

Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road:
From the Persian Gulf
to the East China Sea

Edited by Ralph Kauz

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Preface

The collection of articles published in this volume were mostly presented at the workshop “The Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea”, organized by the Institute of Iranian Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in February, 2004. The theoretical considerations which were supposed to form the framework of this workshop were the hypotheses that the Indian Ocean has formed a largely coherent structure, and has been a space which served as a huge stratum connecting the various kingdoms and cultures adjacent to it, causing interchanges in all possible fields and certainly mutual influences. These considerations are obviously *sensu* Fernand Braudel, and the Mediterranean served as a conceptual model for the larger Indian Ocean. They are not innovative, and have already been discussed for several decades starting with Kirti N. Chaudhuri’s famous study.¹

The idea of the workshop emerged during discussions with Roderich Ptak who also implicitly suggested the title. Angela Schottenhammer, whose “East Asian Maritime History Project” deals in a considerably broader and larger scope with similar or even identical reflections in the East Asian region, has very kindly agreed to accept these proceedings for publication as part of the series of the project which she edits. My sincerest thanks must go to both of them, not only for supporting my researches and suggesting ways I have not thought of, but also for the long and motivating discussions we have had, sipping many cups of tea!

For this workshop the viewpoints for looking at the exchanges in the Indian Ocean should have had two bases: one in China and the other in Iran, as these two cultures – with the addition of Aden and the Red Sea in the western part – acted as a frame for the Indian Ocean trade network, and not only scholars researching these topics should have participated, but also scholars from both countries. However, unfortunately and most regrettably this was not to be in the case of Iran, as no scholars were able to participate.

The sponsor of the workshop declined his support only a few weeks before it was to take place, but fortunately Bert G. Fragner, director of the Institute of Iranian Studies, stepped in to fully support the event and helped to provide the necessary means. The same must be said of Bernhard Plunger, head of the International Relations Department of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, who gave his essential assistance.

During the preparation of the workshop it soon showed that the basic concepts must be circumvented in a few cases, because the interchanges between the land-

1 Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); for a detailed discussion of the research on the topic see Roderich Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstraße: Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit* (München: C. H. Beck, 2007), pp. 9–21.

based and sea-based silk roads were too interwoven to be kept completely separated, maybe even more than in the paradigm “Mediterranean”. Thus a few articles do not deal exclusively with the maritime Silk Road. The same must be said for the western end of the Indian Ocean where Iran and the Persian Gulf were not the exclusive end, thus this part is called “The Iranian and Arabian Sides”.

The publication of this volume was delayed for many reasons, thus some articles may appear a bit outdated in the eyes of the specialists because the most recent research could not be included. It must be stressed that this possible imperfection is not due to any negligence on the part of the authors.

Two of the authors could not attend the workshop, but were kind enough to write papers for this volume: Geoff Wade, who even sent two profound articles, and Martin Slama. I express my sincerest thanks to both and also to the editors of the *Journal of the South Seas Society* who kindly agreed to reprint my article on the somewhat obtrusive merchant Paliuwan, because his story gives an extraordinary example of land- and sea-bound interrelations. Mrs Brigid O’Connor from Newcastle-on-Tyne was so kind to proof-read the articles of the non-native speakers.

The proceedings are arranged in a geographical order starting from the West and heading to the East and are divided into three parts: the West (Iran and the Arabian lands), the interconnections between the two ‘poles’, and finally the Chinese side. However, all articles show the exchanges in Asia and this division must therefore remain to a certain degree superficial.

Some people may say that papers presented at conferences rather fit into appropriate journals and that proceedings rather resemble journals more than coherent works on a specific topic, though written by different scholars. This may be true sometimes, but such proceedings also reflect the consideration and open discussion on certain topics, and these discussions and debates are a major cornerstone in the scientific process.

Introductory Essay: Outline of the Political Relations between Iran and China

Ye Yiliang

Iran was the major link between East and West. By the 4th or 3rd century BCE, China's silk products had already been introduced to West Asia and East Europe passing through Iran; and glass vessels and art ornaments of the eastern part of the Mediterranean were introduced to China through Iran. Iran was named Anxi 安息 or Bosi 波斯 in the Chinese sources.¹ Anxi was the transliteration of Arshak, founder of the dynasty of the Arshakides, or the Parthians (247 BCE – 224 CE) as they are better known. The name Anxi was adopted by the later Chinese dynasties as a term for Iran.

