, Chinese contact spread further west. By the time of the *Hou Hanshu*, a historical account of the

¹⁷ Hudson, 61.

¹⁸ Burton Watson, trans., Sima Qian, "Shi ji 123: The Account of Dayuan," from *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Columbia University Press, 1993), 233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁰ W. Perceval Yetts, "Links Between Ancient China and the West," *Geographical Review* 16, no. 4 (October 1926): 616, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/208388> (accessed June 22, 2014).

Han dynasty in the first and second century AD, the Chinese were also aware of the Da Qin (Roman Empire).²¹ China's westward contact under the Han Empire through Zhang Qian's diplomacy and the Roman conquests of Antioch, Palmyra, Petra, and Alexandria through the efforts of Pompey, Lucullus, Crassus, and Octavian almost concurrently facilitated Sino-Roman connections along the Silk Road.

Roman and Chinese trade through Parthia and the Kushan Empire along the Silk Road was far from vigorous before the first century AD. In fact, such trade was often non-existent before Augustus's imperial reforms and the stability of the *Pax Romana*. Rome had grown wealthy through its many military conquests during the Late Republic, particularly the conquest of Carthage during the Punic Wars, Julius Caesar's conquests in Gaul, and Octavian's annexation of Egypt.²² However, most of Rome's wealth as Octavian became Augustus was in the hands of just a few wealthy people. The Roman masses remained at near subsistence level in an "underdeveloped" economy that stifled commerce and left little room for economic activity other than small-scale handicrafts such as pottery and textiles.²³ In addition, the landed aristocracy felt threatened by a merchant class that made its money without land, so they deemphasized commerce. Low demand, expensive and dangerous transport, and a focus on agriculture over commerce kept Rome's economy underdeveloped.²⁴

The Chinese economy in the first century BC was similarly underdeveloped. The Han dynasty, which emerged from the ashes of a civil war following the collapse of the Qin dynasty,

²¹ *Hou Hanshu* 88.11-12 – all references to the *Hou Hanshu* taken from John E. Hill, trans., *Hou Hanshu, chapter 88, "The Xiyu juan 'The Western Regions,'"* 2nd ed., University of Washington, September 2003, https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html (accessed July 9, 2014).

²² Paul Frederick Cressey, "Chinese Traits in European Civilization: A Study in Diffusion," *American Sociological Review* 10, no. 5 (October 1945): 595, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2086057> (accessed June 22, 2014).

²³ Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

slowly stabilized China during the second century BC. Much like the Late Republic period in Rome, the collapse of the Qin and the unstable rise of the Han caused China to focus primarily on internal matters. As a result, China was somewhat isolated from the outside world until Zhang Qian's expedition in 128 BC.²⁵ Nearly all of its trade was local, and the focus was almost exclusively agricultural. Like Rome during the same period, most of the population of China lived at the subsistence level.

Because of the stability of the *Pax Romana* and Rome's growing population, commercial conditions improved in Rome during the first and second centuries AD. Rome's growing prosperity brought about a taste for luxury, and goods from the East became increasingly desirable. Just as the Principate of Augustus brought stability and prosperity to Rome, the stabilization of the Han gave the Chinese an opportunity for military and economic expansion. By the end of the first century, Han merchants crossed Kushan territory to Parthia.

Just as the Parthians served as the key intermediaries between Rome and the East, they also became the key intermediaries between China and the West.²⁶ Chinese merchants did not pass through Parthia, however. Just as Roman and Parthian merchants kept each other at arm's length, Chinese and Parthian merchants did the same. According to John Thorley, the Parthians did not want to lose the status they enjoyed as intermediaries between the Rome and China.²⁷ Parthia profited economically from the "middleman markup." More importantly, however, Parthia feared that direct trade between Rome and China might encourage one or the other civilization to conquer Parthia, eliminating the middleman altogether. Parthia wisely protected its own interests by keeping Sino-Roman relations indirect.

²⁵ Yetts, 616.

