
FORUM

The Early Modern “Silk-Road”. The Role of European, Chinese, and Russian Trade Reassessed¹

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ABSTRACT

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht den historischen und zeitgenössischen Ort des europäischen und asiatischen Handels im Kontext der sogenannten „Seidenstraße“. Der Erfolg und die Konkurrenz der heutigen chinesischen Wirtschaft wird als Ursache für die sinkende Bedeutung der westlichen Volkswirtschaften auf den Weltmärkten angesehen, aber die Realität *ist* und *war* in der Vergangenheit viel komplexer. War die Industrielle Revolution ein grundlegender Wendepunkt? Insbesondere in Zentralasien waren die institutionellen und wirtschaftlichen Beziehungen weitaus differenzierter, als man von der Vorstellung der „Seidenstraße“ als bloßer Ost-West-Transitroute annehmen könnte. In diesem Sinne betrachte ich die Zusammenhänge zwischen der maritimen und der Seidenstraße. Ich interpretiere die wachsende Präsenz Russlands auf den zentralasiatischen Märkten ab dem 16. Jahrhundert im Zusammenhang mit dem chinesischen Vormarsch in Westasien. Die englischen Ambitionen und die englische Präsenz in Südasien (Indien) betrafen auch die zentralasiatischen Märkte und standen in direktem Wettbewerb mit der Expansion Russlands. Diese wirtschaftlichen und institutionellen Beziehungen haben die Geopolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, in der sich das allgemeine Konzept der Seidenstraße entwickelte, tiefgreifend beeinflusst.

This paper investigates the historic and contemporary place of European and Asian trade in

1 I would like to thank Professor Peter Burschel, director of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Germany), for allowing me to draw widely on the material housed in that library, without which I could not have completed this paper. The English translation was provided by Jeremy Scott.

the context of the so-called "Silk Road". The success and the competition of the present-day Chinese economy is seen as the cause of the declining role of Western economies in world markets but the reality *is* and *was* much more complex in the past. Was the Industrial revolution a fundamental turning point? In Central Asia in particular the institutional and economic rapports were much more nuanced than one might be led to believe by the notion of the "Silk Road" as a mere route of East-West transit. It is with this in mind that I consider the rapports between the maritime road and the silk road. I interpret the growing presence of Russia in the Central Asian markets from the sixteenth century onwards in connection with the Chinese advance in Western Asia. The English ambition and presence in Southern Asia (India) was also concerned with central Asian markets and was in direct competition with Russian expansion. These economic and institutional rapports went on to have a deep influence on 19th and 20th century geopolitics, in which the general concept of the Silk Road developed.

The Traditional Silk Road and the Maritime. Products and International Competition

This article aims to examine trade along the famous Silk Road between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The term 'Silk Road' itself is said to have been coined by the nineteenth-century German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in discussing centuries of trade along the harsh desert routes of Central Asia that linked such places as Samarkand, fabled cities that were also great centres of manufacture. In such commerce, silk clearly epitomized the important luxury goods imported into Europe from Asia. However, that was not the only product carried from China to the West: porcelain, tea and, earlier still, paper and gunpowder (basically a large part of the era's technological know-how) played a no less essential role in East-West trade. And nowadays, after centuries of western dominion which meant that the predominant flow of trade was West-East, we are once again in a situation in which it is the goods flowing out of the Orient that are playing an increasingly dominant role in international commerce.²

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the expression "New Silk Road" is closely connected to the resurgence of China's strategic interest in the West, a "revival" of the influence of Eastern civilization, which, as in the past, cannot be seen in isolation from economic/technological issues. The economic success of present-day China is, furthermore, closely linked to the declining role of some Western economies in world markets. Indeed, the new Silk Road is thus known as the "Belt and Road Initiative", which aims to link the whole of Asia to China and afterwards connect it to some European terminals. Which ones are selected to become such destinations is another aspect of the current interna-

2 The image of the "Silk Road" has to be assessed bearing in mind other views of the relationship between Asia and Europe, which bring together religious aspects of the issue and the question of the various political and economic powers involved. Philippe Forêt and Andeas Kaplony, for example, have identified a "Buddhist Road", a "Mongol Road", an "Islamic Road" and a "Mediterranean Road" (The Journey of Maps and Images on the Silk Road, London/Boston 2008, pp. 1–5). Useful material in a large historical perspective is offered by U. Hübner et al. (eds.), *Die Seidenstraße. Handel und Kulturaustausch in einem eurasiatischen Wegenetz*, Hamburg 2001.

tional competition. Certainly, as in the heyday of Chinese civilization from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the number of Chinese products flowing towards Europe nowadays seems to be much higher than that of European products being exported to Asian markets. In the past this trade deficit would ultimately be compensated for by the West's technological superiority, with the machines of the Industrial Revolution enabling European nations to become firmly established in Asian markets. But in the future?

