



Lecture Series 2022

Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies (AOI), University of Zurich

Before the Golden Peaches – Fresh Perspectives on Early Eurasian exchanges

Like nothing else, *The Golden Peaches from Samarkand* evoke the many exotic items – plants, products, animals, even ideas – that reached China during one of its most internationally entangled and prosperous eras in history. Eminent scholars like Berthold Laufer (1874 – 1934), Paul Pelliot (1878 – 1945), Sergej Rudenko (1885 – 1969), Zhang Xinglang 張星烺 (1881 – 1951), Haneda Tōru 羽田亨 (1882 – 1955) and, indeed, Edward H. Schafer (1913 – 1991), on whose shoulders we stand, masterfully wrote about the earliest exchanges between China and regions all across Eurasia, using a wealth of linguistic, historical, and archaeological data.

At the time the Golden Peaches first reached the Chinese imperial court, their carriers had long followed well-established trade routes, passing through major cultural hubs like Kashgar, which had evolved into flourishing oases during centuries past. It was through intermediaries like the Sogdians that foreign goods as exotic as the Golden Peaches were transported across one of the driest regions in the world and destined for a place known by the Sassanians as “the land behind Chin”. But what about earlier times? How did this long-distance network of economic and cultural exchange come into being? And how did it influence the lives of the people living along its way?

Due to an increase in human mobility in the late second and first millennium BCE, transcultural contacts over the vast expanse of Eurasia had long existed before they started to leave their traces in written documents. It is in this period that unmistakably non-Chinese objects are found in the tombs of the Shang royalty. What role did such imported commodities like the horse, the chariot, the armour, new bronze technologies or the adoption of new types of agricultural and medical products play in bronze-age Chinese society? Who were the people who brought them?

Throughout the Zhou dynasty, both personal and economic relations with foreign peoples such as the Jiang 姜 and the Qiang 羌 were maintained and, more often than not, skillfully integrated into local constructions of pedigree and clansmanship, with the result of becoming well-nigh indiscernible in hindsight. One of the reasons for the maintenance and development of such relationships was surely the access to precious and prestigious goods. In this perspective, it comes as no surprise that the state of Qin with its heartland near the Hexi Corridor – the natural gateway to the West – soon overpowered all other contenders and became the first unified Chinese state that managed to establish long-distance contacts with contemporary empires. This begs the question, how and by whom these contacts were organized?



With the reign of Han emperor Wu (157/56-87 BCE), the empire politically, economically, and culturally expanded towards the Western Regions. According to the official narratives, this “opening” was due, first and foremost, to the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian 張騫 (? – 114 BCE) and his missions that ultimately paved the way to the consolidation of the trade routes known as the Silk Roads in European scholarship since the middle of the 19th century. Simultaneously, products and ideas from Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean started to reach China via maritime routes. How did these new political and economic relations impact the life in the border regions? How were the maritime roads administered? And what kind of long-lasting North-South divisions within the Chinese empire did they bring about?

With the decline of the Han dynasty in the early third century CE and the disintegration of the empire into smaller, often contesting states, the empire lost its dominion over the Western Regions and their influence on trade. Nevertheless, trade persisted in the following centuries and the oases states remained important economic and cultural centers as reflected, for example, by the presence of many Buddhist sites scattered around the Tarim Basin. As people move, so do their belongings, ideas and beliefs. What kind of commodities reached China from antiquity until the fifth century CE, and how did they impact the lives of the elite and commoners? What was given in return? How did Chinese products like silk, paper or lacquer reach Central Asia and beyond? What kind of techniques were transmitted, and how did they transform their target cultures?

The language of this interaction is another intriguing question. While early exchange with the regions in the west was primarily based on personal relationships, it was conducted on a whole new scale since the Han expansion. People from the Chinese heartland settled in the eastern parts of the Western Regions and traders arrived from afar to deliver their precious goods. How did these people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds converse with each other? With new products being imported, new words were introduced and adopted by locals. Is it possible to witness the development of “creolized” cultures in the border regions and of a *lingua franca* or *trading* pidgins to designate the products? Questions as these are extremely difficult to answer since many different languages and language families collide with each other, influencing each other’s phonology and morphology, borrowing words or creating more or less hybrid, calqueing neologies. What are the possible methodologies to successfully detect and evaluate Chinese influences in Middle Iranian or Indian languages and vice versa? What are the linguistic features most susceptible to mutual influences? To what extent did such languages and pre-medieval Chinese have *direct* lexical contacts? How can we understand phoneme changes in the process of Sino-Iranian and Sino-Indian loanword adaptation?

Beyond doubt, tremendous progress has been made since the days of Laufer, Schafer et al. New techniques and methodologies in all pertinent fields of enquiry related to early Eurasian contacts have been established, new data have emerged. With this series of lectures, which is part of the project “Sino-Indo-Iranica rediviva”



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(<https://www.aoi.uzh.ch/de/sinologie/forschung/rediviva.html>), we invite scholars from across the world and from diverse fields to present their insights into some of the questions highlighted above.

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