²⁶ Thorley, "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, Circa A. D. 90-130," 75.

²⁷ Ibid.

The most important item that passed between Rome and China through Parthia was silk. To the Romans, silk was known as “sericum,” and the people who made the silk were, as noted earlier, known as the Seres.²⁸ This is not to say that the Romans knew the true identity of the Seres. Especially in the early days of the Sino-Roman silk trade, the “silk people” could have referred to any of the intermediaries from which the Romans acquired silk, such as the Kushans.²⁹ Illustrative of this phenomenon, peach and apricot trees traveled from China to Rome over the Silk Road; however, the Romans knew them as the “Armenian tree” and the “Persian tree,” not knowing that they originally came from China.³⁰

By the time of Augustus, sources such as Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Ptolemy identified the Seres as a people far to the east of Parthia, an area more in line with modern China. According to Strabo in his *Geographica*, “Bacriana [Bactria]...extended their empire as far as the Seres and the Phryni [the Hsiung-nu],” indicating that the Seres lived beyond (east) of Bactria.³¹ In *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder described the Seres and their location as follows:

We again come to a nation of the Scythians, and then again to desert tracts tenanted by wild beasts, until we reach a chain of mountains which runs up to the sea, and bears the name of Tabis [probably Tibet]. It is not, however, before we have traversed very nearly one half of the coast that looks towards the northeast, that we find it occupied by inhabitants. The first people that are known of here are the Seres, so famous for the wool that is found in their forests.³²

Ptolemy’s calculation of the number of stadia from the Euphrates to the Stone Tower, discussed above, provides additional indication that the Greco-Romans knew of China’s location with relative accuracy considering the indirect nature of the contact between Europe and China.

²⁸ Lewis and Short, s.v. “sericum.”

²⁹ Hudson, 58.

³⁰ Cressey, 596.

³¹ Strab. Geo. 11.11.1.

³² Plin. Nat. 6.20.

Ptolemy noted that the journey from the Stone Tower (in the Tarim Basin) to Sera (the Chinese capital city) “lie[s] on the same parallel as that of the Hellespont and Byzantium.”³³ The difference in latitude between the Stone Tower in Tashkurgan and the ancient Chinese capital at Xi’an (Chang’an) is only three degrees.

While the Romans clearly knew about China by the first century AD, they may not have known much about the production of silk. In book six of his *Natural History*, Pliny wrote that the Seres were “famous for the wool that is found in their forests.” Nearly three hundred years later, Ammianus Marcellinus wrote that the peaceful and agreeable Seres had “well-lighted woods, the trees of which produce a substance which they work with frequent sprinkling, like a kind of fleece; then from the wool-like material, mixed with water, they draw out very fine threads, spin the yarn, and make sericum.”³⁴ These passages make it unclear whether the wool-like product gathered from the trees was cotton or silk. In his *Georgics*, Virgil likewise equated silk with a product from trees when he questioned, “How the Seres comb from off the leaves their silky fleece.”³⁵ Pliny the Elder, who wrote of the “wool” found in the forests of the Seres in book six of his *Natural History*, wrote a description of the silkworm known as a bombyx in book eleven. This may indicate that he indeed described silk and not cotton in book six. Pliny wrote, “These insects weave webs similar to those of the spider, the material of which is used for making the more costly and luxurious garments of females.”³⁶ It is certainly possible that the bombyx, whose silken threads were unraveled and rewoven by women on the island of Cos (Kos; near the

³³ Ptol. Geo. 1.11.6.

³⁴ Amm. 23.6.67.

³⁵ Virg. G. 2.121.

³⁶ Plin. Nat. 11.26.

southwest coast of Asia Minor), was a different type of worm than the Chinese silkworm.³⁷ However, Pliny is unclear on this matter.

