



BOOK REVIEW

The King's Road. Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road

By Xin Wen

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Using civil documents that Wang Yuanlu (1851–1931) discovered in one of the Dunhuang Mogao caves in 1900, *The King's Road. Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* presents the fascinating story of diplomatic envoys who travelled over the network of 'silk roads' that connected the different polities of Central Eurasia and China in the period from 850 to 1000. To draw this picture, Xin Wen has divided this book—that can be categorised in the broader field of 'Dunhuang studies'—into three main parts. The first part is devoted to the travellers themselves. The civil documents subject to research portray people of different ethnic backgrounds (Han Chinese, Tibetans, Uyghur, Sogdians, Khotanese, Indian, and ethnically mixed persons), speaking and writing different languages, belonging to different social positions, Buddhist monastic figures and secular householders, wealthy and powerful people, destitute and desperate people, men and women, governmental officials and commoners. Not only were these diplomatic missions not ethnically, socially, or linguistically monolithic—the latter being an important asset for the diplomatic missions to “successfully navigate the dazzlingly complex linguistic landscape of medieval Eastern Eurasia” (p. 171), but missions from different states appear to have often voyaged together (p. 49), adding to the 'international' character of Central Eurasia in the relevant era. The second part of this book deals with how these people travelled—their knowledge of the 'silk road' network, their ways of transporting goods, the exchange of gifts with the heads of state where they were travelling to, their actual use of language when encountering commoners on the road and engaging with heads of state. The third part of the work brings all these practical considerations into the larger framework of the economic, political, and social impacts of the 'silk road' network.

This broad picture of the activities on and the importance of the 'silk road' network between 850 and 1000 which *The King's Road. Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* provides is based on the wide variety of civil documents (setting aside documents related to the Buddhist faith, about 5 per cent of the total number of documents found in this particular Mogao cave are of a secular nature) that were found in what once served as a mortuary chamber for a renowned local Buddhist monk (p. 19) and that, later on, also served as library cave for Buddhist texts and a storage room for the library of the Dunhuang Sanjie Monastery: the collection contains contracts that show how travellers financed their journeys, royal edicts that include the information that was communicated, maps and road guides that reveal how the difficult terrain of Central Eurasia was navigated, personal correspondence and notebooks that offer a window into the minds and sentiments of the travellers while on the road, petitions that demonstrate the travellers' need for assistance in times of distress, and messages of greeting and gratitude that bear witness to the relationships the travellers enjoyed with their hosts (p. 7). The knowledge that these secular documents are present in this overall Buddhist setting because these documents, having fulfilled their social roles, were actually recycled as used 'paper' to restore damaged parts of Buddhist texts (pp.21–22) makes the value of this find even more extraordinary. The multifariousness of the documents that, given the geographic setting in Dunhuang, basically depict 'diplomatic life' in Dunhuang, is further enriched by the many languages in which the discovered documents were written: “Sources in Chinese, Khotanese, Tibetan, Uyghur and Sogdian reveal the interaction between a North China-dominated tributary system and an equally well-established, though much less well-known, Inner Asian tradition of diplomacy” (p. 9). In the research that is at the basis of this work,

these written sources are complemented with information that can be deduced from the mural paintings and their colophons found in the Mogao cave complex, and with similar documents found in areas further West in Central Asia, such as Turfan and Khotan. The latter type of documents, mostly produced from the 6th to the 8th centuries, serve as a comparative lens (p. 24). Xin Wen also brings these non-Chinese sources into comparison with documents from the Tang and Northern Song courts.

One important scientific outcome of the use of this variety of sources is that “the world of diplomacy viewed from this peripheral, envoy-centered, and multilingual perspective” appears to differ drastically “from the tributary system that appears throughout sources from the Chinese court” (p. 9). That is to say that, contrary to the commonly accepted knowledge that the decline of the Tang brought about centuries of reduced trans-Eurasian connections, the emergence of a large number of independent entities, many of which claimed to be descendants of the old Chinese, Tibetan, and Uyghur empires, made the ‘silk road’ network of vital importance for the material wealth of these different polities, and therefore also enhanced the importance of ‘diplomacy’ to maintain the peace of the Central Eurasian area, which, in its turn, secured the continuation of diplomatic activity. This situation lasted until 1004, when the Chinese Song and the Liao signed the Chanyuan Covenant after the Song had gradually reconsolidated its power alongside the Xia (p. 36).

The real number of transregional journeys over the ‘silk road’ network is impossible to know, but many of the Dunhuang documents hint at an impressive frequency of such diplomatic travel (p. 57). A few factors explain this high frequency. For the heads of states who decreed such missions, they were a means to gain prestige and keep informed (through diplomatic letters) about the political developments in other polities. For the individual envoy, albeit risky, participating in a diplomatic mission—with numbers of participants ranging from as few as half a dozen to as many as over one hundred (p. 48)—was a major means for upward social mobility and gaining considerable wealth (p. 44, p. 203). Monks, too, frequently travelled over the ‘silk roads’. For them, it was not diplomatic purposes or material wealth that incited them to join a diplomatic mission, but the acquisition and dissemination of religious knowledge (p. 73).

As Xin Wen outlines (p. 138), the general ‘program’ of these diplomatic missions had five stages. The first stage was the one of ‘reconnaissance’. Through stories, travelogues compiled by previous travellers (p. 76), geographical treatises, lists of place names (pp.98–99), phrasebooks (p. 193), etc., the travellers had a rough idea of the road ahead. Each successful journey thereby generated knowledge that could inform a future journey (p. 124).

