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The Weight of Silk: An Exploratory Account into the Developing Relations between Byzantium and China

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By Jeanna Lee

Abstract: *History has repeatedly proven that the nation, country, or region that controls the most key raw materials will dominate the surrounding global networks, be they economic, diplomatic, or political. When narrowing this focus to ancient Eurasian cultures, there are two obvious global powers: The Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) in the West and the Chinese Empire in the East (the Han Dynasty). While the scholarly independent research conducted on these powers is incredibly rich, what is understood about their interactions is limited and constantly evolving. Evidence explained later in this article shows that there was little more than an awareness of one another. Despite this, there are a rich number of parallels between these two powers concerning politics, diplomacy, and the general trajectory of their development. This minimal relationship and how it influenced the modern division of the East and West will be explored using trade goods traveling on the Silk Road (130 BCE–1453 CE), primarily silk and foreign coins used in burial rituals. The Silk Road consists of a vibrant history that eventually culminated in an unprecedented event of international industrial espionage. The often-overlooked affair, referred to as the Byzantine Silk Scandal (mid-sixth century), follows the exposure of the carefully guarded Chinese silk production, which ended their monopoly held for multiple millennia. This article will recount the context needed to*

understand the magnitude of this event while exploring and explaining its significance.

Few historical events conjure the breathtaking reverie accompanied by the mere mention of the Silk Road (130 BCE–1453 CE): the sunset set against a blistering desert, a singular line of camels topped with rugs and spices. While the reality is oftentimes far more subtle with its dramatizations, there are occasions when the accepted truth genuinely does a disservice to its subject. In the case of the Silk Road, the complexities of such an intricate and historical network are often neglected in favor of its cinematic and exotic nature. The Silk Road was an ancient trade network formally established by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that operated until the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922 CE) invaded Byzantium (395–1453 CE), the Eastern Roman Empire, and severed its connection to the West. However, Europe became accustomed to this mercantile relation where, as historian Will Durant writes, "Italy enjoyed an 'unfavorable' balance of trade—cheerfully [buying] more than she sold."[1] After the world became connected in this way, it could not be undone. The end of this traditional trade route simply led merchants to pursue trade through new means, resulting in the Age of Discovery during the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, which is often credited for the connectivity of the modern world.

The romanticized depiction of the Silk Road, which bears some resemblance of truth, is often revered because of its supposed exoticism and removal from Western culture. Those familiar with Edward Said's *Orientalism* may be acquainted with the concept of *orientalism*, which identifies and challenges the inherent Western bias towards Eastern cultures. As Said states,

> What we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted together strength of Orientalist discourse, its

[1] Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: The Story of Civilization, Volume III* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 3.

> very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubt-able durability. Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many rations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture.[2]

The modern West's stereotypical, orientalized conception of the Silk Road does not accurately acknowledge its true extent and significance. Not only was this trade route a means of economic and creative exchange, but it also impacted political, religious, technological, ideological, and other fundamental transcontinental dialogues and developments. Historically, there has been a relegation of the East in Western culture and history, despite its remarkable prominence and involvement in the progression of the modern West. The Silk Road itself is a representation and reminder of the connectedness of these two seemingly polarized worlds.

Since there is only one documented encounter of direct interaction between Rome and China, the most significant assets for analysis are the commodities themselves. By tracing specific objects, silk and coins being the most useful, it is possible to recreate the relationship between these two great empires. Rome's acquisition of luxury goods was not unique, but the indispensable symbolism that silk represented made the material a commercial priority. Alternatively, coins have unique properties in funeral assemblies and in private collections, which provides more

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[2] Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 17.

archaeological evidence for interactions between China and Eastern Rome.

The Afro-Eurasian joint venture that is the Silk Road documents the economic, diplomatic, political, and cultural communications between the Romans and the Chinese, which is seen through the commodity chains of silk and coinage. Both societies serve as interesting case studies themselves, but there also exists an opportunity to document the historical evolution of relations between the East and West. In the age of modernity, the social climate shared between the Western and Eastern world is more divided than ever before, which is why there has never been a greater urgency for this line of study. The unification of the East and West through trade continues to be explored as a means to expand prominence, as seen in the contemporary Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (2016), also called the New Silk Road.[3] These developments strive to replicate the prestige and notability accomplished during the original Silk Road era, displaying the geopolitical importance of this transcontinental collaboration.