The Romans had purchased thin textiles from Cos for many years. According to legend, Pamphile of Cos was the first to weave silk by unraveling the webs and spinning them into a “tissue.”³⁸ The Aegean Sea region and other parts of Europe had “wild silk,” as shown in archaeological evidence dating to the Bronze Age.³⁹ Coan women wove the wild silk into thin luxury garments worn by noble women, and the industry was quite profitable. As Chinese silk entered the region in the first century AD, its superiority over the native wild silk forced Cos to share its silk production industry with Tyre, Sidon, Berytus, and other cities in Rome’s eastern territories.

The unraveling and weaving process was an important industry. Imported Chinese silk was unraveled, dyed, and then rewoven to make the product suit Roman tastes. This process limited cultural diffusion between China and Rome since Chinese designs and style were not present on the raw imported silk.⁴⁰ Often, linen and wool were interwoven with the silk during the reweaving process, further deorientalizing it.⁴¹ The goal, of course, was to make a product that was pleasing to Roman customers, yet had the luxurious decadence of the East. Ironically, some of this rewoven and dyed silk was resold to customers in the East, making it very likely

³⁷ Ibid., see note #2 in John Bostock, trans. Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:11.26> (accessed July 19, 2014).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ E. Panagiotakopulu, P. C. Buckland, P. M. Day, C. Doumas, A. Sarpaki, and P. Skidmore, “A Lepidopterous Cocoon from Thera and Evidence for Silk in the Aegean Bronze Age,” *Antiquity* 71, no. 272 (June 1997): 420-429, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/217551351?accountid=8289> (accessed July 24, 2014).

⁴⁰ Cressey, 596.

⁴¹ Thorley, “The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” 217.

that the Chinese bought back some of their own silk in the Roman style.⁴² The Silk Road, after all, traveled both ways.

During the Late Republic and early Empire, only the super wealthy could afford such a luxury as silk. Julius Caesar had silk curtains made to shade spectators at the Circus, which Cassius Dio in his *Roman History* referred to as a “barbarian luxury.”⁴³ As the volume of Chinese silk increased and Rome grew increasingly prosperous under Augustus, a greater portion of the population could purchase silk. The Senate, according to Tacitus in his *Annals*, lamented the extravagancies and foreign indulgences in the early years of Tiberius’s reign. In addition to denouncing the use of solid gold serving vessels for food, the Senate decided that men should not “disgrace themselves” with silk clothing from the East.⁴⁴ Sumptuary laws, however, failed to decrease the prevalence of silk in Rome. Caligula encouraged the use of silk, wearing it on his own person. Suetonius, in his biography of Caligula, remarked that his use of silk attire was fit for a woman, a clear indication that Suetonius did not think highly of Caligula’s clothing.⁴⁵ Nero also wore silks and, according to Josephus in his *Jewish Wars*, Vespasian and Titus wore silken garments.⁴⁶

To restrain the exuberance for luxuries from the East, Antoninus Pius tried to discourage the use of silk, just as the Senate had tried under Tiberius. He sold at auction the shawls and scarves of the imperial wardrobe in reaction to the depleted state of the treasury. The silken garments had been interwoven with gold and adorned with fine embroidery, making their

⁴² Thorley, “The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, Circa A. D. 90-130,” 77.

⁴³ Dio, Cass. Hist. 43.24.2.

⁴⁴ Tac. Ann. 2.33.

⁴⁵ Suet. Cal. 52.

⁴⁶ J. BJ 7.5.4.

opulence too much for Antoninus to tolerate.⁴⁷ Commodus swung the pendulum back to extravagance, adorning his palace with silk and other precious goods. Elagabalus, likewise, showed his desire for extravagance by wearing a robe made of close-woven Chinese silk.⁴⁸ As the Western Empire slid into decline in the fourth century AD, Ammianus Marcellinus remarked that silk had formerly been for the use of the nobility, but was now available to people of even the lowest distinction.⁴⁹