Limiting our present discussion to a focus on Central Asia, the area of the continent traversed by the Silk Road, one observes the emergence of two directions of long-distance trade in luxury goods that, in general terms, can be seen as running east-west and north-south. This trade flow was, for reasons regarding both climate and environment, irregular, depending upon the numerous caravans whose passage also had an influence upon the life of local nomadic peoples. Yet, despite its irregularity, such trade stimulated the growth of empires, which, in turn, developed to control / exploit the movement of luxury products with the introduction of taxation, resulting in powerful geopolitical interests being, quite literally, invested in commerce. There is no question that von Richthofen and Western historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focused primarily on the commercial aspects of the Silk Road and less on the issues relating to taxation and the control exercised by the political entities in Central Asia. However, alongside this "east-west trade" there was also a "north-south trade", commerce that also involved local nomadic societies.³ Both the "east-west" and "north-south" trade stimulated interest in controlling this area and its resources, bringing into play the Chinese Empire, the Russian Empire (whose influence is generally underestimated by historical discussions of the period concerned with this issue), and European trade companies.⁴ Furthermore, within the complex world of Central Asia, greater attention should also be placed on

3 J. A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass. Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864*, Stanford 1998, p. 99; idem, *The Silk Road. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2013. There is a vast bibliography on the legendary Silk Road. One can now consult P. Frankopan, *The Silks Roads. A New History of the World*, New York 2015, even if – in spite of a title that suggests this is just another study of the Silk Road – this work aims to explore the various levels of the relationship between "East" and "West" (an aspect that is brought out by the title of the German translation: *Licht aus dem Osten: Eine neue Geschichte der Welt*, Berlin 2016). Also see V. Hansen, *The Silk Road. A New History with Documents. With Coverage of the Mongols and Marco Polo*, Oxford 2017. For the strictly Italian aspect of the question, see F. G. Bruscoli, *Bartolomeo Marchionni, "homem de grossa fazenda" (ca. 1450–1530). Un mercante fiorentino a Lisboa e l'impero portoghese*, Florence 2014; M. Spallanzani, *Mercanti fiorentini nell'Asia portoghese (1500–1525)*, Florence 1997.

4 Without going into all details of a vast literature on the role played by Western trading companies, I would like to mention M. Morineau / S. Chaudhuri (eds.), *Merchants, Companies and Trade Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Paris / Cambridge, UK 2007; L. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident. Le commerce à Canton au XVIII^e siècle, 1719–1833*, 3 vols, Paris 1964; S. Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700. A Political and Economic History*, London 1993; N. Steensgaard, *Carracks, Caravans and Companies. The Structural Crisis in the European-Asian Trade in the Early 17th Century*, Odense 1973; L. Blussé et al. (eds.), *Companies and Trade*, Leiden 1981; G. Souza, *The Survival of Empire: Portuguese Trade and Society in China and the South China Sea, 1630–1754*, Cambridge, UK 1986; J. C. Boyajian, *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580–1640*, Baltimore / London 1993; C. Jacqueland, *De Séville à Manille, les espagnols en mer de Chine*, Paris 2015; E. Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade. The English East India Company, 1600–1757*, Princeton 2016; F. Gipouloux, *La Méditerranée asiatique. Villes portuaires et réseaux marchands en Chine, au Japon et en Asie du Sud-Est, XVI^e–XXI^e siècles*, Paris 2009.

such nomadic peoples as the Zunghars, the Jurchen, and the Kazakhs, all who certainly interacted with the larger political entities.⁵

