

Silver Road Meets Silk Road: Insights about Mexico's Insertion into Silk Road Dynamics

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The Silk Road tied the globe together for the first time by producing an early globalization phenomenon. Some consider that the ancient Silk Road disintegrated around the 18th century CE due to the fall of the Muslim empires and the kingdoms between Asia and Europe. However, the maritime trade among East Asia and the Spanish dominion on the American continent reactivated the ancient Silk Road on some levels, and maintained trade dynamics until the 19th century. This was possible because of Mexican silver and trade spots. Notwithstanding its historical background, Mexico seems so far away from the new Silk Road, or the Belt and Road Initiative in the 21st century. Thus, this paper analyzes Mexico's historic and current role concerning the Silk Road. First, I conceptualize and compare the ancient Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of complex interdependence theory. I propose that, unlike the ancient Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative is a case of an induced complex interdependence. Second, I study the Manila Galleons' dynamics in order to trace the ancient ties with the Silk Road. I emphasize Mexican silver's contribution to East Asian economies and the importance of Mexico's role in the East Asia-Spanish trade. Consequently, I analyze Mexico's position in the Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, I present some concluding remarks about Mexico's role in the Silk Road.

Keywords: Mexico, trade, Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative, Manila Galleon.

Introduction: The Silk Road as a Concept

In the last five years since Chinese President Xi Jinping's speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, the "Silk Road" has gained momentum. While the Silk Road as an idea is not new, it has become an important political and economic concept to understand current international relations. However, the lack of methodological conceptualization implies analytical problems at the time of studying present-day globalization. However, one thing is for sure; the Silk Road has become another word for globalization.

This "Silk Road-style globalization" began in the 2nd century CE, when the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) established the "peace and friendship" system with the Xiongnu people of the northern steppes.¹ The Han dynasty paid grain, silk and wine on a yearly basis in order to maintain peace. Eventually, these and other products found their way to Rome via Central Asia. In addition, Zhang Qian as a Han envoy visited Fergana,² Sogdiana³ and Bactria,⁴ and established trade arrangements in order to defeat the Xiongnu. Ultimately, the Han dynasty and the Parthian Empire established trade arrangements to exchange products through caravan routes. This also reinforced commercial ties between East Asia and Europe, and allowed the entrance of Buddhism into the East Asian region. Therefore, the necessity of peace through commerce and regional cultural feedback, originated what is nowadays known as the Silk Road.

After the Han dynasty, the frontiers of subsequent dynasties enclosed some East Asian political organizations until the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties. This meant the reduction of goods exchanges across the Silk Road. However, Tang dynasty "cosmopolitanism" strengthened the Silk Road once again due to its important presence in Turkish, Uyghur and Tibetan societies. It also strengthened Buddhism transmission.⁵ The consolidation of frontiers of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960 CE) period reduced goods exchanges once again. In the Song dynasty period (960–1279 CE), the Silk Road reemerged in the form of a "maritime Silk Road" because of the Song's important naval presence in Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle West.⁶

The development of an active East Asian trade, both continental and maritime, reached a peak with the Song dynasty. Due to the geopolitical impossibility for the Song dynasty to control the continental-based trade system, it began to explore maritime trade networks that

¹ Stephan Barisitz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 30–33.

² Valley that connected the ancient Chinese capital of Xian to the west over the Wushao Ling Mountain Pass to Wuwei.

³ Ancient Iranian civilization that at different times included territory located in present-day Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

⁴ Name of a historical region in Central Asia, north of the Hindu Kush mountain range and south of the Amu Darya River, covering the flat region that straddles modern-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

⁵ Mark E. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire. The Tang Dynasty* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁶ Peter Yun, "Balance of Power in the 11th–12th Century East Asian Interstate Relations," *Journal of Political Criticism* 9 (2011): 139–162.

would allow it to continue its wealth accumulation process. According to some authors,⁷ Song dynasty mercantile trade across East Asia took advantage of previous trade networks controlled by South Asian peoples. As it connected Japan and Korea with Southeast and South Asia, it increased the government's promotion of regional trade, and it linked the "maritime Silk Road" with the ancient Tea Horse Road of the southwest China region. In addition, the beginning of the maritime Silk Road saw the beginning of precious metal exchanges as a payment method among East Asian economies.⁸

The introduction of the government's contribution to economic and commerce dynamics, in addition of the introduction of non-Chinese elements into the equation as important nodes in the regional economic scene, are noteworthy elements of the development of the Silk Road as a concept. With the Song dynasty, it is possible to see the conversion from a Chinese-led Silk Road to an Asian-based Silk Road.