The fall of Rome to the Goths and other Germanic invaders did not end the Sino-Roman silk trade. When Alaric sacked Rome in AD 410, his demands for tribute included 4,000 silk tunics.⁵⁰ Even “barbarians” appreciated the value of silk. With the Western Empire in a shambles, the Eastern Empire in Constantinople continued the silk trade. In the mid-sixth century AD, Justinian procured some silkworm eggs from a group of monks near Khotan (Yutian in the Tarim Basin), allowing Constantinople to monopolize the silk trade.⁵¹ The relationship between the Roman Empire and China, already disrupted by the fall of Rome and the rise and fall of dynasties in China, all but ended once Europe could produce its own silk.⁵²

Silk was the most famous product to travel between Rome and China, hence the name “Silk Road,” but it was not the only item of trade between the two great empires. China had much to offer civilizations at the western end of the Silk Road. The Romans imported perfumes and pepper, as well as incense and cosmetics.⁵³ They also wanted medicines such as *radix*

⁴⁷ James Yates, “Sericum,” in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1875), 1028, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Sericum.html (accessed July 6, 2014).

⁴⁸ Thorley, “The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” 217.

⁴⁹ Amm. 23.6.67.

⁵⁰ Cressey, 596.

⁵¹ Yates, 1029.

⁵² Cressey, 596.

⁵³ Thorley, “The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” 219.

Pontica (root from Pontus), a type of rhubarb now commonly known as “Turkish Rhubarb” but originally from China.⁵⁴ According to *De Medicina*, a first century AD medical encyclopedia by Aulus Celsus, items from the East such as rhubarb, storax (related to witch-hazel), and poppy could serve as “antidotes” for various ailments.⁵⁵ While Romans certainly could have used locally made perfumes, incense, and cosmetics as they had done since the foundation of the Republic, new wealth and reliable travel made unique and exotic items from faraway lands easier to obtain and more desirable. Today, we see a modern version of this phenomenon every time we walk through a supermarket. Bananas from Costa Rica, strawberries from California, oranges from Florida, clementines from Spain, and apples from Wisconsin sit side-by-side in the produce aisle.

Rome’s vast empire and its extensive trade connections offered a wide variety of goods to merchants traveling east on the Silk Road. Primarily, the Chinese wanted gold and silver in exchange for their goods. Other precious metals, as well as precious and semi-precious stones, traveled from various parts of the Roman Empire to China via intermediaries. The Chinese also wanted coral to make jewelry, which the Romans could procure from the Mediterranean and Red Seas. The Chinese wanted glass, which the Romans could obtain from Alexandria and Syria. Amber from Roman contacts in Scandinavia and cinnabar from Africa traveled eastward to the Chinese.⁵⁶ Additionally, the *Hou Hanshu* records that the Han received fighting cocks, rhinoceroses, gold-threaded and multi-colored embroideries, woven gold-threaded net, delicate polychrome silks painted with gold, and “asbestos cloth” from the Romans (the Da Qin).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁵ Cels. 5.23.

⁵⁶ Thorley, “The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, Circa A. D. 90-130,” 76-78.

⁵⁷ *Hou Hanshu* 88.12.

Most of the exchange between Rome and China was in physical goods. The Parthians kept the two empires from trading directly, and the vast distance and numerous civilizations in the gap between East and West generally hampered diffusion. Despite these hindrances, some aspects of culture may have passed between Rome and China nonetheless. For example, in some translations of the *Aeneid*, notably that of C. Day Lewis (2009), Camilla kills Orsilochus by rising up in her “stirrups” and hacking him with her battle-axe.⁵⁸ The Stanley Lombardo translation (2006) has Camilla “rising in the saddle,” but not necessarily in stirrups. In this case, stirrups may be implied in the translation.⁵⁹ Stirrups, an invention of the Chinese, would likely have arrived in Europe during the first or second century AD at the earliest, clearly anachronistic to Bronze Age warfare. If stirrups had reached Rome by Virgil’s time, their inclusion in the *Aeneid* shows an example of Silk Road diffusion. Another example of cultural diffusion between Rome and China may be similarities in military strategy. According to historian Everett Wheeler, most of Sun Tzu’s stratagems are found in Western stratagems.⁶⁰ It is certainly possible that Sun Tzu’s military theories traveled along the Silk Road and influenced Roman tacticians such as Frontinus and Polyaeus. However, Wheeler notes that stratagem and deception are characteristic of all primitive warfare, so there is no way to know whether this is an example of diffusion.

