

AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW ON THE ROLE OF THE SILK ROAD IN WORLD HISTORY

Mamta Devi

Research Scholar

Department of Arts

Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh.

Mamta Devi43@gmail.com

Dr. Pradeep kumar kesharwani

Research Guide

Department of Arts

Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh

Abstract

Two important studies have examined the Silk Road, which connected East and Southeast Asia to Central Asia, India, Southwest Asia, the Mediterranean, and northern Europe. 100 BCE until 1450, the Silk Road thrived. From the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s, European, Japanese, and American scholar-adventurers rediscovered and looted many Silk Road sites and artifacts in Chinese Turkestan and Gansu Province (to the east). Geopolitical, cultural, and technical realities and the rise of New World History as a topic of study accelerated the second phase in the 1980s. This second wave of interest in the Silk Road has produced many academic, popular, and other media publications and broadened historians' perceptions of its scope, depth, and importance.

Keywords; *Silk Road, Aurel Stein, Mogao Caves, Sogdians, Dunhuang Studies, Turfan, world history*

THE SILK ROAD AS A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCT

How come? Most modern Anglophone scholars who focus on these trans-Eurasian caravan routes that crisscrossed Eurasia's interior in Late Antiquity and beyond employ the evocative and occasionally deceptive "Silk Road." Global historians favor the plural form.¹ Some modern world historians use the term "Silk Routes," which doesn't imply singularity or extraterrestriality, to describe the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Mediterranean, and other maritime transportation routes as integral parts of Late Antiquity's long-distance exchange network. The Silk Route fascinates French historians.³ German academics prefer der Seidenstrasse. Although historians believe that silk was simply one of many important products transported and exchanged along the Silk Road and that the most historically significant "commodities" were ideas and culture, we still prefix Road, Roads, or Routes with "Silk." This illustrates how ancient historical labels remain even when their authenticity is questioned. How, when, and where did the term "Silk Road" first appear?

German explorer, geographer, and geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen invented "Silk Road" in 1877.⁵ Richthofen seldom said them. For him, the Seidenstrasse was a single route to Marinus of Tyre's "Land of Silk" in the first century CE, which Ptolemy's second-century Geography preserved, as opposed to the Seidenstrassen, which were the various trade routes between imperial Rome and Han China along which the priceless commodity of silk traveled in significant quantities from roughly 100 BCE to about 150 CE.⁶ Silk, which Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), the Roman savant, angrily stated cost the Roman Empire fifty million sesterces yearly "so that a Roman matron might wear a transparent garment in public,"⁷ propelled this short trans-Eurasian trade interchange, according to Richthofen. Others must spread the phrase. Richthofen student Sven Hedin (1865-1952) and Albert Herrmann invented "Silk Road." Three well-publicized archaeological and geological expeditions in Xinjiang and Tibet between 1894 and 1908 popularized "the Silk Road" among educated Europeans and North Americans.

The widely publicized exploits of other intrepid archaeologists in Chinese Turkestan, Gansu Province, and nearby areas of Central Asia who, between the 1890s and the early 1930s, mapped vast areas of Central Asia, discovered long-lost oasis cities and secret caches of artifacts and documents, and returned artistic treasures to museums in Europe, Japan, India, and the US They influenced Silk Road research.

THE FIRST PHASE: DISCOVERING AND "RECOVERING" THE TREASURES OF THE SILK ROAD

These rapacious pioneers' discoveries and scholarly articles enabled Silk Road scholars. Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943) towered. Stein excavated Central Asian Silk Road sites 1900–1943. Stein greatly enhanced New Delhi's National Museum and London's British Museum. Most notable western China voyages were 1900, 1906–1908, 1913–1916, and 1930. The four Stein missions were "the most daring and adventurous raid upon the ancient world that any archaeologist has attempted," according to Sir Leonard Woolley.¹² Stein and the other Silk Road archaeological pioneers' "raid upon the ancient world," whether meant to be inaccurate or not, properly describes their perplexing endeavor. Stein's biggest discovery, among many others, gained him instant recognition and, in the eyes of many anti-imperialists, infamy. Stein visited Gansu Province's Mogao Caves, Buddhist cave-shrines in the Gobi Desert, in May 1907. Dunhuang, a military fortress and oasis, located 15 kilometers from the Mogao Caves. Scholars sometimes call the Mogao Caves "Dunhuang" or "the Dunhuang Caves" despite their distance from the town. The eastern intersection of the two main Silk Road routes that skirted the southern and northern fringes of the enormous Tarim Basin and its dreaded and nearly impassable Taklamakan Desert was a commercially and militarily strategic site from the first to the tenth centuries CE. "The gateway to Caves into a generic "Dunhuang Caves"" is used.