A true global Silk Road emerged during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Traditional trade contacts between the Chinese and the Mongols and the vast extension of the Mongol Empire during the 13th century CE both enhanced the continental Silk Road.⁹ The Ming dynasty's government monopolized trade through the so-called "tributary system," as well as the building of main selling spots around main urban centers and the opening of markets at the frontiers. This too happened on the sea with the voyages of Zheng He and the "Four Oceans Navigation" system.¹⁰ Even though the Ming dynasty's government tried to close contacts with the exterior, a complex network of non-official relations developed in all East Asia, including private trade.¹¹ It was in this general context when contacts with New Spain occurred through the Manila Galleons.

Exchanges between East Asia, America and Europe through the Manila Galleons have been abundantly studied. What is important to highlight is that the Manila Galleons inaugurated a true global-based Silk Road by linking East Asian intra-regional trade with the trade among America and Europe.¹² What is more, the Manila Galleons were the means by which Mexican and Peruvian silver found its way to Asia. This contributed to the rise of a "mercantilist" phenomenon in Asia by treasuring and prizing silver and considering it as

⁷ John Chaffee, "Song China and the Multi-state and Commercial World of East Asia," *Crossroads-Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 1 (2010): 33-54; Pin-tsun Chang, "The Rise of Chinese Mercantile Power in Maritime Southeast Asia, c. 1400-1700," *Crossroads-Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 6 (2012): 205-230.

⁸ Angela Schottenhammer, "Brokers and 'Guild' (huiguan 會館) Organizations in China's Maritime Trade with her Eastern Neighbours during the Ming and Qing Dynasties," *Crossroads-Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 1 (2010): 99-150.

⁹ Henry Serruys, "Sino-Mongol Trade During the Ming," *Journal of Asian History* 9, no. 1 (1975): 34-56.

¹⁰ Geoffrey C. Gunn, *History without Borders: The Making of an Asian World Region, 1000-1800* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011); Chunming Wu, "A Summary on Shipwrecks of the Pre-contact Period and the Development of Regional Maritime Trade Network in East Asia," in *Early Navigation in the Asia-Pacific Region. A Maritime Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Chunming Wu (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 1-28.

¹¹ Angela Schottenhammer, "Brokers and 'Guild'."

¹² Arturo Giraldez, *The Age of Trade: The Manila Galleons and the Dawn of the Global Economy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

synonymous with wealth, although it also served as a payment method.¹³

Trade between East Asia and New Spain reached a dynamic of its own.¹⁴ This implied that from 1565 to 1740 the *novohispano* elite managed trade with the Philippines more than the *peninsulares* or Spaniards in New Spain. This also suggested that the entire political structure in New Spain supported trade activities in such a way that it was possible to observe the government's promotion of commerce. However, global political vicissitudes and the rise of imperialism in the 19th century CE broke global trade links, which consequently caused the virtual disappearance of the Silk Road and the ending of Mexico's historic ties with East Asia.

The previous short history of the evolution of the ancient Silk Road aims to demonstrate that it was mainly a complex interdependent, economic and cultural phenomenon. This meant that it promoted trade and linked diverse societies at a cultural level in such a manner that their interrelation also increased mutual vulnerability and sensitivity.¹⁵ Although it could be argued that the use of the concept of "complex interdependence" is an anachronism,¹⁶ I think it is useful to also explain how mutual economic and cultural influence spread among the peoples along the ancient Silk Road. That is why many commercial goods and cultural practices of one place influenced and impacted other places in many ways. In addition, it is important to emphasize that from the Song dynasty, the Silk Road stopped being considered only a Chinese-led phenomenon in order to become a global-based phenomenon.

In the present day, the People's Republic of China has reinitiated the Silk Road as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Supposedly, the BRI has not only resumed the ancient Silk Road dynamic, but it also has restarted a regional intention of promoting connectivity and integration, infrastructure and trade.¹⁷ Nevertheless, unlike the ancient Silk Road, in which complex interdependence emerged as a cultural and economic phenomenon, in the BRI, complex interdependence has been induced by its strategic and political nature. Furthermore, the BRI is a Chinese-led project, and the ancient Silk Road was a global-based phenomenon.

In this historical process, Mexico has played a significant role as an important bridge between East Asia and Europe, as well as an important trade spot and currency source. At present, Mexico's geopolitical position is valued by many Asian countries that intend to

¹³ Vera Valdés Lakowsky, *De las Minas al Mar. Historia de la Plata Mexicana en Asia, 1565-1834* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987); Richard Von Glahn, "Foreign Silver Coins in the Market Culture of Nineteenth century China," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007): 51-78.

¹⁴ Mariano A. Bonialian, *El Pacífico Hispanoamericano: Política y Comercio Asiático en el Imperio Español (1680-1784)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2012); Mariano A. Bonialian, "Comercio y Atlantización del Pacífico Mexicano y Sudamericano: La Crisis del Lago Indiano y del Galeón de Manila, 1750-1821," *América Latina en la Historia Económica* 24, no. 1 (2017): 7-36.