This stage was followed by the ‘road protection’ stage of the diplomatic mission leaving its own state. Because the diplomatic envoys had to travel over a collection of regional routes of varying degrees of traversability conditioned by topographical features and the availability of water (these ‘geopolitical’ conditions translated into four types of stops on the road: postal stations, military establishments, natural stops near water, and stops in deserts), and because of the danger the diplomatic mission might encounter from malevolent gangs, it was the sending state’s task to guarantee safe travel and guidance of the mission until it entered the jurisdiction of another state. Because, at that moment, the mission

needed the escort and protection of that other state (p. 112), a previous returning mission had to inform the head of state whether a new mission would be accepted by the head of state from which they had just returned. The importance of all this is confirmed in the Dunhuang documents: it is rarely deserts, mountains, or rivers that appear as the main culprits for the failure of a mission, but the hosts, either because of the dereliction of protective duties or through active hostility (p. 143).

Having arrived at the destination state, the mission's activities focused on the 'audience' with the head of state—the third stage of a diplomatic mission. In this stage, diplomatic and other gifts were exchanged. Practical concerns and cost-efficiency determined the nature of the gifts. More precisely, "the limits of carrying power meant that envoys had to make choices as to what to take to maximize the political, cultural, and material gains of the trip" (p. 90). This explains why light and costly products—such as silk—were preferable. For the heads of state, gifts had three social functions: an economic function of redistribution, a political function of maintaining peace, and a social function of enhancing or confirming status (p. 150). These gifts were most often accompanied by diplomatic letters that included a section describing the content and quantity of the gifts attached, as well as the purpose of these gifts. Without these letters (both official and private), the social significance of the gifts could not be properly understood (p. 155). While in many cases the delivery and acquisition of gifts were themselves the primary goals of diplomacy, the donation of gifts likely also facilitated the transmission of diplomatic information and the formation of interstate relations (p. 159). Written information was thus complemented with verbal messages that were a vital part of the communication. For this, the missions could depend on their multilingual composition (p. 191). The members of the diplomatic missions themselves were treated as guests, and also received gifts. "Unlike the gifts exchanged between sovereigns, which tended to be high-value, luxury items, the gifts given to envoys were more diverse. There were high-value items such as silk, but more often, the gifts for envoys, both at departure and on arrival, comprised practical items such as horses, food, wine, paper, and clothes" (p. 163). These gifts accounted for a significant portion of the 'income' of envoys on a diplomatic mission.

Very often, the envoys stayed in the destination city for a period of time. One could in this sense claim that these multimonth, sometimes even multiyear, residences—the fourth stage of the diplomatic missions—constituted "a semipermanent diplomatic presence in the host state" (p. 136). During this residence, the envoys continued to produce documents and convey messages to both the sovereign of their own state and their host (p. 187). As a general rule, so it appears, longer edicts were composed in the administrative language of the sender; shorter notes were composed in the administrative language of the receiver (p. 188).

Thereafter, the diplomatic missions, loaded with presents and diplomatic letters, had to head back to their own state. This was the fifth and final stage of the program. The knowledge gained on such a mission was, in its turn, the basis on which a new mission could be organised.

It is precisely because, in the period between 850 and 1000, this network of roads within Central Eurasia and between Central Eurasia and China was not maintained by any one government that "the fall of a state or the shift of a governmental policy could not fundamentally change the shape of the

Silk Road, much less cut it off entirely, [but was] created accumulatively by a mutually generative process of travel and knowledge construction and consumption” (pp.124–125). The culturally, ethnically, and socially heterogeneous composition of the diplomatic missions further added to the implications these missions had on the cultural, economic, and political awareness of the people involved.

Interpreted within the larger framework of the economic, political, and social impacts of the ‘silk road’ network from 850 to 1000, Xin Wen has magnificently crafted a portrayal of kings who may have donated a part of the gifts they received through these diplomatic missions to Buddhist institutions for the accumulation of merit (p. 231), but who also depended on diplomatic missions to acquire the necessary foreign goods that enabled them to sustain their representation of kingship (p. 228) – even to the extent that “a shared culture of kingly dress” was created (p. 235). Economically speaking, a picture of a Dunhuang that is to a significant extent defined by the activities of diplomatic travellers emerges. Overall, this work shows how this diplomatic activity “was not the prerogative of a small, tight-knit group of highly trained bureaucrats,” but was “a way of life open to a wide spectrum of people in society” (p. 288); “to many residents of medieval Dunhuang it was a way of life, and a means of livelihood” (p. 224).

In short, Xin Wen has shown that, collectively, the Dunhuang documents offer a multiperspective view of the political culture of Dunhuang and, to some extent, the region around it. Economic, political, and cultural reasons explain why the primary concern of the participants in the ‘silk road’ activities between 850 and 1000 was the maintenance of peace. As a result, an open road was achieved through diplomatic means in most cases, and military actions were the exceptions (p. 268). A second important outcome of this work is therefore that a non-Sinocentric story of Eastern Eurasia is given, a story that contradicts the general view based on Chinese documents that the Five Dynasties and the Song are often the sole protagonists of Chinese history in this period of history. On the contrary, the Five Dynasties and the Song are shown to be only parts of a broader world that responded to the decline and fall of the Tang, the Tibetan, and the Uyghur empires, and to one another (p. 302). The value given to peace—and, by extension, the value of profound historical knowledge of which this book is an excellent example—is succinctly expressed in one of the letters Cao Yuande, lord of Dunhuang, wrote to the Uyghur ministers of Ganzhou (Pelliot 2992v-1): “By the road we become one family”.