As far as European traders are concerned, they – and Italians in particular, from the time of Marco Polo onwards – played a role in opening up such terrestrial trade routes, even if (for both international and domestic reasons) they would subsequently be almost entirely excluded from them. During the Middle Age one might cite not only Marco Polo⁶ but also other merchants and numerous missionaries, such as Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Odorico da Pordenone, and Giovanni da Montecorvino (all of whom who tried to convert Asian populations).⁷ Thereafter, national trade companies and monopolies appeared, better organized to exploit such commerce and enjoying the substantial protection provided by emerging nation-states. It is true that Tuscany and Genoa tried to establish similar companies, but these regional states did not have the same success as the Dutch East India Company (VOC) or as the companies set up by the Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, Swedes, or Danes.⁸

Another aim of our article is comparing the fortunes of the ancient Silk Road with those based on commerce of the new Maritime Silk Road, the latter being considered more profitable and seen as a central axis of relations between East Asia and the West.⁹ In the

5 P. C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge, MA 2005.

6 Hans Ulrich Vogel's recent work puts an end to the hypothesis that Marco Polo never actually reached China: Marco Polo was in China. *New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues*, Leiden/Boston 2013. His arguments are confirmed by the two Orientalists Mark Elvin and Philippe Ménard in their prefaces to his book.

7 The issue of the role of Catholic missionaries and of Italian trade in the Middle Ages is too sizeable to be dealt with here. On these questions see *Relation des voyages en Tartarie de Fr. Guillaume de Rubruquis*, Fr. Jean du Plan Carpin, Fr. Ascelin, et autres religieux de S. François et S. Dominique, qui y furent envoyez par le Pape Innocent IV et le Roy S. Louys [...] (recueilly par Pierre Bergeron), Paris 1634. The drive to convert the peoples of Asia would continue into the Early Modern period; see the bibliography by C. Wessels in: *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia, 1603–1721*, The Hague 1924, as well as the following works: C. K. Pullapilly / E. J. Van Kley (eds.), *Asia and the West. Encounters and Exchanges from the Age of Explorations. Essays in Honour of Donald F. Lach*, Notre Dame 1986; J. W. Witek, *The Seventeenth-Century European Advance into Asia. A Review Article*, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994) 3, pp. 867–880.

8 T. Iannello, *Progetti di istituzione in Italia di Compagnie commerciali per il Giappone*, in: A. Tamburello (ed.), *Italia – Giappone, 450 anni*, vol. I, Rome/Naples 2003, pp. 75–77. Luca Molà's research into the role played by Italian cities is a good starting-point here (see: Venezia, Genova e l'Oriente: i mercanti italiani sulle Vie della Seta tra XIII e XIV secolo, in: M. A. Norell (ed.), *Sulla Via della Seta. Antichi sentieri tra Oriente e Occidente*, Turin 2012, pp. 124–166). However, G. Marcocci's essay *L'Italia nella prima età globale (ca. 1300–1700)*, in: *Storica* 60 (2014), pp. 7–50, overlaps with the aims of the present study, with its goal of tracing the course of Italian trade in a problematic period of Italian history. One source that is still useful in reconstructing the Italian presence in international markets is A. De Gubernatis, *Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali: pubblicata in occasione del Congresso geografico di Parigi, con estratti d'alcune relazioni di viaggio a stampa ed alcuni documenti inediti*, Livorno 1875. Given the close relations that existed between the Republic of Venice and the subcontinent, India should be a focus of particular study, see A. Grossato, *Navigatori e viaggiatori veneti sulla rotta per l'India. Da Marco Polo ad Angelo Legrenzi*, Florence 1994. A traditional yet still useful is the edition by D. Carruthers, *The Desert Route to India, Being the Journals of Four Travellers by the Greath Desert Caravan Route between Aleppo and Basra, 1745–1751* [1929], Farnham 2010.