¹⁵ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (New York: Longman, 2001).

¹⁶ Until recent times, complex interdependence theory has only been used to analyze the Belt and Road Initiative. See Aaron Jed Rabena, "The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 3 (2018): 683-697.

¹⁷ Biswa N. Bhattacharyay and De Prabir. "Restoring the Asian Silk Route: Toward an Integrated Asia," ADBI Working Paper 140 (2009); Asian Development Bank. *2014 Annual Report* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2014).

approach either the North American or the South American markets. For said reasons, I consider it important to think over Mexico's role in both the ancient Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative. It is important to highlight that even though there are studies on both the ancient Silk Road and Latin American ties,¹⁸ as well as studies about Latin American involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative,¹⁹ a study about Mexico's participation in the both the ancient Silk Road and the BRI is nonexistent. This paper aims to fill that research gap. In this line of thought, the main research question is how to conceptualize Mexico's insertion into Silk Road dynamics. The main objective of this research is to analyze Mexico's role in Silk Road dynamics through the Manila Galleons and in current times. As a hypothesis, I claim that the Silk Road is a global complex interdependence process, and Mexico is an important trade hub in it.

The present paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I review the role of New Spain in the maritime Silk Road through the Manila Galleons. Additionally, I focus on characterizing East Asia during the Ming and Qing dynasties, on the arrival of *novohispanos* settlers in the Philippines, and on the Manila Galleons. In the second section, I study Mexico's ties with the Asia-Pacific region. I explain the "pendulum" type relations between Mexico and East Asia, in which there were periods of remoteness and rapprochement. In the last section, I present some concluding remarks and thoughts about the topic, and I propose some research lines.

The Manila Galleons: New Spain's Role in the Maritime Silk Road

Many scholars have affirmed that, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the tributary system in the East Asian region was well-established.²⁰ The argument that states existed as political units in historic East Asia endows life to the tributary system. However, I contend that the tributary system occurred only in the highest political spheres of East Asian societies, and

¹⁸ Olimpia Niglio, "La Seda. Un Hilo Sutil Que, por Siglos, ha Unido a los Pueblos de Oriente y de Occidente." *Apuntes* 25, no. 1 (2012): 82-89; Teresa de Maria and Teresa Castelló Yturbe, *Historia y Arte de la Seda en México: Siglos XVI-XX* (Mexico City: Banamex, 1990).

¹⁹ Sergio Cesarin. *China y América Latina: Nuevos Enfoques Sobre Cooperación y Desarrollo: Una Segunda Ruta de la Seda?* (Buenos Aires: BID-INTAL, 2005); Margaret Myers. "China's Belt and Road Initiative: What Role for Latin America?" *Journal of Latin American Geography* 17, no. 2 (2018): 239-243; Jiang Shixue and Fortunato Mallimaci, *La Franja y la Ruta. Iniciativa China de Cooperación con América Latina y Caribe* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones UNTDF, 2018); Gonzalo Gutiérrez, "La Ruta de la Seda," in *América Latina y el Caribe y China. Relaciones Políticas e Internacionales 2017*, ed. José Ignacio Martínez Cortés (México: UNAM, Red ALC-China, UDUAL, CECHIMEX, 2018), 97-110; Zhu Hongbo, "Building the New Silk Road across the Pacific. Economic and Trade Relations between China and Latin America after the Financial Crisis in 2008," *Journal of Globalization, Competitiveness & Governability* 6, no. 1 (2012): 115-135.

²⁰ Giovanni Andornino, *The Nature and Linkages of China's Tributary System under the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (London: London School of Economics, 2006); John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order. Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Zhang Feng, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 4 (2009): 597-626.

contacts at lower levels were very dynamic and with few obstacles. This implies that states were not the main political institution in East Asia due to the absence of well-demarcated frontiers.

When the Ming dynasty was founded, it restored the “tributary” trade with the northern and western societies. Trade was then used as a political tool instead of an economic resource, this because the main objective was containment of the Mongols, Jurchen and Central Asian peoples.²¹ Nevertheless, the Chinese not only used “tributary” commerce to trade with the Mongols, but also they built selling outposts around main urban centers as well as opening markets within the frontiers.²² In other words, the Ming dynasty procured the continuous flow of goods on many levels, not only the official ones, increasing a complex interdependent network of relations.

The government’s promotion of trade during the Ming period also happened at the southern border. While from 1371 to 1407, the Mings government forbade any contacts with the exterior and thus reduced foreign trade, from 1405 to 1433, it sponsored Zheng He’s seven naval expeditions with the mission of establishing trade contacts with societies in current Southeast Asia, India, the Persian Gulf and even Africa.²³ During the Ming dynasty there was a *laissez-faire* style trade in all directions in spite of the government’s intention to monopolize overseas shipping and trade.²⁴ This meant the simultaneous development of official trade based on tributary relations and nominally illegal and private trade.