Ideas about religion and philosophy may also have crossed the Silk Road between Rome and China. Manichaeism began in Persia in the third century AD. Similarly to Zoroastrianism of the ancient Persian Empire, Manichaeists believed in the duality between good and evil and

⁵⁸ C. Day Lewis, trans. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 281.

⁵⁹ Stanley Lombardo, trans. Virgil, *The Essential Aeneid* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 172.

⁶⁰ Everett L. Wheeler, “Stratagems in the Western Tradition,” Conference on Strategic Deception in Modern Democracies: Ethical, Legal, and Policy Challenges, Chapel Hill, NC, October 31-November 1, 2003, 2, <http://tiss.sanford.duke.edu/pubs/documents/Wheeler.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2014).

between light and dark. Missionaries spread Manichaeism across the Silk Road. It reached China during the T'ang dynasty, along with Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity.⁶¹ It reached Rome through Egypt near the end of the period of invasion, civil war, plague, and economic depression known as the "Third Century Crisis," perhaps during the reign of Probus. Manichaeism spread in the Roman world due to the Gnostic tendencies of Mesopotamian Christianity.⁶² It likely spread in China due to the dualism already present in the *yin* and *yang* and the self-denial of Daoism and Buddhism. While Manichaeism was not a product of either Rome or China, it connected both empires in a unique way.

Certainly, as shown above, contact between ancient Rome and China was indirect. As the Roman Empire expanded its influence eastward and China built alliances with western provinces, the two great empires did, however, become more familiar with each other. According to Pliny the Elder, the Seres shunned the outside world. Rather than venturing out to trade, they preferred to have outsiders come to them.⁶³ Ammianus Marcellinus wrote that the Seres lived a peaceful life, never knowing weapons or warfare. They were gentle, quiet, and lived in harmony with their neighbors. The Seres were frugal, content, and avoided the outside world. Illustrating their solitude, they practiced silent barter, laying out their goods along the river so that the value of their products could be assessed without words. Furthermore, their introversion was so severe that they gave away their products without receiving any foreign products in return.⁶⁴ Pliny and Ammianus described an interesting view of the Seres as noble savages, with an almost childlike

⁶¹ Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 59, no. 1/2 (1969): 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/299850> (accessed July 8, 2014).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶³ Plin. Nat. 6.20.

⁶⁴ Amm. 23.6.67-68.

backwardness and innocence. What Pliny and Ammianus did not know was that Rome and China were not as different as they believed.

The Chinese view of the Romans was more accurate. The Da Qin, according to the *Hou Hanshu*, resembled the “Middle Kingdom” (China), thus receiving the name “Da Qin” (Great China). The Da Qin were tall and honest, and their common people were farmers. They shaved their heads and wore embroidered clothing. The Da Qin had stone-walled towns, had a postal relay system, and had a government ruled by a temporary king and a group of thirty-six leaders that deliberated over the affairs of state. If the state experienced a calamity, the king was quickly replaced and the rejected king accepted his demotion without anger. In business, the Da Qin were fair and honest. They sent envoys from the capital to the border of their territory to trade in gold and silver coins.⁶⁵ The Han dynasty compiled the *Hou Hanshu* in the fifth century AD, and the Han clearly had a better understanding of the Romans at that time than the Romans had of the Chinese.