The Hou Hanshu and Roman-Chinese Relations: Societal Beginnings to 166 CE

When studying China and Byzantium alongside one another, there is an academic challenge because, while they were not always simultaneous with one another in development, significant chronological events often overlapped.[4] In China, the Shang Dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE) was the first ruling dynasty documented in Chinese records, although the Chinese empire was formally unified from five separate states in 221 BCE under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). Tradition states that the city of

[3] United States Congress, "The New Silk Road Strategy: Implications for Economic Development in Central Asia: July 31, 2013, Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe" (Washington: Commission on Security Cooperation in Europe, 2015).

[4] Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China,* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Rome was formed in 753 BCE, although this is derived from the myth of Romulus and Remus.[5] In 330 CE, Emperor Constantine (272–337 CE) founded a "second Rome" in the East, referred to as Byzantium in modernity, which relocated Rome's capital to what would become Constantinople.[6]

Fairly reputable and extensive documents exist for both empires, but oftentimes historical significance and accepted ideology fluctuate between cultures, influencing what is ultimately recorded. Further, it can be challenging to separate the impossible amount of coincidental similarities, where nearly identical events were happening simultaneously despite their lack of direct contact. China and Rome were of comparable geographic sizes at their height and they each dominated their individual landscapes, at times laying separate claims to the rest of the world. They also relied on agrarian, monetized economies.[7] Even portions of their eventual downfall shared resemblances, where they both lost half of their empire (the West in Rome and the North in China) to "barbarian" forces.[8] They both generally relied on centralized governments. Furthermore, there were distinct and powerful classes of elites, and conquest was considered a fundamental element of the empires.

Despite their resemblances, both empires had their own unique challenges. Topography and landscape are crucial elements to recognize when studying society because there is usually some

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[5] Romulus and Remus, two twin brothers, are traditionally credited as the mythological founders of Rome.

[6] Constantinople was renamed Istanbul after the Ottoman Invasion in 1453 CE.

[7] John D. Durand, "Population Statistics of China, A.D. 2–1953," *Population Studies* 13, no. 3 (1960): 216; Walter Scheidel, "A Model of Real Income Growth in Roman Italy," *Historia: Zeitschrift fur Alta Geschichte* 56, no. 3 (2007): 324. The individual geographic landscapes were referred to as orbis terrarium and tianxia, respectively. Around 2 CE, the number of people in China is recorded to be 59.5 million compared to the 60–75 million that are estimated for Rome.

[8] "Barbarian" refers to South Asian nomadic Steppe tribes and the Ottoman Empire.

reflection of their innermost values of the environment. Cultures often base their beliefs on the specific attributes they interact with regularly and this can vary quite drastically depending on where a culture is physically located.[9] Unsurprisingly, the environment greatly influenced the development of both regions. While China and Rome shared a relatively temperate climate, their topography required extremely different responses. Rome's position in the bustling Mediterranean fueled communication, migration, and trade. In contrast, although China is not land-locked by any means, this much larger country consists of more isolated valleys and mountain ranges, with the Himalaya mountains in the southwest, the Gobi Desert to the north, and the Central Asian deserts to the west.[10] This geography influenced the development of trade, settlements, and communication, and explains why there was little interaction between both empires. Neither needed to seek materials far outside of their traditional neighbors because of the regular access to variously wealthy trading partners by land and sea. However, this changed after the invention of silk and the creation of the Silk Road, which indirectly connected the two empires for the first time.

Throughout their rise, both Rome and China experienced challenging periods of reform during which cultural transformation, economic development, and conquest all took place. Specifically, these empires relied on military organization and the governmental regulation of resources, which organically implied a need for physical and social expansion.[11] Additionally, it is vital to appreciate the enormous distance inhabited by the Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE) and Kushan (c. 100 BCE–375 CE) empires, the powers that served as the intermediaries between the East and West. These regions inhabited the modern-day Middle

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[9] G. F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relationships from the Earliest Times to 1800* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1931).

[10] Homer H. Dubs, "An Ancient Military Contact Between Romans and Chinese," *The American Journal of Philology* 62, no. 3 (1941): 322.

[11] Howard Spodek, *The World's History* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998).