Illustrated volumes cover this underground art. Roderick Whitfield's *Dunhuang: Caves of the Singing Sands: Buddhist Art from the Silk Road*, 2 vols. with Seigo Otsuka pictures is the greatest source. *The Caves of Dunhuang* by Fan Jinshi; *Dunhuang: A Centennial Commemoration of the Discovery of the Cave Library* by Zhang Wenbin et al. (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 2000); and *Cave Temples: Art and History on the Silk Road* by Roderick Whitfield, Susan Whitfield, and Neville Agnew.

Valerie Hansen's *Silk Road: A New History*, Chapter 6, "The Time Capsule of Silk Road History: The Dunhuang Caves," 167–98, describes the Library Cave and its contents well. Every Silk Road student needs this book.

Dunhuang's Buddhist caves. Bezeklik northeast of the Taklamakan Desert and Kizil in western Xinjiang are also notable. In 1906, German explorer Albert von Le Coq brought Bezeklik and Kizil's most valuable works to Berlin. The Berlin Museum of Asian Art exhibits WWII bombing survivors. US, Russia, Japan, and Korea got paintings. Pages 61–65 of Valerie Hansen's *Silk Road* address the Kizil Caves and Le Coq's painting deconstruction.

Silk Road navigation always included northern and southern bypasses across the harsh Tarim Basin. Merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, warriors, diplomats, and others going or returning from China's heartland sought spiritual solace at Dunhuang's Buddhist cave complex and monasteries.

Apart from its undeniable importance to Silk Road travelers, what most attracted Stein to this site was that a Daoist monk, Wang Yuanlu, had seven years earlier discovered more than

40,000 manuscripts and printed documents in a wide variety of Silk Road languages and large numbers of painted silken banners that had been walled up in a small cave for seven to nine hundred years, largely preserved from time. Stein convinced Wang to give several cartloads of these gems to the Mogao cave-shrines and a pilgrims' guesthouse. Stein studied through the papers and observed that their multi-language depiction reflected Dunhuang's Silk Road multi-culture. Stein grabbed an 868 Diamond Sutra block-printed scroll. Stein's supporters in England and India divided Dunhuang's wealth for museum study. Stein, who was fluent in at least eight languages, including Sanskrit and Old Persian, lacked sufficient knowledge of Chinese, the language in which most Buddhist texts were written, and the temperament to confine himself to a museum basement.

Stein published a multi-volume account of his Second Expedition and the objects he brought back from Dunhuang and elsewhere in 1921, a few years after returning to England. He invented "Serindia" to represent the widespread cultural interchange along the Silk Road from the Pamir Mountains in western Chinese Turkestan to Dunhuang in that work's unique title. The Latin term Seres, which the ancient Romans used for the mysterious East Asian silk makers, plus "India," the source of many Silk Road cultural characteristics like Buddhism, form this neologism.

Stein and other adventurer-scholars looted Wang Yuanlu's treasure horde. Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), a notable French orientalist, was able to study Stein's uncollected materials. Picked nicely. After paying Wang 90, Pelliot carried a big scroll and art collection to Paris in 1909. The Guimet Museum held the Pelliot Collection, while the Bibliothèque nationale de France had the papers.

European criminals stole Cave 17's treasures to the Berlin Library and St. Petersburg Oriental Institute. To stop theft, Chinese officials relocated any remaining Cave 17 valuables to the capital. A big treasure arrived in 1910 despite Wang's surreptitiously keeping back a considerable amount of manuscripts, which he eventually delivered to Stein in 1914,²⁷ and inevitable pillaging. Most of the Library Cave's manuscripts are at Beijing's National Library. Scholars may study Silk Road art and documentation in European, Asian, and American museums and libraries. As we will see, the Second World War closed Central Asia and China to most Western researchers for a decade or more, although interest in and study and writing on the Silk Road continued between the mid-1930s and the 1980s.