One reason that Rome completely missed the mark describing China yet China described Rome with greater accuracy could be that there was direct contact between the two empires. Parthia may have kept China and Rome apart, but the Romans might have reached China by sea. One particularly interesting passage in the *Hou Hanshu* describes what may have been direct contact between Rome and China in modern Vietnam. It states that in the “ninth *yanxi* year” during the reign of Emperor Huan (probably about 166 AD), the king of Da Qin sent envoys through the central Vietnamese coast. The “king of Da Qin,” referred to as Andun, may have been Marcus Aurelius. The king of Da Qin offered elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, and turtle shells, all items Rome could easily have gathered from its trading partners and offered as tribute.

⁶⁵ *Hou Hanshu* 88.11-12.

The author of the *Hou Hanshu* admittedly wrote, however, “The tribute brought was neither precious nor rare, raising suspicion that the accounts might be exaggerated.”⁶⁶ Most likely, as stated earlier, the Chinese traded with the intermediaries of Rome, not with the Romans themselves. The *Hou Hanshu* does, however, state that the Da Qin “trade[s] with Anxi [Parthia] and Tianzhu [India] by sea.”⁶⁷ It is possible that the Romans continued their sea voyage around India to the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and around the Malay and Indochina Peninsulas to the Vietnamese coast along the South China Sea.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, no evidence other than the *Hou Hanshu* exists to support or deny this theory, so this suspected example of direct contact between Rome and China is questionable.

Another potential point of direct contact between ancient Romans and the Chinese was Crassus’s failed attack on the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC. According to Pliny, Carrhae (now Harran) was located in “Arabia” (actually the Syrian-Turkish border) just across the Euphrates.⁶⁹ Crassus, a member of the First Triumvirate with Julius Caesar and Pompey, sought to gain fame and fortune for himself at the expense of the Parthians. In opposition, Surenas of Parthia attacked Crassus at Carrhae. According to Plutarch, Crassus “showed more brilliant qualities in that awful hour than ever before.”⁷⁰ He ordered his men to assume the *testudo* (tortoise) formation, wherein the soldiers packed together and locked their shields to create a tortoise-shell barrier.⁷¹ Unfortunately, Crassus’s tactics could not stop the Parthian

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Taishan Yu, “A History of the Relationship between the Chinese Dynasties and the Western Regions,” Victor H. Mair, ed., *Sino-Platonic Papers* 131 (March 2004, July 2013 ed.), 183, http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp131_chinese_dynasties_western_region.pdf (accessed July 7, 2014).

⁶⁹ Plin. Nat. 5.21.

⁷⁰ Plut. Crass. 26.5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 24.3; see also Dio, Cass. Hist. 49.30 for a detailed description of the *testudo* formation.

assault. He was killed, and the victorious Parthians removed his head and right hand.⁷² His head was subsequently used as a prop in a play, adding insult to injury.⁷³

The possible connection between Rome and China lies in the aftermath of Carrhae. According to historian Homer Dubs of London's China Society, 20,000 of the 42,000 Roman soldiers were killed and 10,000 were made prisoners. The other 10,000 escaped back to Syria.⁷⁴ The fate of the 10,000 prisoners of war is uncertain, but Pliny wrote that the captives were moved to Margiana on Parthia's eastern frontier.⁷⁵ There they may have blended into Parthian society. Horace asked in his *Odes*, "Has Crassus' soldier ta'en to wife / A base barbarian, and grown grey / (Woe, for a nation's tainted life!)," suggesting that the Roman captives intermarried with the women of the "barbarian" Parthians.⁷⁶ As the Roman prisoners moved east, Chinese merchants and soldiers moved west. Wars between rival civilizations such as the Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu) and the Wusun on China's western frontier, particularly in and north of the Tarim Basin/Taklamakan Desert region, pushed further west to engulf the Ferghana Valley and Sogdiana (in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). These were regions inhabited by people Zhang Qian called the Dayuan and the Kangju. Margiana, where the Roman prisoners of Carrhae were taken, bordered the Ferghana Valley and Sogdiana. The close proximity of the Roman prisoners and the armies of Western Chinese warlords led to what Dubs contends was a direct connection between the Romans and the Chinese.