East and possessed a landmass the size of the Roman Empire at its height as seen in Figure 1.[12] The intermediary role of the Middle East stimulated the rise of transcontinental trade and throughout history, decisions made within this region greatly impacted Sino-Platonic relations.[13]

Figure 1: Parthia and Kushan compared to Rome and the Han Empire. The Silk Road connected all four empires in a linear line with routes that branched into each territory. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.[14]

Beginning during the period of the Western Han (c. 50 BCE), China was well-aware of Rome's existence in the West.[15]

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[12] Jake Nabel, "Remembering Intervention: Parthia in Rome's Civil Wars," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 68, no. 3 (2015): 327–352.

[13] "Sino-Platonic relations" refers to the relations of Central Asian peoples with external societies.

[14] Free to redistribute under CC BY-SA 4.0. SY, "Map showing the four empires of Eurasia in 2nd Century AD," July 27, 2017, Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eurasia_in_2nd_Century.png.

[15] Ye Fan, "The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu: The Xiyu juan, 'Chapter on the Western Regions,'" in *Hou Hanshu*, Second Edition, ed. John E. Hill (University of Washington, 2003).

However, there is no direct interaction between them except for a supposed mission during the reign of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). The emissaries who requested a meeting with these Chinese ambassadors claimed to be sent by the Roman ruler himself, although this was likely a deception due to the lack of corroborating Roman evidence. This encounter is documented in the *Hou Hanshu*, also called the *Book of the Later Han*, a history book composed by Fan Ye (398–445 CE) and other historians. Although writing multiple centuries after these events, the men compiled documents and accounts to preserve the history of the Han Dynasty. The meeting with the Roman ambassadors is transcribed below:

> In the ninth *yanxi* year [166 CE], during the reign of Emperor Huan, the king of Da Qin (the Roman Empire), Andun (Marcus Aurelius), sent envoys from beyond the frontiers through Rinan (Commandery on the central Vietnamese coast), to offer elephant tusks, rhinoceros horn, and turtle shell.[16]

There are favorable acknowledgments about the kingdom of "Da Qin," or the Roman Empire, however, the Chinese seemed unimpressed by the goods presented to them. Many of these items, such as ivory and gems, were already accessible through other trade partners, so this meeting between the two empires seemed unremarkable to the Chinese.[17] Further investigation of this meeting reinforces the theory that this was a deception and not an official Roman interaction. There would likely be some Roman documentation of the exchange at least, if not a full inquiry into

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[16] Fan.

[17] Peter F. Bang, "Commanding and Consuming the World: Empire, Tribute, and Trade in Roman and Chinese History," in *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*, ed. Walter Schneidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100–120.

this previously unknown civilization, especially one as prominent and powerful as China. Despite the truthfulness of this encounter, Chinese historians believed this interaction to be legitimate which impacted their perception and records regarding Rome. In an analysis about Roman prestige goods presented in China, Armin Selbitschka, a professor from New York University Shanghai, writes this about the encounter and Roman-Sino trade relations as a whole:

> The visitor was probably a private merchant masquerading as an official envoy- and the establishment of a few embassies during the seventh century CE, the Roman and Chinese courts remained distant from one another. The majority of exchanges between the Eastern Roman and Chinese cultural spheres were focused on commerce done in stages. It is highly unlikely that large numbers of Byzantine merchants ever set foot on Chinese ground or vice versa. [18]

While the *Hou Hanshu* serves as the main documentation for these interactions from the Chinese perspective, following European history in this era is arguably even more difficult. This narrative can be woven together from several sources, including Pliny the Elder (c. 23–79 CE) and Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–570 CE).[19] Neither of these accounts is particularly favorable due to their reputation for exaggeration, although they each gathered histories based on long-lost documents. Pliny especially took an interest in Eastern relations and describes silk and gems in great detail. In one account, he describes the Chinese people:

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[18] Armin Selbitschka, "The Early Silk Road(s)," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 38.
[19] Gaius Pliny, *The Natural History*. online translation via LacusCurtius, https://bit.ly/PlinyNH.

> [T]he people called the Chinese, who are famous for the woolen substance obtained from their forests… enable the Roman matron to flaunt transparent raiment in public. Though mild in character, [the Chinese] resemble wild animals, in that they also shun the company of the remainder of mankind, and wait for trade to come to them.[20]

As exists within all historic source material, there is some bias in Pliny's documentation. While the use of these sources can be controversial, this documentation reveals the limited understanding of how silk was produced and how isolated China and Rome were from one another.