The name Bosi appeared for the first time in the standard history of the Wei dynasty,² the name “Bosi” mentioned there referred to the Sasanian dynasty (224 – 651 CE), but Bosi was the designation of a tribal union which inhabited the south western part of present Iran. The name of the province Pārs / Fārs derived from this name.³

According to Chinese sources the long-standing history of friendly intercourses between Iran and China began in 119 BCE, when the emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 dispatched Zhang Qian 張騫 a second time as his envoy to the Western Regions (Xiyu 西域). Zhang Qian was accompanied by an entourage of about 300 persons from amongst whom he sent a number of subordinates to the Parthian empire. This mission was duly received and welcomed.⁴

The following Western Han dynasty almost every year sent missions to Central and Western Asia, including Anxi – sometimes five or six times each year, in some years even more than ten times. The largest of these missions included several hundred people, and they carried silk products, gold and silverwares to the west, while bringing precious goods from there back to China.

Ban Chao 班超 was sent as a special envoy to the Western Regions in 98 CE, and he dispatched his assistant Gan Ying 甘英 to the Parthian kingdom, but there the Iranians hindered Gan Ying from continuing his journey to the Roman Empire, because they obviously did not want China to have direct contacts with that empire.⁵

The communications between China and Iran were somewhat disrupted after the fall of the Han dynasty, but they were resumed in the first year of the emperor

1 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), j. 123, p. 3162.

2 Wei Shou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), j. 102, p. 2270.

3 See I. M. Diakonoff, “Media”, in Ilya Gershevith (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 2, The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 61-63.

4 *Shiji*, j. 123, p. 3172.

5 Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), j. 88, p. 2918.

Gaozong 高宗 of the Northern Wei dynasty 北魏 (455 CE). Persian tributes were recorded in the years 461, 466, 468 and 476 accordingly and the chronicles indicate that the Sasanian dynasty sent envoys in the years 507, 517, 518, 521 and 522.⁶ The geographical location of Iran, its general situation, people's life, rituals and habits and economic situation as depicted in the *Bei Shi* 北史 were quite detailed and accurate.⁷

During the reigns of the Sui (581 – 618) and the Tang (618 – 907) dynasties, the relations between these dynasties and the Sasanians were even more close and frequent. They continued even after the fall of the Sasanians in 651, when Iran was conquered and merged into the Arab-Muslim Empire. The already mentioned emperor Gaozong appointed the Iranian prince Pērōz, son of Yazdgird III, the last Iranian shah, to be the military governor of Jiling 疾陵 (Zaranj in western Afghanistan) in 662 and emperor Zhongzong 中宗 appointed in 684 prince Narseh, son of Pērōz, to the military rank of general. Both Iranian princes lived in the Tang capital Changan 長安 for a long time and successively passed away in China.⁸

During the Tang dynasty, many foreigners who conducted various businesses resided in Changan and other cities, as the major port Guangzhou 廣州 and Yangzhou 揚州, on the estuary of the Grand Canal into the Yangtze River. The Chinese government assigned special residential areas to them and allowed them to build “foreign” temples, as the establishment of a Zoroastrian and a Nestorian monastery in the northwest part of Changan prove. 4,000 foreign families were recorded in Changan in 787. Most of the Iranians living in China were merchants, but some were also employed in the administration or in the army.⁹ They were celebrated for their wealth, as the comment of the famous poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 shows: “[It is impossible to see] a poor Persian, a sick physician, two lean men fighting and a fat new bride.”¹⁰ The *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 quotes many Tang writers who mention that Persians and Arabs spend their money freely and without restraint.

Due to the number of Iranian merchants coming to China and the increase of trans-Asian trade, many Iranian, especially Sasanian coins were brought to China. The total number exceeds 1,900 and the earliest silver coins found here date from Shāpūr II (r. 309 – 379); the last were minted during the reign of the last Sasanian emperor Yazdgird III (r. 632 – 651).¹¹

6 Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), j. 97, p. 3223.

7 *Beishi*, j. 97, p. 3222.

8 For a rough sketch of these events see William Watson, “Iran and China”, in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 3 (1), The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 547; see also Edwin G. Pulleyblank, “Chinese-Iranian Relations, i. in pre-Islamic times”, in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 5 (Costa Mesa, Ca.: Mazda Publishers, 1992), pp. 424-31, p. 425.