The parallelism between the tributary system and complex trade networks throughout the region continued with the Qing dynasty. In fact, the Qing dynasty was dependent on Ming dynasty economic forces, which meant the proliferation of market towns throughout China that promoted domestic trade and that also supported foreign trade. In this line, between 1719 and 1806, the growth rate of trade between Canton and Europe was about 4% yearly, and between 1680 and 1820, silver stocks growth rate was 0.9% on average, coming to a total of 800 million yuan between 1570 and 1830.²⁵ In spite of the government’s supervision and strict controls over trade, the private and active efforts of societies and organizations were always present in trade networks across the region. These organizations, known as *buiguan* (“brokers,” “guilds”), were very active during the Ming and Qing dynasties and served as public and private mediators.²⁶

²¹ Morris Rossabi, “The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia During the Ming,” *Journal of Asian History* 4, no. 2 (1970): 136-168.

²² Henry Serruys, “The Mongols in China: 1400–1450,” *Monumenta Serica* 27, no. 1 (1968): 233-305.

²³ Robert Finlay, “The Voyages of Zheng He: Ideology, State Power, and Maritime Trade in Ming China,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 8, no. 3 (2008): 327-347; Hui Chun Hing, “Huangming Zuxun and Zheng He’s Voyages to the Western Oceans,” *Journal of Chinese Studies* 51 (2010): 67-85.

²⁴ Charles Holcombe, *Una Historia de Asia Oriental: De los Orígenes de la Civilización al Siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016), 241; Albert Feuerwerker, “The State and the Economy in Late Imperial China,” *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 297-326.

²⁵ Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-Chien Wang, “Economic Developments, 1644–1800,” in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 9 Part One: The Ch’ing Empire to 1800*, ed. Williard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 563-646.

²⁶ Angela Schottenhammer, “Brokers and ‘Guild.’”

This entire context is important to understand the arrival and settlement of the *novohispanos* in East Asia. The presence of Spanish settlers in the Asian region has also been widely studied.²⁷ What is important to highlight is that the Spanish Empire searched for a colonial establishment in East Asia due to commercial, geopolitical and religious reasons. The Spaniards achieved the establishment of a settlement and trade ties precisely because of the lack of well-established frontiers in a region that was presumably under the tributary system. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult to settle in the region without paying tribute. Although the Spanish government tried to arrive in the East Asian region from the European continent, the perilous journey made it impossible. That is why all “Spanish” voyages to Asia were made from New Spain with the exception of the first two.²⁸

New Spain was important for global trade for another reason: silver. The Philippines’ incorporation into the Spanish Empire was thus twofold. On the one hand, it had its roots in the discovery of silver mines on the American continent, which supposed a lucrative business with the exchange of devalued silver in Mexico and Peru but overvalued silver in Asia.²⁹ On the other hand, it also implied revenues in the form of taxes to the Spanish imperial structure.³⁰ From 1593 to 1702, New Spain officially imported 250,000 pesos of goods and exported 500,000 of silver. This amount increased to 300,000 in imports and 600,000 in exports from 1701 to 1734. Moreover, from 1734 to 1769, they also increased to 750,000 in imports and 1,500,000 in exports. These amounts are official data, and it is safe to say that private and illegal trade made enormous profits, too.

The geopolitical and monetary importance of New Spain for the maritime Silk Road was only possible due to the Manila Galleons. The transpacific trade through the Manila Galleons, or *Nao de China*, route has also been widely analyzed.³¹ What it is important to emphasize is that the Manila Galleons were considered a symptom of *novohispano* control of transpacific trade, rather than Spanish control of it. Hence, the Mexican *almaceneros* (grocers) became the most powerful economic group in New Spain; they refused to participate in transatlantic

²⁷ Cristina Barrón, *Urdaneta Novohispano. La Inserción del Mundo Hispano en Asia* (México City: Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, 2012); José Antonio Cervera, “La Expansión Española en Asia Oriental en el Siglo XVI: Motivaciones y Resultados,” *Estudios de Asia y África* 52, no. 1 (2017): 191-201; John L. Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines. Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565-1700* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

²⁸ Magallanes and Elcano made the first Spanish voyage to East Asia in 1519, and García Jofre de Loaisa made the second in 1524.

²⁹ Patricio Hidalgo Nuchera, “La Figura de Andrés de Urdaneta en la Historiografía Indiana, Conventual, Documental y Moderna,” in *Andrés de Urdaneta: un hombre moderno*, ed. Susana Truchuelo García (Ordizia: Ayuntamiento de Ordizia, 2009), 17-91.