Development of the Silk Road (130–70 CE)

In China, a collection of tribes from the northern steppe grasslands called the Xiongnu (Hsiung Nu) were a source of worry and apprehension for the earlier Han Dynasty between 206 BCE and 9 CE.[21] The first Great Wall was built specifically against these "intruders" a dynasty earlier during the Qin (Ch'in) Dynasty (221–206 BCE).[22] The Qin consistently faced these nomadic tribes until Emperor Wudi (157–87 BCE) forced them out of the Ordos region in 119 BCE.[23] However, the constant intermittent warfare left China in a state of near collapse, forcing the empire to split into two sections. Around 60-70 CE, the separate northern province expanded into modern-day Turkestan during a period of political disruption. Chinese commanders took hold of the area, which was

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[20] Gaius Pliny as reprinted in Xinru Liu, *The Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 1314.

[21] Steppe refers to the South Asian grassland that spans from modern-day Siberia to Europe.

[22] Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Second Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[23] Denis Twitchett, *Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge University Press), 33.

then settled by Chinese traders, beginning the initial roots of the Silk Road.[24]

Although the exact time China began exporting silk to the West is unknown, there are various suggestions about the Silk Road's development. In 115 BCE, Mithridates II of Parthia (124–91 BCE), modern-day Iran, allied with Emperor Wudi. At this time, China and Parthia engaged in a sort of direct commercial exchange. Into the following century, Roman general and statesman, Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), supposedly possessed several silk items himself, including a set of silk curtains. From the time of Emperor Augustus (63–14 CE) onward, Rome never again went without silk.[25]

It is crucial to remember that the Silk Road, despite its name, was not a linear connection but a wide network. The intermediaries between the trade route, Parthia and Kush, later developed into the Islamic Caliphate. India and Pakistan each "facilitated, regulated, and taxed silk-road trade but shaped it through demand for particular goods and cultural contributions."[26] The Persian language was the *lingua franca* of the Silk Road which reinforces their prominence in the region.[27] Even those not allied under a confederation, such as nomadic Central Eurasians, regularly interacted with this system. The first silk the Romans ever saw was rumored to be the Parthian banners at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE, although the republic had indirectly interacted with Asian goods far before this.[28] Access to horses and even wheel technology came from the Fertile Crescent, which secured Western fascination in the East, although further development of

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[24] John Block Friedman and Kristen Mossler, eds., *Trade, Travel, and Exploration in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013), 307.

[25] John Thorley, "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, 'Circa' A. D. 90–130," *Greece and Rome* 18, no. 1 (1971), 71.

[26] James A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press), 7.

[27] McLaughlin.

[28] Millward, 26.

the ancient Silk Road would not go any further than Parthia.[29] By the turn into the modern era, the Silk Road decisively established the vague relationship between Rome and China. However, considering the highly variable and inconsistent histories of Rome and China, ideal conditions could never have lasted very long.

The Fall of the West (113–395 CE) and the Period of Disunity (130–589 CE)

By 130 CE, China lost influence within modern-day Turkestan and soon lost complete control of the area.[30] In the West, Roman and Parthian relations worsened, eventually leading to a new series of wars under the Roman emperor Trajan (53–117 CE) in 113 CE. From 541 to 549 CE, an epidemic believed to be smallpox rapidly spread across the Western world.[31] The Roman Empire, the Chinese, and the Parthians all struggled to maintain their footing because of the epidemic and series of wars. By the third century, both the Parthian royal house and the Han Dynasty collapsed. In 285 CE, Emperor Diocletian (244–311 CE), realizing the unsustainable enormity of the Roman Empire, decided to divide the Empire into western and eastern halves. Silk continued to be exported into Western and Eastern Rome but with greater difficulty and expense than ever before.

During the late fourth century, Western Rome became politically unstable. Internal secular conflict paired with the recurring invasions of Germanic tribes eventually led to the collapse of the West in 476 CE. This period in Rome and the parallel political instability of China in the mid-second through mid-fifth centuries are typically referred to as a "dark age."[32] The Byzantine capital of Constantinople continued to rule in the east

[29] Millward, 21.

[30] Ebrey.

[31] Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: Transformation of an Empire*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2016).