THE SECOND PHASE: INSTITUTIONALIZING THE SILK ROAD

In the heat and humidity of late June and early July 2002, 1.3 million people attended the thirty-sixth annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and more than 350,000 bought the extensive program, which included short but informative essays on Silk Road phenomena. This event highlighted the historic and contemporary representations of peoples from Japan to Italy who had been part of the Silk Road saga for over 2,000 years. "The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust" was the Smithsonian's 9/11 reaction. This two-millennium cultural exchange event included Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble. Yo-Yo Ma founded the Silk Road Ensemble in 1998 to blend Asian and Western instruments and musical styles in the spirit of the historic Silk Road, where a variety of instruments, harmonic motifs, and dance styles like the Sogdian swirl traveled from Central Asia and India to East Asia, where they were adopted and transformed by their host cultures. The Silk Road has arrived for concertgoers and Mall

visitors who examine antique and modern goods. After 30 years of research, the Silk Road is a cultural phenomenon. Despite safety limitations, Beijing's National Art Museum of China's 2008 exhibition of Buddhist art from northwest China, "The Lights of Dunhuang," drew record crowds. 660,000 Chinese viewed the antiques in two months. Every Western travel magazine advertises escorted Silk Road tours to sites that were formerly off limits. Silk Road Spices is a Bukhara alleyway. Western cities have Silk Road eateries. Academics advanced in the 1980s.

Toward intensifying Silk Road studies to the point of institutionalization.

From the mid-1930s through 1980, interest in the Silk Road did not totally subside. Despite the ups and downs of modern life, including the fall of the government after 1911, invasion and war, and, most dangerously, a Cultural Revolution that rejected the past, Chinese artists, art historians, historians, and others continued to be fascinated by their distant past. In 1944, a weak central government formed the Dunhuang Art Institute as Communist-Nationalist tensions were rising and threatened to turn into a civil war. The facility employed patriotic artists who recreated Dunhuang cave paintings. Despite all the domestic and international issues the new PRC was facing, the Dunhuang Art Institute was reorganized as the Dunhuang Research Institute of Cultural Properties in 1950, but it did little research and kept copying cave art. However, when Duan Wenjie, an artist turned art historian, took over as director near the end of the 1970s, the process that would lead to the development of a top-notch institution at Dunhuang devoted to protecting and studying the caves was already underway. We will discuss the Dunhuang institution below. Things changed. A tiny number of Western Silk Road specialists, notably China and eastern Central Asia experts like Owen Lattimore (1900-1989), kept the beacon lights burning.

Events in the early 1980s and beyond caused this interest in the Silk Road and the second phase of Silk Road study. Two geopolitical realities stood out: the People's Republic of China (PRC) opening up to the outside world, which started under Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and has continued with growing momentum for three and a half decades; and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to the emergence of independent and fairly open Central Asian states, like Uzbekistan, whose lands had been home to peoples and polities that had played important roles in history.

In 1988, UNESCO established the Silk Road. By adopting an ecumenical perspective on the Silk Roads that was in line with the goals of the new world historians and went far beyond the conventional focus on eastern Central Asia that had characterized so much of the initial phase of Silk Road studies led by Stein and other "foreign devils," UNESCO established a ten-year multidisciplinary project called "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue,"

The "Silk Roads"—a vast network of commerce and communication routes linking the Far East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Iranian and Anatolian plateaus, the Caucasus, the Arabian peninsula, the Mediterranean, and Europe facilitated the transmission and exchange of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, customs, and traditions over three millennia.

This project's homepage claims, more out of hope and UNESCO's ultimate goal than historical scholarship:

These peaceful East-West exchanges, which greatly shaped and enhanced Silk Road civilizations, may educate current nations about intercultural communication.³⁹

The epic saga included fights and wars along the Silk Roads, despite many peaceful contacts. Despite ignorance, it achieved much that decade. Between 1990 and 1995, it supported twenty-six international seminars, twenty-five significant academic expeditions, a multitude of publications and research projects, the establishment of research centers, the awarding of research fellowships, the funding of conservation projects, and the production of audio-visual materials.

The International Dunhuang Project (IDP) is an ambitious organization that promotes Silk Road studies globally. The IDP was founded in 1994 to "make information and images of all manuscripts, paintings, textiles, and artifacts from Dunhuang and archaeological sites of the Eastern Silk Road."