³⁰ Vera Valdés Lakowsky, “La Importancia de la Plata Novohispana en Asia,” in *Urdaneta Novohispano. La Inserción del Mundo Hispano en Asia*, ed. Cristina Barrón (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, 2012), 179-198.

³¹ Salvador Bernabéu and Carlos Martínez Shaw, eds., *Un Océano de Seda y Plata: El Universo Económico del Galeón de Manila* (Sevilla: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2016); William L. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon* (New York: Dutton, 1939); Carmen Yuste, “El Dinamismo Rutinario de la Carrera Transpacífica,” in *Urdaneta Novohispano. La Inserción del Mundo Hispano en Asia*, ed. Cristina Barrón (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, 2012): 199-222.

commerce with the European continent as they influenced the change of location of the annual trade fair from the port city of Veracruz to Acapulco.³²

The Manila Galleons and the maritime Silk Road also provided New Spain with an identity that detached it more from Spain. The imports of Asian goods³³ made exotic “desires” into “needs” because they marked an important social status as part of the Spanish Empire.³⁴ Nonetheless, in New Spain, Asian goods reached an “identity” status as they promoted a syncretism between Asian culture and Mexican culture in the forms of folklore (*China poblana*), literature (*El periquillo Sarniento*), and crafts (*talavera*) to name a few. Quoting some important Mexican researchers,³⁵ “the oriental” became representative of “the Mexican.”

Even before Mexico became an independent state, it already had deep connections with East Asia through the maritime Silk Road. Until the 16th century CE, the Asia-led Silk Road maintained a very dynamic rhythm in trade due to flexible frontiers and a regional complex trade network that was shaped around official, private and illegal trade. This implied that cultural and social exchanges took place and contributed to outlining Asian societies as known in the present. After the establishment of another route via the Manila Galleons, the Silk Road went global and continued to link Asia and Europe. Still, as time progressed, New Spain became more and more important for this maritime Silk Road in detriment to the Spanish metropolis. Thus, from the 16th century to the 18th century, East Asia and New Spain became interdependent due not only to trade exchanges, but also because of cultural and social exchanges as well.

Mexico's Ties with the Asia-Pacific Region

Remoteness made clear the relationship between Mexico and Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries. There were several reasons for this. On the one side, China was never a full consumer of Mexican silver, and in the 19th century, the metallic commodity was more desired by England and the United States than the Qing government, which issued a prohibition against silver's import in 1809. On the other side, Asia suffered from the “mercantilist” belief that only metals were significant to increase wealth.³⁶ The more general context for this was the rise of imperialism in Asia, which meant the establishment of the gold standard, the disintegration of the East Asian regional order based on flexible frontiers, and the Latin American pursuit

³² Mariano A. Bonialian, *El Pacífico Hispanoamericano*, 17; Carmen Yuste, “El Dinamismo Rutinario de la Carrera Transpacífica,” 211-213.

³³ Cotton and silk goods, jewels, metals, spices, porcelain, cinnamon, pepper, camphor, and ivory, among other goods.

³⁴ Russell K. Skowronek, “Cinnamon, Ceramics, and Silks: Tracking the Manila Galleon Trade in the Creation of the World Economy,” in *Early Navigation in the Asia-Pacific Region. A Maritime Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Chunming Wu (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 59-74.

³⁵ Francisco Javier Haro, José Luis León and Juan José Ramírez, *Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales de México, 1821-2010. Volumen 6: Asia* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores-Dirección General del Acervo Histórico Diplomático, 2011), 55.

³⁶ Vera Valdés Lakowsky, *De las Minas al Mar*, 260-262, 311-312.

of political independence. The aforementioned also implied the fragmentation of the Silk Road and, with it, the breakdown of a complex interdependence based on trade and cultural exchanges between Asia and Mexico.

The newborn nation attempted to restore the Mexican presence and trade in East Asia by outdated strategies like using Mexican silver to guarantee goods exchanges with Asia, even with the presence of new social phenomena of prominence like Chinese immigrants and their potential to occupy inhabited Mexican lands.³⁷ At the end of the 19th century, Mexico only succeeded in securing diplomatic ties with Japan (1888) and China (1899), although the main reason behind these efforts was to control Asian immigration.³⁸ It is possible to say that in the absence of favorable global trade conditions, or “Silk Road conditions,” commerce was difficult to restore. The complications of consolidating the nascent state apparatus caused a failure by the Mexican government to focus its attention on Asia. In addition, Asian societies were engaged in their own problems.