[32] Millward, 27.

and claimed to be the continuation of the Roman Empire. Similarly, the northern Chinese states were less impacted than their southern counterparts. In these regions, this period intensified traditional ecclesiastical institutions' influences. In Byzantium, Christianity became a defining characteristic. In China, the Northern Wei promoted Buddhism and other aspects of Indian culture, represented by the mountainside Buddha carvings like those in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. These changes introduced the Period of Disunity (220–589 CE) in China, which continued until the establishment of the Sui (581–618 CE) Dynasty. The Sui was then succeeded by the Tang (618–907 CE), which was initially defined by the dynasty's militaristic expansion.[33]

After the rise of the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) in Persia, Byzantium attempted to circumvent this trade partner to obtain silk due to trade blockades. By the fourth century, Byzantium developed its internal silk industry after the silkworm scandal in the mid-sixth century. However, even after Byzantium began its silk production, various ideas and other commodities followed along the traditional routes. The Silk Road continued until the fall of Byzantium in 1453 CE and the rise of the Ottoman Empire essentially ended Eurasian trans-international trade.[34]

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[33] Ebrey.

[34] A. A. Vasil'ev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1958).

Silk in Byzantium and the Silkworm Scandal (Mid-500 CE)

Figure 2: Byzantine silk woven in Egypt, dated between the seventh and ninth centuries. Courtesy of the Met Museum.[35]

Silk had long served as a diplomatic tool between Byzantium and its neighbors. It was referred to as *seres* by ancient Greek and Romans, which is understood as the romanized version of the Chinese word, *si*.[36] The Romans coveted silk but were unable to reproduce the technology to manufacture it. Figure 2 shows early European silk which, although valuable, was not as coveted as Chinese silk. Pliny the Elder wrote that silk was "the wool found in their forests," showing the lack of understanding about even the origins of the practice.[37] Regardless, silk was always prominent on the world stage. Even Egyptian queen Cleopatra (69/70–30 BCE)

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[35] Met Museum, "Roundel with Amazons and a Cross," 7th-9th century, 8 3/16 x 8 1/4in. (20.8 x 20.9cm), silk, public domain, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466156?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+500-1000&what=Silk%7cTextiles&ft=silk&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=17.

[36] Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC–AD 305* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[37] Liu.

is thought to have worn silks as opposed to linens.[38] In 568 CE, Eastern Roman Emperor Justin II (520–578 CE) was offered silk in exchange for an alliance with the Turkic Khaganate. The Tang Dynasty even authorized the use of silk as currency.[39] While Byzantine silk production began in the sixth century, its quality was far inferior to the Chinese product.

With the rise of the Sassanid Empire (224–651 CE) and the subsequent Roman-Persian wars (476–627 CE), importing silk into Europe became increasingly difficult and expensive. As a result, Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565 CE) attempted to create alternate routes through Sogdiana, Crimea, and Ethiopia. However, all these efforts failed. Typically, raw silk purchased from China traveled through the intermediary Middle East and was made into fine fabrics within Europe. The reign of Justinian I marks a turning point on both the sale and manufacturing of silk, as sumptuary laws blocked purple silk consumption by those outside the royal family.[40]

Purple clothing, which Pliny claims was a tradition begun by the legendary founder of Rome, Romulus, was a long-standing tradition for nobility in Rome.[41] Creating purple cloth began with capturing sea snails to extract the dye, a method that was consistently used as early as 1200 BCE until 1453 CE. This method was initially used to color purple wool, but purple silk eventually became the standard to represent imperial authority. Sumptuary laws first began in fourth-century Rome dictating that only the emperor could wear what was called "Tyrian purple."[42] Purple dye, created from the murex shell, became synonymous with the idea of higher office. While only the emperor could be

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[38] Adrian Goldsworthy, *Antony and Cleopatra* (London: Yale University Press, 2010).

[39] Millward, 71.

[40] David Jacoby, *Commodities, and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Routledge, 1997).

[41] Pliny.

[42] Jacoby, *Commodities, and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean*, 455.

completely clothed in purple, priests and officials were allowed to wear small pieces of purple, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: "Emperor Justinian and Members of His Court." Photograph from the twentieth century, original mosaic dates to the sixth century. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art photograph collection.[43]

Although there is not much evidence to show that Western Roman rulers were quite as protective of the color, the Eastern Byzantine empire embraced the practice of equating purple silk with elite ranking. By the age of Diocletian (244–305 CE), the production of Tyrian purple was closely controlled, subsidized, and used only to color imperial silks. The dye process itself is described by Pliny:

> The most favourable season for taking these is after the rising of the Dog-star, or else before spring… after it is taken, the vein is extracted to which it is

[43] Met Museum, "Emperor Justinian and Members of His Court," early twentieth century (originally dated the 6th century), 104 x 144 x 5 in, mosaic, public domain, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466586.