9 R. Kauz (ed.), *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, Wiesbaden 2010; R. Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstrasse. Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit*, Munich 2007. The most recent works stress that "the contrast between land and maritime routes might not have been as sharp as normally assumed" (see my own: *Luxury Production and Technological Transfer in Early Modern Europe*, Leipzig 2017, pp. 258–259).

period after the Yuan dynasty, the Silk Road was also believed to be increasingly dangerous. But were ships and the maritime route really so much safer than the old terrestrial roads? In any case, it is true that the Italians seemed to have been the first to lose out because of the opening of a new maritime route to the East (as well the shift of commercial activity away from the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic).¹⁰

Their near-complete absence from this sea-borne trade with Asia is highlighted both by historians and by the silence surrounding this argument, found in contemporary sources.¹¹ Nevertheless, while the Italians were directly affected by the shifting balance between the Silk Road and the maritime route, a more nuanced account has to be given when discussing the various other actors and political-economic factors at play in Central Asia. Indeed, I would stress that trade along the Silk Road continued to occupy a certain role and, even more critically, the commerce flowing through Central Asia helps to explain what would take place during the nineteenth century between the major political and economic actors, both Western and Eastern countries.

A supportive argument could draw on the figures put forward by Williamson and O'Rourke. They estimate that between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries world trade grew by around 1.06 per cent per year. For his part, Angus Maddison claims that from 1500 to 1820 annual growth in the gross domestic product of both China and Western Europe was only around 0.4 per cent. If one is to believe these figures and what they say about the relationship between gross national product and intercontinental trade, the divergence in development over these two centuries between Asian and European countries was not that dramatic (certainly in Europe, internal demand, and thus a relative increase in the spending power of domestic consumers, occupied an essential role in stimulating European development). Furthermore, it does not seem that there were any decisive improvements in transport technologies or any decrease in the costs borne by merchant ships, all of which remained fairly constant over these centuries: it would only

10 Given the complexity of relations between Europe, Asia, and the Americas (even if only in quantitative terms), it is difficult to propose a straightforward revisionist account. Jan de Vries stresses the fact that "the cumulative value of British, French, and Dutch imports from the New World exceed[ed] those from Asia by nearly a factor of three (J. de Vries, *Limits of Globalization in the early modern world*, in: *The Economic History Review* 63 [2010] 3, p. 728). Asian trade – involving the overheads of distant travel and the need to penetrate established networks – never enjoyed the profit margins that plantation products traded across the Atlantic yielded to landowners in European colonies (idem, *Connecting Europe and Asia: a Quantitative Analysis of the Cape-route Trade, 1497–1795*, in: D. O. Flynn et al. [eds.], *Global Connections and Monetary System, 1470–1800*, Aldershot 2003, pp. 82–85). Furthermore, I. Blanchard, converting Jan de Vries' calculations in guilders into figures in pounds sterling, has calculated that in 1802 "this Eurasian commerce, which encompassed wares carried through both the trans-continental and local nomadic trade-system, crossing Russia's Asiatic frontiers from Central Asia [...] was only valued ca. £160,000", while just 30 years previously "the value of goods transported by way of the Cape maritime route to Europe amounted to ca. £4,820,000", see Blanchard, *The "Great Silk Road"*, ca. 1650 / ca. 1855, in: M. A. Denzel et al. (eds.), *Small is Beautiful? Interlopers and Smaller Trading Nations in the Pre-industrial Period*, Stuttgart 2011, pp. 262–263.

11 B. Yun-Casalilla, *Iberian World Empires and the Globalization of Europe 1415–1668*, Singapore 2019, esp. pp. 51–88; S. Bernabéu Albert (ed.), *La Nao de China, 1565–1815. Navegación, comercio e intercambios culturales*, Sevilla 2013; W. L. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, Manila 1985; J. L. Gasch-Tomás, *Asian Silk, Porcelain and Material Culture in the Definition of Mexican and Andalusia Elites, c. 1565–1630*, in: B. Aram/B. Yun-Casalilla (eds.), *Global Goods and the Spanish Empire, 1492–1824: Circulation, Resistance and Diversity*, New York 2014, pp. 153–173.

be with the revolution brought about by steam power in the nineteenth century that these factors would come into play.¹²