9 See Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 136-157.

10 Li Shangyin, *Zazuan 雜纂* (Shanghai: Shangwuyin shuguan, 1927).

11 Sasanian silver coins were discovered in the following Chinese provinces: Shānxi 陝西, Henan 河南, Shānxi 山西, Hebei 河北, Qinghai 青海, Inner Mongolia 內蒙古, Xinjiang 新疆 and Guangdong 廣東.

Starting in the 11th century, the maritime communications between China and Persia exceeded those overland. Merchants and envoys from Western Asia travelled mainly to the Chinese ports of Guangzhou and Quanzhou 泉州; they were called “Dashi ren” 大食人 in Chinese texts, a transliteration from the Persian word “Tāzīk/Tāžīk” which was originally applied to Iranians in contrast to Turks, but in this case the Arabs are meant. However, many of these “Dashi ren” were probably Iranians and not Arabs.

During the Song dynasty (960 – 1279), maritime communications developed greatly, and the economical and cultural intercourse between China and Iran also grew rapidly. Archaeological remains in Iran indicate that not only Chinese porcelains and silks were sent to Iran, but potteries and silks made in Iran were also strongly influenced by Chinese styles. In Kish, an island and major emporium in the Persian Gulf, many porcelains dating from the Song dynasty were excavated; and in the tombs of Rey, south of modern Tehran, many silks of the 10th and 12th centuries were found.

During the following Yuan dynasty (1279 – 1368) many persons of the so-called Western Regions came in various functions to China, as military personnel, envoys, prisoners of war and merchants; we may safely assume that a high number of Iranians was among them. Persian was used as the *lingua franca* when dealing with the countries of Central and Western Asia, and the Yuan administration consequently founded a bureau called “Huihui Guozixue” 回回國子學 in 1289, in which Persian was taught.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the Arab world traveller (1304 – 1377), related in his accounts that Chinese musicians sang many lovely songs in Chinese, Persian and Arabic, when he was invited for boating on the West Lake in Hangzhou 杭州, and the Persian songs were sung again and again by the musicians in honour of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa.¹²

In the same period, the Īlkhāns ruled over Persia and their ruler Arghun (r. 1284 – 91) sent three envoys to the court of the Yuan dynasty to ask for a Mongol princess in marriage. Qubilai Khan responded in sending princess Kōkāchin to marry Arghun by ship, because the land road was blocked due to conflicts with the Chaghatayids. Qubilai Khan appointed the famous Italian merchant Marco Polo, who had been serving at the Chinese Court for seventeen years, to escort the princess to Iran. They started in Quanzhou in 1291 and arrived in Hormuz two years later, only to find out that Arghun had passed away. Thus Kōkāchin was married to Ghazan Khan, Arghun’s son.¹³

Fakhr ad-dīn, son of Jamāl ad-dīn, ruler of the island and emporium of Kish, travelled from the Persian Gulf to China and arrived there in 1297 as an envoy of Ghazan Khan to pay tribute to the Mongol emperor Cheng Zong 成宗 and to do

12 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (author), H. A. R. Gibb (tr., rev., annot.), *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, A.D. 1325-1354. Translated with Revisions and Notes from the Arabic Text Edited by C. Defrémery and B. R. Sanguinetti*, 5 vols. (rpt. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999; originally published by the Hakluyt Society; vols. 4 and 5: London: Hakluyt Society, 1994, 2000), IV, p. 903.

13 Marco Polo (author), Henry Yule and Henri Cordier (tr., eds.), *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram, 1998 [reprint of the 3rd ed. 1929]), I, p. 322; Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959-1973), I, pp. 392-4.

business; he stayed in China for a couple of years, but was shipwrecked on the return journey and died.

The mutual exchanges between Iran and China continued also during the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644); the Timurides (1370 – 1506) especially were extremely interested in diplomatic and commercial interactions with China. The famous maritime expeditions under admiral Zheng He 鄭和 decidedly deserve mentioning; the last four of his expeditions reached the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz and presented Chinese fine brocades, silk, gauzes, porcelain and other precious items. The exchange overland flourished until the mid-15th century, but declined afterwards. Chinese envoys were sent to Central Asian and Iranian cities like Samarqand, Herat, Isfahan, Kerman, Shiraz and many others.

Principally due to inner-Asian reasons, the commerce on the Silk Road declined rapidly after ca. 1500, and in about the same period the Portuguese took over the long-distance trade in the Indian Ocean. These factors implied that direct links between Iran and China had disappeared, though certainly not indirect links – chinaware was still a major export item for the Middle East, but the millennia-long official relations gradually sank into oblivion until they were resumed in the late 19th century.