The emergence of the United States as a regional power at the end of the 19th century also substantiated the relationship between Mexico and Asia. Even though the Mexican political elites had always sought to reconnect Europe and Asia, the presence of the United States in the hemisphere redefined Mexico’s trade priorities and possibilities. In this sense, nearly 75% of Mexican foreign trade went to the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century, and most of its investment came from the U.S. and European countries.³⁹ Since the formation of this scenario, the Mexican political elites tried to maintain certain political autonomy vis-à-vis the United States, sometimes by itself and at other times in tune with other Latin American countries’ foreign policies.⁴⁰ In addition, the turbulent period of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) reduced foreign ties to a minimum.

Besides the international and regional economic and political context, another regrettable factor that characterized Mexico’s remoteness from Asia was most definitely racism. During the first decades of the 20th century, Mexican governments promoted Asian immigration. However, Mexican society was immersed in an identity-redefinition process in which Asians were left out, contrary to what happened during the New Spain period.⁴¹ In fact, the Mexican elites adopted an “orientalist” approach towards Asia, in which a unique form of Asian identity was formed in the Mexican imagination that was very far from objective. This happened in

³⁷ Francisco Javier Haro, José Luis León and Juan José Ramírez, *Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales de México*, 60-61.

³⁸ José Luis León-Manríquez and Eduardo Tzili Apango, “México y Asia Pacífico: Proximidades y Distancias de una Dilatada Relación,” *Revista CIDOB d’Afers Internacionals* 110 (2015): 116-117.

³⁹ Sandra Kuntz-Ficker, “Nuevas Series del Comercio Exterior de México, 1870–1929,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 20, no. 2 (2002): 213-270; Veliz Lizarraga, “Comercio Exterior de México. 1853-1910,” *Revista de Comercio Exterior* 3, no. 2 (1953): 63-67.

⁴⁰ Roberta Lajous Vargas, *Historia Mínima de las Relaciones Exteriores de México, 1821-2000* (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2012).

⁴¹ Flora Botton Beja, “La Persecución de los Chinos en México,” *Estudios de Asia y África* 43, no. 2 (2008): 477-486; Francisco A. Romero Estrada, “Factores que Provocaron las Migraciones de Chinos, Japoneses y Coreanos Hacia México: Siglos XIX y XX. Estudio Comparativo,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales (Cr)* 4, no. 90-91 (2000): 141-153.

literature above all.⁴² As a consequence, this caused strangeness and even violence against the Asian communities settled on Mexican land.

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that Mexico as a nation restored some of its Asian ties. Between 1958 and 1988, Mexico concluded 60 bilateral connections with Burma, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, and then South Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore.⁴³ In 1987, a presidential report to Congress introduced the Asia-Pacific region as an imperative subject of foreign policy. The Mexican government created the Mexican Commission of the Pacific Rim in 1988, and soon after Mexico made its way into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 1993.⁴⁴ Nearly parallel to this event, the Chinese premier Li Peng proposed restoring the ancient Silk Road in a visit to various Central Asian countries in 1994.

It is important to emphasize that the relationship between Mexico and the Asia-Pacific region was ambivalent at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The full appearance of neoliberalism caused a change of focus of the Mexican political elites to North America, and as a consequence of this, the North America Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was promptly instituted. Contrary to this, the perception of Asia-Pacific countries regarding the geopolitical importance of Mexico can be briefly described as a country sharing a border with the biggest consumer market in the world.⁴⁵ Due to this fact, the relationship has increased in trade volume and complexity, even though it has been more due to Asian governments' interest than Mexico's.

When Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed restoring the ancient Silk Road in 2013, Mexico's relations with Asia suffered a setback. From 2012 to 2014, Mexico and China established a "comprehensive strategic association." Mexico and Japan strengthened their dialogue on all levels. In addition to this, Mexico and India intensified their relationship since the Latin American country promoted Indian observer status in the Pacific Alliance. Mexico and South Korea also reinforced their relations based on the MIKTA process. Moreover, Mexico's promotion of cooperation on multiple topics with Australia, the Philippines, New Zealand and Singapore was swift and correct.⁴⁶

However, from 2014 to 2018 the Mexican government concentrated efforts on promoting the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) with scarce results given the position of the Trump administration on that matter. In addition, some scholars consider that the TPP was a

⁴² Eduardo Tzili Apango, "La Cultura como Bien Público Global: La Influencia de la Poesía de Li Po en José Juan Tablada," in *América Latina y el Caribe-China. Historia, Cultura y Aprendizaje del Chino 2015*, ed. Liljana Arsovska (Mexico City: UNAM, Red ALC-China, UDUAL, CECHIMEX, 2015), 125-140.

⁴³ Francisco Javier Haro, José Luis León and Juan José Ramírez, *Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales de México*, 326-327.

⁴⁴ José Luis León-Manríquez and Eduardo Tzili Apango, "México y Asia Pacífico," 119-120.