Such data is instructive, but it does not help one to quantify the impact of European trade on Asian affairs. And such complications are increased by the scarcity and poverty of local sources; by the primitive way in which many Asia products were traded (sometimes through the simple truck system, a tributary system within the many areas controlled by the Chinese authorities); by the complicated fiscal system used in collecting taxes from the nomadic populations inside Central Asia; by the continuing contraband between the different nations interested in the Asian trade; and by the growing conflict between the emerging nations and the numerous merchants operating inside Central Asia (Russians, English, Afghans, and Indians). All these aspects make attempts at precise quantification of Western interests inside Asia seem wishful thinking. As Jack Goldstone stresses when discussing the role of American silver and the supposed impact of its declining influx on political affairs of China (particularly during the crisis of the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century): "silver bullion played a role far out of proportion to its scale in the economy". Much more substantial influences on the internal affairs of China were the control of the borders, the role of the agriculture, recurrent famine, and dynastic conflict between Chinese rulers. Indeed, the total volume of European trade "was never more than just over 1 percent of China's economy, and was generally 0.2–0.3 percent. The complete cessation of such trade (the arrival of the silver) would hardly have been noticeable in the over-all economy".¹³ At the same time, the relative closure of China as well as of Tokugawa Japan – and their relative disinterest in commercial expansion beyond their own borders – created more opportunities for Westerners to become involved in Asian affairs.¹⁴ Arms and military force also influenced the Europeans' ability to impose their presence upon Asian markets – an issue that is covered in a whole range of post-colonial studies that I can only cite here.¹⁵

12 R. Findlay/K. A. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War and the World Economy in the Second Millennium*, Princeton 2007, pp. 305, 378–79.

13 J. A. Goldstone, *East and West in the Seventeenth Century: Political Crises in Stuart England, Ottoman Turkey, and Ming China*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (1988) 1, p. 115. W. S. Atwell, on the contrary, has no doubts about the effects of imported silver on the Chinese economy, see: *Another Look at Silver Imports into China, ca. 1635–1644*, in *Journal of World History* 16 (2005) 4, pp. 467–489.

14 It should not be forgotten that the Asian continent had for centuries being particularly attractive for European countries, which were in many ways less advanced, particularly with regard to technology. The reason why relations developed as they did – and particularly why the fleets of the eunuch Admiral Zheng did not continue their exploration of the African and Arabian coast in the first decades of fifteenth century – remains a controversial point (one compelling and convincing interpretation is that this was due to the fact that Chinese policy was primarily concerned with managing internal affairs: Ying Liu et al. (eds.), *Zheng. He's maritime voyages (1405–1433) and China's relations with the Indian Ocean world: a multilingual bibliography*, Leiden 2014).

15 A wealth of economic and cultural insights can be found in the essays that make up P. Burschel/S. Jüterczenska (eds.), *Begegnen, Aneignen, Vermessen. Europäische Expansion als Globale Interaktion*, Stuttgart 2016. Also see G. Wade, *Asian Expansions: An Introduction*, in: idem (ed.), *The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*, Abingdon 2015, p. 18. On the idea of "cosmopolitanism", see G. Marcocci, *Renaissance Italy Meets South Asia: Florentine and Venetians in a Cosmopolitan World*, in: J. Flores et al. (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism in the Early Modern World: The Case of South Asia (16th–18th Centuries)*, Paris 2015, pp. 45–68. On the notion of "interconnected worlds", see S. Subrahmanyam, *Mondi connessi: la storia oltre l'eurocentrismo (secoli 16.–18.)*, Rome 2014; G.

What is certainly true is that both short- and long-distance trade existed before the emergence of nation-states and the structure within which they existed.¹⁶ Thus, as Chaudhuri underlines, at the time of the Portuguese arrival in India in 1498, “there had been no organized attempt by any political power to control the sea-lanes and the long distance trade of Asia. The Iberians and their north European followers imported a Mediterranean style of warfare by land and sea into an area that had hitherto had quite a different tradition”¹⁷. Similarly, Michael Pearson examines the fiscal policy followed by Asia to reveal a very different approach to that found in European financial policies. The first tended to focus on revenue from the taxation of agricultural produce, while within European states an increasing role was played by the fiscal revenue generated by maritime trade: “the issue of sea revenues is a key to understanding European expansion”.¹⁸ The common perception of Asian countries in decline has undoubtedly been accompanied by the perception of European maritime trade in expansion and the decreasing significance of the Silk Road. And it was during this period that Italian merchants, unable to compete with such major institutions as trade companies, were forced to operate under the umbrella of Portuguese and Spanish trade organizations or join forces with individual merchants.¹⁹ Future research is required to cast more light on the limited

Marcocci, *Indios, cinesi, falsari: Le storie del mondo nel Rinascimento*, Bari 2017. Within this specific historical context, lucid and telling arguments for historians to reconsider the East and re-evaluate the supposed centrality of the West are advanced in J. Goody, *L'Oriente in Occidente. Una riscoperta delle civiltà occidentali*, Bologna 1999. However, one cannot forget the fundamental lessons to be learnt from the pioneering studies by Joseph Needham and his successors in the volumes on Science and Civilisation in China, published by Cambridge University Press from 1954 onwards.