> requisite to add salt to every hundred pounds of juice…about the tenth day, generally, the whole contents of the cauldron are in a liquefied state, upon which a fleece is plunged into it by way of making trial. The tint that inclines to red is looked upon as inferior to that which is of a blackish hue.[44]

Silk was an item precious to Byzantium in general, but purple silk had transcended the role of a mere item. Western Roman tradition believed that the government had a duty to protect its civilians from extravagance and overindulgence. The Roman emperor was allowed a purple cape lined with gold, and senators represented their office with a single purple stripe across their toga.[45] Official mandates required the court to wear distinctive markers made of silk, and it was used throughout religious iconography, which created a visual distinction between socioeconomic boundaries.[46]

After the Persians began strictly regulating the silk trade, there were "unwelcome changes in costs and availability."[47] This resulted in the frantic search for an alternative. As the story goes, two monks, most likely derived from the Nestorian Church, approached Justinian I regarding their recent mission into China. While in China, they had been able to personally witness the secretive and highly complex methods of raising silkworms and producing silk. In exchange for unknown promises, the monks agreed to acquire the silkworms from China. The smuggling expedition itself supposedly took two years.[48] Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–570 CE) recounts the event that eventually

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[44] Liu, 1491.

[45] Charlene D. Elliot, *Colour Codification: Law, Culture and the Hue of Communication* (Ottawa: Carleton University: 2003), 62.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Heleanor B. Feltham, "Justinian and the International Silk Trade," in *Sino-Platonic Papers* (University of Pennsylvania), 5.

[48] Liu, 2638.

disrupted the silk monopoly in China and circumvented trade intervention on the part of Persia:

> About the same time (mid-6th century) came from India certain monks; and they had satisfied Justinian Augustus that the Romans no longer should buy silk from the Persians, they promised the emperor in an interview that they would provide the materials for making silk so that never should the Romans seek business of this kind from their enemy the Persians, or from any other people whatsoever… they brought the eggs to Byzantium, the method having been learned… thus began the art of making silk from that time on in the Roman Empire.[49]

This event easily feels like something out of the cinema but was, in fact, the precipice of tensions built over hundreds if not thousands of years. Nobles used silk, particularly in foreign policy, to legitimize Byzantium's claim as the continuation of the Roman Empire in the East.[50] The significance of silk in Byzantium is not to be dismissed, for silk was used strategically as a diplomatic, economic, and political resource. In particular, purple silk was indicative of the royal family's inherent authority as well as serving "a major role as virtual currency, symbol of status, and arbiter of style."[51]

By the early tenth century, Byzantium's silk production operated completely independently from external trade.[52] Before this, the empire's legislation was partially dependent on the silk

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[49] Procopius, *On the Wars*, Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

[50] Robert Sabatino Lopez, "Silk Industry in the Byzantine Empire," *Speculum* 20, no. 1 (1945): 1–42.

[51] Feltham.

[52] David Jacoby, "Silk Economic and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 198.

trade from China, which the Middle Eastern kingdoms largely intercepted. Although Byzantium produced a type of silk before Justinian I's silk scandal, this version was of infamously inferior quality. As Persia destabilized and Roman relations with them worsened, the desperation to maintain silk's important symbolic gesture increased.

Smuggling the silkworms into Byzantium drastically altered the character of the Silk Road. Although silk pieces were no longer in such high demand after the scandal, Chinese silk thread was still largely favored in the Mediterranean world while Byzantium continued to perfect their version. As shown in Figure 4, other regions like Egypt, modern-day Syria and Iran also began manufacturing their version of the product. China no longer held a monopoly on silk production as the practice spread throughout the Eurasian world.

Figure 4: Made in modern-day Iran, dated to the seventh century. Courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery.[53]

[53] Yale University Art Gallery, "Two pieces of compound twill," Iran, seventh century, Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, 20 9/16 × 19 3/8 in, 13 3/4 × 13 3/16 in., silk, public domain, https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/46680.