⁴⁵ Jorge A. Lozoya, "Asia-Pacífico en la Mira," in *Los Grandes Problemas de México. XII Relaciones Internacionales*, eds. Blanca Torres and Gustavo Vega Cánova (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2010), 539-556.

⁴⁶ Carlos De Icaza, "Introducción. México: Objetivo Asia-Pacífico," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 108 (2016): 15-25; Alfonso de María y Campos Castelló and Alejandro Ramos Cardoso, "Presentación. México y Sus Relaciones con Asia-Pacífico," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 108 (2016): 7-13.

clear geopolitical instrument to contain or to shape China's behavior on trade.⁴⁷ The Mexican government's decision on continuing promoting the TPP without the United States has a more ideological component rather than an economic one due to Mexico's reluctance to get closer to other economic trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition to this, China and Mexico's relationship has diminished because of the Mexico-Queretaro High-Speed Train project issue.⁴⁸ To sum up, the Mexican intention to further deepen relations with the Asia-Pacific has been more "discursive" than real.

The absence of Mexico's intention to fully participate in the Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China is another sign of the aforementioned matter. First of all, it is noteworthy to consider that the BRI is a project aimed at inducing a complex interdependence status among its members. In this sense, it is important to recall that the Belt and Road Initiative comprises a list of 68 countries, 6 main routes⁴⁹ and 6 economic corridors,⁵⁰ Mexico being excluded from it. With that said, in the first Belt and Road Forum held on May 14–15, 2017, in Beijing, Mexico wasn't part of it, but other Latin American countries such as Brazil and Chile certainly were. Mexico is not a member or even a prospective member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), considered by many as one of the main financial sources of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵¹ Meanwhile Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela are non-regional Latin American prospective members of the AIIB. Since then, China has been looking forward to Latin America to adhere to the BRI schema.

In this way, it is important to think about the Silk Road concept as part of the BRI in order to understand Mexico's insertion into its dynamic. The academic literature has widely

⁴⁷ Peter Drysdale, "China, Economic Containment and the TPP," *East Asia Forum*, December 12, 2011, accessed August 13, 2018. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/12/12/china-economic-containment-and-the-tpp/>; Li Xiangyang, "Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement: A Major Challenge to China's Rise," *International Economic Review* 2 (2012): 18-27; Ye Min, "China and Competing Cooperation in Asia-Pacific: TPP, RCEP, and the New Silk Road," *Asian Security* 11, no. 3 (2015): 206-224.

⁴⁸ In March 2014, Mexican and Chinese government officials formed a "High Level Work Group" with the objective to develop an infrastructure project known as the "Mexico-Queretaro High-Speed Train." In November 2014, the China Railway Construction Corporation, the China Railway Construction Corporation International, and the CSR Corporation Limited, in association with the Mexican firms Constructora y Edificadora GIA, Prodemex, GHP Infraestructura Mexicana and Constructora TEYA, won the Mexican government's competition for the project mentioned. However, in the same month, the Mexican government cancelled the bidding and therefore the project due to alleged domestic corruption in the process. See Sebastián Barragán, "Videgaray Dirigió a China en Propuesta del Tren México-Querétaro, Revela Documento," *Aristegui Noticias*, February 6, 2018. <https://aristeguinoticias.com/0602/mexico/videgaray-dirigio-a-china-en-propuesta-del-tren-mexico-queretaro-revela-documento/>.

⁴⁹ Continental: 1) Central Asia-Russia-Baltic Sea-Europe, 2) Central Asia, Persian Gulf, Mediterranean Sea, 3) Southeast Asia. Overseas: 4) Southern Sea-Malacca Strait-Indian Ocean-Europe, 5) Southern Sea-South Pacific-Latin America, and 6) Arctic (Ice Silk Road).

⁵⁰ 1) China-Mongolia-Russia, 2) China-Central Asia-West Asia, 3) China-Southeast Asia, 4) China-Pakistan, 5) China-Bangladesh-India-Burma, and 6) New Eurasian Land Bridge.

⁵¹ Mike Callaghan and Paul Hubbard, "The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Multilateralism on the Silk Road," *China Economic Journal* 9, no. 2 (2016): 116-139.

studied the BRI initiative,⁵² although its impact on Latin America has not been. It is certain that unlike the ancient Silk Road, the BRI is a Chinese-led project based on three features: open world trade system, sustainable development and international cooperation.⁵³ This means that the Silk Road has ceased being a global-based phenomenon. The fact is that along with the AIIB, China alone has promoted the Silk Road Fund to reinforce the previous idea. In addition, unlike the ancient Silk Road, and contrary to the facts previously established in the main documents, the BRI has enormously focused on infrastructure. The AIIB approved 2.34 billion USD in infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burma, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tajikistan in the years 2016-2017.⁵⁴ From 2014 to 2017, the Silk Road Fund invested nearly 17.8 billion USD in infrastructure projects for the China-Central and Eastern Europe Investment Cooperation Fund, the China-EU Co-Investment Fund, as well as in Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Russia.⁵⁵ Finally, China pledged to invest 27.8 billion USD in countries along the Silk Road for the same goal starting from 2016.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, there is not much information about types of financing other than infrastructure-related projects.