Road freely accessible on the Internet and to promote their use through educational and research initiatives. As of January 23, 2014, it had added 418,039 images to its interactive website. A day earlier, it had 417,468 images, which gives us an idea of its pace and dedication to this project. Its website has Silk Road articles and a newsletter with supplemental material for academics and the public. Issue 38 discusses the Diamond Sutra's history, transmission, and spiritual value, as well as the British Library's preservation of Aurel Stein's 190746 printed scroll. By 198247, virtually all of Aurel Stein's Silk Road records from the British Museum were relocated to the British Library, where the IDP's directorship is located. The seven Asian and European partner institutions host the IDP's bilingual data base and website and teach their employees in digital media and conservation approaches. Two of these seven institutions—the National Library of China in Beijing and the Dunhuang Academy near the Mogao Caves—are in China. Despite official China's disdain of Stein's wealth and its on-and-off efforts to return these antiquities, Chinese experts support this British-led project. more IDP partners, including the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Sven Hedin Foundation in Stockholm, supply data from their collections. The IDP's other main partners are in Korea, Japan, Russia, Germany, France, and provide webpages in their native languages. The Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan, is one of the fifteen, showing that cross-cultural academic cooperation can transcend governmental boundaries.

The IDP sponsors Silk Road displays and discussions about Chinese Turkestan. As these words are written, it co-sponsors "Aurel Stein and the Silk Road: a hundred years on" at the Royal Geographical Society in London.

The IDP, unlike UNESCO's Silk Roads initiatives, studies the eastern routes between Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) and Kashgar, the meeting point of the northern and southern routes skirting the Tarim Basin. Given that early 20th-century explorers brought resources from western China, it makes sense. The IDP's study adds to a contemporary Silk Road scholarly trend called "Dunhuangology," although most prefer "Dunhuang Studies."

Dunhuang Studies are based on the Library Cave's relics and the other 491 Mogao Caves' murals and sculptures. It's only the start. Dunhuang Studies expands like a pebble thrown into water to incorporate studies on related sites and caches around China, particularly its western regions. Dunhuang Studies is an interdisciplinary study of a great treasure trove of Silk Road items from Dunhuang and beyond, notably those from before the thirteenth century and the Mongol invasion of China. Turfan documents are examples.

The 170 square kilometers of luxuriant Turfan Depression, the second lowest and hottest place on Earth, is also a significant oasis. Along the northern route that skirted the Tarim

Basin, it is 550 kilometers from Dunhuang. It was a centre for intensive agriculture, Sogdian and Chinese commerce, and cultural interchange during the first 150 years of the Tang dynasty (618–907), a period of increasing Silk Road activity, because to its water supplies. Turfan was famous for its Sogdian-imported grapes, wine, and melons.

Between 1893 and the 1930s, Russian, German, and Japanese expeditions explored and exploited Turfan, removing many Chinese and Central Asian manuscripts that reflected Turfan's diverse religions. They removed more artifacts and paintings as usual. Aurel Stein visited and took numerous manuscripts and other valuables. The best were unknown.

Gaochang, now a ruin 37 kilometers outside Turfan, was in the Turfan Depression. Stein explored and stole from the Astana Cemetery beyond its walls. Due to time and the immensity of the burial place, he only explored a small section of the graves. Most of the cemetery's 3,000 Chinese burials remain undiscovered. Between 1958 and 1975, Chinese archaeologists unearthed several graves, often without proper methods. 205 of them had paper pieces with words in numerous languages made into funeral belts, shoes, and hats, despite their terrible skills. Paper bundles supported the bodies. The Dead Sea Scrolls took similar labor to finish. It shows the Silk Road's beginnings at a vital trading point. Turfan's long-distance business networks may be gleaned from the 2000 papers and 300 contracts seized. These papers, tax records, and a large quantity of Sassanian Persian or Islamic silver coins give us this idea. Valerie Hansen says, "these records highlight the dominant role played by Sogdians in the Silk Road trade."

Dunhuang Studies are also practiced at the Dunhuang Academy, a multidisciplinary academic institution based in the Mogao Caves that studies the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang and its cultural impacts. However, it substantially advances Silk Road research. As stated, it's a major IDP partner. Its main purpose is to protect the genuine caves, which were opened to visitors in 1980 but are currently suffering from overtourism.

After all, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen invented the names "Silk Road," "Silk Roads," and "Silk Routes" 137 years ago. Are they still relevant? This writer says, "Yes!" History without passion is lifeless, and the institutionalization of Silk Road research and its global reach due to digital technology guarantee that we are now at a period of significant development in our understanding of the Silk Road.