Byzantine, Sui/Tang (581–907 CE) Coins, and Monetary Exchange

While documentation regarding silk specifically is quite limited, the impact of the Silk Road itself is traceable using many other methods. One of the more interesting commodities to track whenever trade is analyzed is monetary currency. Collectors likely gathered coins and merchants likely used them as they traveled along the Silk Road. This gives historians another outlet to trace the extent of Roman and Chinese relations. As artifacts, coins are an intrinsic asset to the archaeological record, especially when tracking any aspect of material exchange. Coins are particularly revealing in regard to the people who both created and circulated them, offering a wide array of perspectives and uses. Moreover, coins are reputable and attributed to a particular date range, which is why they are so valuable within the archaeological sphere. Coins were also typically created to transfer political messages, religious values, authority, thoughts, and artistic forms.[54] Although they exist for economic reasons, currency often transcends these barriers to possess more limitless social and cultural connotations.

The abundance of Roman coins recovered from China reveals the rich and complex relationship between the Chinese and Romans through monetary exchange. These coins consisted mostly of imperial Byzantine coinage (*solidi*), as high-value trade generally used Byzantine or Muslim currency. These were considered more reliable and stable than other regional coins.[55] Although there are examples of these coins in China, they only circulated widely through the Mediterranean and Near East. British archaeologist and academic Colin Haselgrove and professor of ancient numismatics, Stefan Krmnicek, study global economies and discuss how valuable the discoveries of Roman coinage are:

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[54] Colin Haselgrove and Stefan Krmnicek, "The Archaeology of Money," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 235–250.

[55] Feliu Gaspar, 'Money and Currency," in *Money and Coinage in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ramon Gorne (Brill, 2019), 21–40.

> The ubiquity and (generalized) uniformity of coins make them well suited to quantification. For the Roman period especially, numerical and statistical methodologies are now integral to the study of archaeological site finds. By making large numbers manageable, these approaches have revealed important patterns that can be criticized for perpetuating our perception of coinage as an inherently familiar medium, which behaves according to known rules, while maintaining the division between coins and the rest of the archaeological record by analyzing them as integrated assemblages effectively divorced from their contexts.[56]

Today, archeologists have uncovered almost fifty Byzantine imperial coins in China like the one seen in Figure 5. Except for a singular piece, archeologists excavated the remaining coins from tombs across Mongolia and several Chinese provinces such as Xinjiang and Gansu.[57] The coins were either found on the body, indicating use in funerary practices, or functioned as ornamentation. Social classes vary considerably but these individuals all possessed some form of wealth. While thousands of Sasanian coins were discovered in China, there are few examples of *solidi*. The lack of *solidi* found in China reinforces the idea of limited direct interaction between these two powers, as it was likely intermediaries who carried this coinage into China after acquiring it on the Silk Road.

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[56] Haselgrove and Krmnicek, 237.

[57] Francois Thierry and C. Morrison, "Sur les monnaies byzantines trouvées en Chine," *Revue Numismatique* 36 (1994): 110.

Figure 5: Byzantine coin of Justin I, produced 519-527 CE. Public Domain. [58]

The Decline of Byzantium and the End of the Silk Road (1195–1453 CE)

In 1206 CE, Genghis Khan (1162–1227 CE) gathered the nomadic tribes within the Steppe to conquer northern China and Central Asia.[59] Arguably, this unified the Eurasian continent like never before, although it did not last past the fifteenth century. Around 1260 CE, the Venetian explorer Marco Polo (1254–1324 CE) traveled to China where he served under Kublai Khan (1215–1294 CE). Here, he observed the extensive routes along the Silk Road.[60]

Although maritime routes linked China to the outside economic trade, it soon became much cheaper to transport the large quantities to meet demand by sea as opposed to land. Moreover, because the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) had little direct military presence, Central Asia was openly fragmented, and travel became dangerous.[61] Travel continued along the routes into the sixteenth century, but technological advancements and industrialization changed the Eurasian continent as a whole.

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[58] Numismatica Ars Classica, "Solidus Iustinus I," produced in the sixth century, Wikimedia Commons, coin, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Solidus_Iustinus_I.jpg.

[59] Millward, 34.

[60] Marco Polo, Maria Bellonci and Teresa Waugh eds., *The Travels of Marco Polo*: *A Modern Translation* (New York: Facts on File, 1984).

[61] Millward, 111.

However, to say there was a true end to the Silk Road is somewhat misleading. While state sponsorship ended, merchants continued to travel along their traditional routes, but the number of items likely shifted. Since Europe and Asia had become so used to this cultural exchange, many merchants simply turned to maritime trade or other land routes.