In support of his theory, Dubs cites evidence from an eight-scene narrative painting of the Battle of Zhizhi in 36 BC, described by first century Chinese historian Ban Gu in his *History of*

⁷² Ibid., 31.6.

⁷³ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁴ Homer H. Dubs, *A Roman City in Ancient China* (London: The China Society, 1957), 4.

⁷⁵ Plin. Nat. 6.18.

⁷⁶ Hor. Od. 3.5.5-7; see also Dubs, 5.

the Former Han Dynasty. The battle was between the Hsiung-nu, led by a chieftain named Jzh-jzh (Zhizhi), and the Han Chinese, led by generals Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang. Dubs explains that according to Ban Gu's description of the painting, Jzh-jzh organized "more than a hundred" men of his army into a "fish-scale" formation to defend against the Han attack.⁷⁷ Dubs claims that the "fish-scale" formation may have been the Roman *testudo* formation, and the "hundred men" may have been a remnant of the former Roman soldiers. Because the Hsiung-nu were "nomads and barbarians," they would not have had the extensive training required to form such a highly-skilled formation.⁷⁸ Roman forces, on the other hand, would have had ample training. Dubs believes that the Roman prisoners of Carrhae that had been taken to Margiana may have lost hope of returning to Rome, and some of them (perhaps "more than a hundred") became mercenaries for the Hsiung-nu.⁷⁹

Unfortunately for the Hsiung-nu, the Han Chinese were far too powerful and Jzh-jzh was defeated. Dubs cites a Chinese source stating that 145 Hsiung-nu soldiers were taken alive after the battle. They may have been the "more than a hundred" soldiers in the fish-scale formation. As mercenaries, the Romans of Carrhae would have had no further need to fight since their employer lost the battle, and their *testudo*/fish-scale formation would have allowed them to survive longer than the Hsiung-nu nomadic soldiers.⁸⁰ The Chinese may have kept these men alive to use as their own mercenaries to guard China's western frontier. Dubs states that the Chinese placed these men in "a specially created frontier city" in the Gansu province of central

⁷⁷ Dubs, 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

China, a city the Chinese named Li-jien (spelled Liqian or Li-chien in other sources).⁸¹ The name Li-jien sounds like “legion,” making the story all the more plausible.

Pliny the Elder’s story of blue-eyed Chinese adds additional credibility to Dubs’ theory. Pliny wrote about people beyond the Emodian Mountains (perhaps the northern edge of the Himalayas, on the other side of which is Serica), who “exceeded the ordinary human height, had flaxen hair, and blue eyes, and made an uncouth sort of noise by way of talking, having no language of their own for the purpose of communicating their thoughts.”⁸² Could Pliny’s blue-eyed Chinese have been descendants of Crassus’s soldiers at Li-jien? Certainly, displaced Roman soldiers would have struggled to communicate with the Chinese and the various tribes in the area. They might also have been taller than the Chinese, with distinctive European features.

Dubs’ theory progresses nicely from the Battle of Carrhae to the founding of Li-jien, and Pliny’s story of the blue-eyed Chinese fits well into the narrative. Many scholars, however, refute Dubs’ findings and dismiss Pliny’s blue-eyed Chinese and having any connection to Romans in China. In a book review of Dubs’ *A Roman City in Ancient China*, Owen Lattimore calls the story “entertaining and convincing,” but he states that the distance between Carrhae and Li-jien was so vast that such a journey would rival the travels of Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan.⁸³ In another review, Schuyler Cammann criticizes Dubs’ numerous assumptions used to fill gaps in the story. Cammann also challenges the name Li-chien (Li-jien). Cammann links the name with Bactrian Greeks and the Chinese name for Alexandria, not to a Roman legion. Thus, if the residents of Li-jien were indeed from the West, they would have been Greeks deposited by

⁸¹ Ibid.,

⁸² Plin. Nat. 6.24.

