

BOOK REVIEWS

Xin Wen. *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 389 pp.

Starting from the mid-ninth century, when the three imperial powers that once dominated Central Asia, i.e., the Tang (618-907), the Tibetan Empire (618-842), and the Uighur Empire (744-840), experienced a near-simultaneous decline, the oasis region between Kashgar and Dunhuang entered a new era of political fragmentation. While there has been a widely shared view that such political fragmentation led to significantly reduced Eurasian connections, recent scholarship has begun to reexamine the region in this era to disclose a de facto densely interconnected world that has been hitherto largely neglected by historians of the Silk Road. In *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*, Xin Wen, Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University, strives to read through manuscripts from the “library cave” in Dunhuang to trace the activities of envoys along the Silk Road between 850 and 1000 and the multi-faceted diplomatic connections between various states along the road. Through an insightful observation of the lives of the envoys, as reflected in the manuscripts, Wen strongly argues that next to a certain degree of political fragmentation, there also existed an “equally well-established, though much less well-known Inner Asian traditions of diplomacy” (p. 9). Instead of mighty imperial powers, a collection of smaller independent states incentivized diplomatic journeys to “acquire diplomatic information and validate their own status” and thus ushered in “a long process of remaking by kings and their envoys,” which eventually exhibited another version of the Silk Road, namely the “King’s Road” (p. 12).

In his effort to recount the “King’s Road,” Wen wisely traces the social history of diplomatic journeys on the Silk Road in three parts, bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. Part I “Travelers,” consisting of the first three chapters, delves into the Dunhuang manuscripts to discuss who these diplomatic travelers were and the different objects they carried. After briefly recounting the political and social settings of the travelers as documented in the Dunhuang texts, Chapter 1 focuses on the travelogue of Gao Juhui and other manuscripts to introduce the different states that coexisted after the ninth century. Through this body of texts, Wen shows that it is because of the lack of an overwhelming imperial power that this period was “an age of kings rather than of empires and emperors” (p. 38). The next chapter portrays the people who traveled on diplomatic missions as recorded in

the documents. Of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the envoys, as Wen convincingly presents, constituted a significant portion of the population of Central Asian states and “integrated the states and people of medieval Eastern Eurasia into a tight-knit network” (p. 62). The third chapter then moves forward to examine five categories of nonhuman entities that traveled with the envoys, e.g., food, clothes, texts, animals, and luxury items. For Wen, human and nonhuman travelers together formed a diplomatic mission, which was a “unit of delicate human-thing symbiosis” (p. 93).

The following four chapters, Part II, “Traveling,” discusses the envoys’ lives on the road, in particular how they traveled in foreign lands and communicated with speakers of different languages. Neither well-marked highways nor undefinable, shifting paths, Wen unveils in the fourth chapter that the Silk Road, the premodern travelers journeyed, was a collection of regional routes that were navigated without comprehensive maps but by the producing and reading of geographical treatises, lists of place names, and place-centered poems as well as using travelogues and local guides. Because of the noncommercial nature of diplomatic missions, official receptions (ch. 5) and exchanges of gifts (ch. 6) were of special importance for diplomatic travelers. With a program of five stages of envoy-host encounters (i.e., reconnaissance, incoming road protection, an audience with the sovereign, residency, and outgoing road protection), the envoys and the hosts together formed reciprocal relations, in which the hosts provided accommodation and treatment in exchange for the envoys’ praise for generosity and promise to spread their good name. Such interactions were always accompanied by exchanges of diverse gifts from both sides, in which the parties often attempted to out-gift the other. Through such exchanges, as Wen forcefully argues, “the state of higher status reasserts its higher status, while the state of lower status received martial gains” (p. 169). To conduct these receptions and exchanges, the envoys shifted ways of communicating through translations of official documents and interpretations of conversations, as shown in Chapter 7.

The economic and socio-political influences of these diplomatic travelers are assessed in the three chapters of Part III, “The King’s Road.” While trade was definitely important in the economy of Dunhuang, Wen highlights in Chapter 8 that diplomacy also played a vital role. As noted in pretravel contracts, agreements of the Society for Long-Distance Travel, and private and official records of gift distribution after the return of travelers, people from a wide spectrum of Dunhuang residents participated in financing and pooling resources for the envoys, which in turn constituted an essential part of the Dunhuang economy. Through edicts, letters, portraits, and chronicles, chapter 9 shows the lives of some of the well-documented sovereigns of Eastern Eurasia between 850 and 1000. For these rulers, as Wen discloses, the network of diplomatic connections was important for their personal profit (from gift exchanges), necessary information from far away, and their political legitimacy as recognized by other kings. These kings relied on foreign goods, news, and people to distinguish themselves from their subjects, thus enabling them to ensure special status. Such usage of the “kingly exchange” is also attested in regional politics in and around Dunhuang, as shown in the final chapter. Through an analysis of letters exchanged between Dunhuang, Turfan,

Ganzhou, and Khotan, Wen lucidly reveals that there was a commonly accepted idea of a shared road among the kings, which was “intriguingly close to the standard understanding of the ‘Silk Road’” (p. 284). In this way, the kings and other social strata eventually reached a consensus that the trans-regional routes should be kept open and accessible.

Based primarily on a wide array of manuscripts discovered in Dunhuang, Wen successfully reconstructs a lively world of diplomatic travelers on the Silk Road between 850 and 1000. This period, marked by the decline of imperial powers and the coexistence of several small states, did not witness the demise of the Silk Road in Eastern Eurasia but the creation of another Silk Road different from the commercial one. In this new version, the Silk Road was generated and maintained by a series of smaller states who collectively formed a network of diplomatic relations through exchanges of luxury gifts and political information. The King’s Road, in this sense, also exerted an essential impact on the economic lives and political worlds in these societies. Such impact, as Wen cogently argues, means that “the ‘Silk Road’ is an accurate term to describe this diplomatic network” (p. 287).

Comprehensive in coverage and meticulously researched, *The King’s Road* is a long-awaited addition to the study of Dunhuang documents and the social lives along the Silk Road. In doing so, Wen moves away from the scope of earlier works of diplomatic history that primarily focus on political decision-making and military strategies by joining Valerie Hansen and Susan Whitfield in guiding readers to entangle with the lives of people (including kings, nobles, envoys, traders, monks, etc.) through texts and objects of Silk Road archaeology.¹ Moreover, by portraying the continued diplomatic interactions between Silk Road states and North China, Wen goes further to disclose that material connections between North China and Central Asia did not cease after the ninth century and that the Five Dynasties (907-960) and the Song (960-1276) were only parts of a broader world that was closely interconnected.

Critical readers may find it a minor quibble to read on page 7 that the author notes the Mogao Caves are located “southwest of the city of Dunhuang” (they lie, in fact, southeast of Dunhuang), yet this should by no means diminish the exceptional virtue of this book as being fascinating and intriguing in many aspects. No doubt, it will appeal to a wide readership from diverse fields of not only about the Silk Road but also Chinese and Central Asian history.

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¹ Valerie Hansen, *Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Susan Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Susan Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Materials Culture of the Silk Road* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).