During the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204 CE), Byzantium was significantly weakened. The crusaders from Western Europe made a controversial and unprecedented decision to invade the Christian empire of Byzantium, destroying relations between the Orthodox and Catholic world. During the beginning of the thirteenth century, Baldwin of Flanders (1172–1205 CE) conquered Constantinople and established smaller, independent states. One of these being the Empire of Nicaea (1204–1261 CE), which eventually attempted to reinstate the empire, but it would never reclaim the former glory of Byzantium.[62]

Michael Palaiologos (1123–1282 CE), the first emperor of this restored empire, proclaimed,

> Constantinople, the Acropolis of the universe, the imperial capital of the Romans, which, by the will of God, was under the power of the Latins, has come again under the power of the Romans—this has been granted them by the will of God through us.[63]

However, the empire was left completely defenseless against the imposing threats to the East. The dying Roman Empire appealed to Pope Nicholas V (1397–1455 CE) but the empire ultimately received no form of aid during the Ottoman siege. Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481 CE) entered the city, and Constantinople fell in 1453 CE. This invasion accelerated the complete collapse of

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[62] Vasil'ev, 580.

[63] C. Chapman, "De vita sua opusculum," in *Michel Palcologue, restaurateur de l'Empire Byzantin (1261–1282)* (Paris: E. Figuiere, 1926), 172.

Rome and Christendom in the East and substantially aided the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

From 130 BCE when the Han first sponsored trade until the fall of Byzantium in 1453 CE, there were many physical exchanges along the Silk Road. However, the most enduring impact comes from the incredible exchange of culture that accompanied these objects. Every facet of Eurasian civilization crossed these routes, carried among the merchants and people who traveled between these distant worlds. The closure of the Silk Road led many merchants towards the Age of Discovery, which sparked international globalization unlike anything seen throughout human history at that point. The Silk Road helped introduce this idea of reliance on other cultures while broadening the worlds of each person who lived during this age. This encouraged maritime exploration leading to the development of the modern world.

Conclusion

Chinese and Roman commerce and culture continued to impact history far into modernity. This is especially apparent when observing international trade. While silk itself is no longer the economic and political necessity that it was in Byzantium, the material is still considered exotic and is highly sought after today. This is proof of the surviving remnants of the later Roman Empire in current Western society. The legacy of Byzantium, which allowed Greek and Roman culture to survive through the Renaissance, is heavily influenced by its Eastern neighbors. This is not a fact lost on historians, but further nurturing could perhaps help soothe contemporary relations between the East and the West. This division was created over multiple millennia, so it stands to reason that it may take a similar amount of time to resolve these traditional tensions.

Ancient transcontinental trade cannot accurately represent the international connectivity of the present day. Still, this connection between peoples reminds them of their shared humanity, despite cultural differences and physical boundaries.

While Central Eurasia seems unrecognizable in the modern day when compared to the classical and medieval periods of the Silk Road, many of these coveted commodities are still exchanged across the non-literal Silk Road. Politics, fashion, travel, music, video games, and immigration continue to be shared, albeit with some controversy, between the Western and Eastern portions of the world. There is some hope, that between these shared elements, lies the connection that can reunite this cultural divide.

The study of the Silk Road is a moment in human history that highlights the natural inclinations of several aspects of human nature: curiosity, desire for connection, and ambition. This is why the shared story of Rome and China allows for an exchange that promotes greater understanding and exposes the reality that there are no linear paths in history. The Silk Road shows that even cultures geographically and socially divided still influence one another. Diplomacy, politics, and economics all dictate how international foreign policy is conducted within other countries, and no nation is excluded from this concept.

The geopolitical and socio-economic importance of the Silk Road cannot go unrecognized if there is any hope for resolving the remaining agitations that exist on the global stage. Hopefully, in the future, projects like the New Silk Road can bridge the widening gap that endures between these two cultures. Although this project exists in the form of pipelines and highways, it is designed to allow China better access to the international sphere. This will allow China to be more geopolitically assertive within this strategic ancient trade corridor, much to the dismay of many Western politicians. There is a fear that this is simply a guise for expansionism, but others have more optimistic hopes.[64] Perhaps after this promising project is completed, the East and the West will be able to acknowledge their shared history and come to accept that there are more similarities connecting them than there are differences.

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[64] Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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