Final Remarks: Significance of the Silver Road Regarding the Silk Road

The ancient Silk Road marked an early period of globalization and it was a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that developed a complex interdependent status. This implied cultural interchanges and economic development between the peoples and societies involved in this dynamic, which also produced a high level of sensibility about what happened on the Silk Road. The accumulation and the reproduction of capital were not priorities in this period

⁵² Peter Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," Lowy Institute Analyses, March 22, 2017; Simeon Djankov and Sean Miner, eds., *China's Belt and Road Initiative. Motives, Scope, and Challenges* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2016); Gan Junxian and Mao Yan, "China's New Silk Road: Where Does It Lead?" *Asian Perspective* 40, no. 1 (2016): 105-130; Manuel de Jesús Rocha Pino, "El Cinturón Económico de la Ruta de la Seda: Implicaciones para Asia Central," *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales de la UNAM* 126 (2016): 97-127; Wang Yong, "Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's New Grand Strategy," *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 3 (2016): 455-463.

⁵³ Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China's Contribution* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, *Annual Report 2016. Connecting Asia for the Future*, <https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2016/annual-report/index.html>, accessed August 10, 2018; Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, *Annual Report 2017. Financing's Asia's Future*, <https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2017/annual-report/index.html>, accessed August 10, 2018.

⁵⁵ Easternational Connecting, "The Silk Road Fund," accessed August 14, 2018, <http://www.easternational.it/page.php?id=21>; Silk Road Fund, "China Finance Interview with the Chairman of Silk Road Fund," May 11, 2017, accessed August 17, 2018, <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/cnweb/19930/19938/34988/index.html>.

⁵⁶ Matthew Miller, "China Starts \$21.8 Billion Offshore Fund Amid Currency Concerns," *Reuters*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-fund/china-starts-21-8-billion-offshore-fund-amid-currency-concerns-idUSKBN13W180>.

of early capitalism. Although many governments at the time tried to reduce foreign contacts, especially the Chinese and Japanese governments, trade found its way through private and illegal merchants.

In this process, Mexico as New Spain played an important role. On the one hand, it served as a fundamental trade hub and linking point through which Asia and Europe were connected. On the other hand, it promoted some regional economic development as it established a trade agenda of its own. Through this course of action, Mexican society adopted many Silk Road cultural elements as part of its own identity. This made New Spain highly vulnerable to changes in its relationship with Asia as it could damage its own identity. In addition, the silver road was sensitive to world monetary changes, as was seen when the Chinese dynasties prohibited the entrance of *novohispano* silver.⁵⁷

With the advent of capitalism, the Westphalian international order and the United States as an emergent power came the disintegration of the ancient Silk Road and Mexico's detachment from its traditional Asian ties. In addition, the nation-state formation process in Mexico left out its Silk Road legacy and redefined its national identity. In other words, the complex interdependence between Mexico and the ancient Silk Road was reduced to a minimum. Since this period, the geopolitical position of Mexico has caused a deep trading interdependence with North America. In spite of many Mexican administrations' attempts to diversify their foreign economic relations, this has been very difficult to achieve.

The new Silk Road, through the Belt and Road Initiative, has marked 21st century globalization as a geopolitical, strategic and economic project. This has thus implied heavy infrastructure investments and the increase of economic interdependence between China and the Silk Road countries. In this current capitalist project, the accumulation and the reproduction of capital are top priorities. Now, many governments, particularly the Chinese one, are endorsing the new Silk Road.

In this process, Mexico has been an outsider. A long history of economic interdependence with North America and the remoteness of Asian societies has made it difficult for Mexico to reconcile with the Silk Road. Traditionally, the Mexican Silver Road operated as a "bridge-area" which promoted trade and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. Nowadays, the potential role of Mexico concerning the Belt and Road Initiative is uncertain, although it could possibly restore its bridge-country role to foster development in Latin America and to connect Asia and Europe once again. To answer the main research question, it is possible to conceptualize Mexico in Silk Road dynamics, both ancient and the Chinese initiative, as an important trade, cultural, and logistical node. It remains to be seen how Mexico will be involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, and if this participation will adopt the "traditional" role of Mexico in order for the Silver Road and the Silk Road to meet once again.

⁵⁷ Vera Valdés Lakowsky, *De las Minas al Mar*.

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