⁸³ Owen Lattimore, “A Roman City in Ancient China, Review by Owen Lattimore,” *The American Journal of Philology* 79, no. 4 (1958): 447-448, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/292363> (accessed June 22, 2014).

Alexander's conquests, not Romans.⁸⁴ Chinese historian Taishan Yu also criticizes Dubs' theory as not being able to withstand close scrutiny. Likien County (Li-jien) was, according to Yu, named after the state of Lixuan. It had connections with the Ptolemy's of Egypt, but had nothing to do with the Romans. Bluntly, he writes that it is impossible for Li-jien to have been of Roman origin.⁸⁵ As for Pliny's blue-eyed Chinese, Indo-European-speaking people entered the Tarim Basin region long before Crassus's soldiers would have, likely accounting for the difference in hair and eye color from other Chinese people in the region.⁸⁶

In an attempt to either prove or disprove Dubs' theory, scientists have performed DNA tests on people in and around Li-jien. In a Y-chromosome genetic study of 227 males in the region, 77% of the Y-chromosome components were found to be of East Asian origins, most likely Han Chinese.⁸⁷ Another DNA study specifically looked at Pliny's blue-eyed Chinese. Its findings show that blue-eyed, fair-skinned, and light-haired people of the Tarim Basin match the DNA of Bronze Age and Iron Age people in southern Siberia who populated the Tarim Basin long ago during the Indo-European migration.⁸⁸ These scientific findings show that Dubs' theory of former Roman soldiers in China is anything but airtight, but such data can be interpreted in

⁸⁴ Schuyler Cammann, "A Roman City in Ancient China, Review by Schuyler Cammann," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (May 1962): 380-382, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2050695> (accessed June 22, 2014).

⁸⁵ Yu, 20.

⁸⁶ Samuel Lieberman, "Who Were Pliny's Blue-Eyed Chinese?" *Classical Philology* 52, no. 3 (July 1957): 176. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/267182> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁸⁷ Ruixia Zhou et al., "Testing the Hypothesis of an Ancient Roman Soldier Origin of the Liqian People in Northwest China: a Y-Chromosome Perspective," *Journal of Human Genetics* 52, no. 7 (June 2007): 584-591. <http://www.nature.com/jhg/journal/v52/n7/full/jhg200782a.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

⁸⁸ Christine Keyser et al., "Ancient DNA Provides New Insights into the History of South Siberian Kurgan People," *Human Genetics* 126, no. 3 (September 2009): 395-410. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/24433901_Ancient_DNA_provides_new_insights_into_the_history_of_south_Siberian_Kurgan_people (accessed June 6, 2014).

various ways. Speculation about the theory continues, as evident by recent articles in *The Telegraph*⁸⁹ and *The Economist*.⁹⁰

Contact between ancient Rome and China, two of world history's greatest empires, is a subject that lends itself to speculation due to the paucity of concrete evidence that connects the empires. Nevertheless, ample evidence does exist to show that Rome and China certainly did have meaningful contact. Most of this contact took place via intermediaries such as the Parthians and the Kushans, but other civilizations along the Silk Road felt the effects of the East-West connection as well. Scholars continue to debate whether the "Da Qin" were in fact the Romans, and whether the "Seres" were without question the Chinese. Because of the intermediaries that came and went and because of the shifting landscape of the Silk Road territories over the centuries, much uncertainty remains. The silk trade and the exchange of various other goods and ideas between East and West left indelible marks on all the cultures along the Silk Road, including Rome and China.

⁸⁹ Nick Squires, "Chinese Villagers 'Descended from Roman Soldiers,'" *The Telegraph*, November 23, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8154490/Chinese-villagers-descended-from-Roman-soldiers.html> (accessed July 25, 2014).

⁹⁰ Yongchang, "The Romans in China: They Came, Saw and Settled," *The Economist*, December 16, 2004, <http://www.economist.com/node/3445050> (accessed July 25, 2014).

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