Hobson, Brill, Leiden, 2002, Robert Finlay's *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, Roxann Prazniak's "Siena on the Silk Roads: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250-1350," *Journal of World History* 21 (2010): 177-217, Abdul Sheriff's "Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam," Columbia University Press,

References

1 E.g., Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Premodern Times* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 2, "The Era of the Ancient Silk Roads"; David Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History," *Journal of World History* 11 (2000): 1-26; Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The World, a History* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 196-99, etc.

2 This is especially true of world historians who study pre-modern "world systems" of commercial exchange: Philippe Beaujard, "From Three Possible Iron-Age World Systems to a Single Afro-Eurasian World-System," *Journal of World History* 21 (2010): 1-43.

3 E.g., Pierre Biarnès, *La Route de la Soie: une histoire géopolitique* (*The Silk Road: A Geopolitical History*)

(Paris: Ellipses, 2008).

4 E.g., Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Die Seidenstrasse: Handelsweg und Kulturbrücke zwischen Morgen- und Abendland. But see Peter Suter, Die Seidenstrassen: Handelsverbindungen zwischen China und dem Westen von der Frühgeschichte bis zur Mongolzeit (The Silk Roads: Commercial Conduits between China and the West from Antiquity to the Mongol Era) (Stäfa: Gut, 1987).*

5 Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, *China. Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien (China: Results of a Personal Journey and Studies Based Upon It)*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Reimer, 1877-1912), vol. 1, *passim*; *idem*, "Über die zentralasiatischen Seidenstrassen bis zum 2. Jh. n. Chr." ("Regarding the Central Asian Silk Roads to the Second Century after Christ"), *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 4 (1877): 96-122.

6 The best study of Richthofen's use of these terms is Daniel C. Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads': Toward the Archaeology of a Concept," *The Silk Road* 5 (2007): 1-10; www.silk-road.com/toc/newsletter.html. Accessed January 18, 2013. See also Tamara Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," *Critical Inquiry* 40 (2013): 194-219. Chin seems not to know of Waugh's work, and her article suffers from a certain opaqueness of style and language.

7 Ed. and trans. Alfred J. Andrea in Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, 7th ed., 2 vols. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2012), 1:165.

8 Albert Herrmann, *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien* (trans. F. H. Lyon as *The Silk Road* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938). Waugh, "Archaeology," 6-7, provides details of their contributions to this popularization. Hedin's autobiographical *My Life as an Explorer*, illustrated by the author and translated by Alfhild Huesch (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co, 1925), is filled with details that have excited the imaginations of generations of school boys and contributed substantially to creating the romance of the Silk Road.

9 Cave 328 is one of the handful of caves at Dunhuang that is permanently open to visitors, so that guides can lecture them on the effects of Western "imperialism." Warner's defense of his "labour of love" in removing these artifacts to keep "those crumbling pigments from harm" (144-45) can be found in his autobiographical *The Long Old Road in China* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1926).

10 A well-written but far-from-complete survey of the exploits of the more notable (or no-torious) of these adventurer-scholars is Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (London: John Murray, 1980). Hopkirk's engaging book focuses on the adventures and occasional misadventures of six men: Sven Hardin of Sweden; Aurel Stein of Great Britain (by way of Hungary); Albert von Le Coq of Germany; Langdon Warner of the United States; and Count Otani of Japan, possibly a spy as well as an archaeologist.

11 Actually, Marc Aurel Stein, but he favored not using Marc as a given name. Several excellent biographies of Stein are available in English: Jeannette Mirsky, *Sir Aural Stein, Archaeological Explorer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Annabel Walker, *Aurel Stein, Pioneer of the Silk Road* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); Susan Whitfield, *Aurel Stein on the Silk Road* (Chicago: Serindia, 2004). All are illustrated, but Whitfield's book alone has color plates of some of Stein's finds.

12 Quoted by Jeannette Mirsky in her introduction to a 1964 reprint of Aural Stein's 1933 memoir, *On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), xiii.

13 Complicating matters is the fact that the small Yulin complex of Buddhist caves, which is located about one hundred kilometers east of Dunhuang, is often combined with the Mogao

14 In 111 BCE, Emperor Han Wudi established it as a military outpost. From those beginnings it became a commercial center and place of religious pilgrimage, hosting a variety of peoples.

15 About 906,500 km².

17 "A Note on Dunhuang Cave 17, 'The Library,' or Hong Bian's Reliquary Chamber," *Ars Orientalis* 16 (1986): 93-101. See also Rong Xinjiang, "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reasons for Its Sealing," trans. Valerie Hansen, *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asie* 11 (1999-2000): 247-75.