- 16 M. Middel, *Portals of Globalization as lieux de mémoire*, in: *Comparativ* 27 (2017) 3–4, pp. 70–71. However, this does not mean that one should read the relative closure of China, Japan, and India without reference to the forces driving European expansionism, a process that defined the character of this entire period of history. The evolution in European economies and political systems proceeded in tandem with a process that saw the formation of the modern state, a revolution in the organization of military and naval power, and a growth in trade that triggered, or accelerated, the process of “globalization”. For Immanuel Wallerstein, this process began in the sixteenth century, while Janet Abu-Lughod argues that it actually got underway during the course of the thirteenth century, thanks to the roles played by both China and the Arab world. For his part, Wallerstein tends (wrongly) to underestimate the role played by Asia, above all because he regards this continent as having been excluded from the key structure of “centre – semi-periphery – periphery” during the Early Modern period. The vision that inspires such interpretations is clearly related to the very contemporary debate regarding global trade and national interests, inevitably inviting us to consider the real effects of the process without forgetting that “global expresses a certain multi-layered connectedness of all historical realms – it entails relations, flows, and influences at a cultural, social and political level”. See on this point D. Sachsenmaier, *China and Globalization*, Paper presented to the Conference: *Globalization, Civil Society and Philanthropy*, New York 2003, p. 2; see also D. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History. Theories and Approaches in a Connected World*, Cambridge, UK 2011. Certainly, once met with some scepticism, A. G. Frank’s arguments with regard to the return of China into world markets (see: *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley / Los Angeles, 1998) are now taken much more seriously.
- 17 K. Chaudhuri, quoted by T. Andrade, *Asian States and overseas expansion, 1500–1700. An approach to the Problem of European Exceptionalism*, in: Wade (ed.), *The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*, p. 53.
- 18 M. N. Pearson, *Merchants and States*, in: J. D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires*, Cambridge, UK 1991, p. 48.
- 19 Fully-developed research on this issue can be found in B. Crivelli / G. Sabatini (eds.), *Reti finanziarie e reti commerciali. Operatori economici stranieri in Portogallo, XVI–XVII secolo (=Rivista di Storia Economica XVIII [2015] 2)*. In particular, N. Alessandrini, *Reti commerciali genovesi a Lisbona nel secolo XVII: elementi di commercio*

presence in Asia of Italian merchants (minority groups which also included Armenians, Greeks, and Jews) and on how well they were able to resist changing circumstances and the growing competition from Western Trade Companies.

That being said, it is undeniable that Italy, and particularly Venice, throughout the seventeenth century remained a major destination for the Asian products, even if these were also flowing into many other European ports. Iranian silk, for example, remained a fundamental luxury Asian product that affected the trading relations between Asia and Europe as a whole: key players in this trade were the Armenians and the city of New Julfa, created by the Safavids during the seventeenth century, with the express purpose of facilitating the increase of silk exports from Iran to expanding European markets.²⁰ And this sector of Persian silk was one in which the role played by Venice was far from insignificant as well the capacity of the entire peninsula to tackle the Asian raw and manufactured silk production.²¹

It has to be considered that in each area of what today is called the Middle East one can identify specific local strategies. The Ottoman Empire, for example, was among the competitors closely connected to Indian markets, exporting horses, grain, and cotton and importing jewellery, spices, and fine silks; the Sunni Islam practised by the Ottomans was a significant factor in the rivalry with Safavid Iran.²² For its part, Iran also developed its own cultural and economic strategy in other directions, as is reflected by the diplomatic relations the Safavids maintained with Siam.²³ The fall of the Safavid dynasty at the end of the seventeenth century, a period when the Dutch and English navies were becoming more relevant factors in the East, contributed to the growing importance of the maritime route, even if Central Asian markets continued to exist.

globale, pp. 275–298. See also N. Alessandrini/A. Viola, *Genovesi e fiorentini in Portogallo: reti commerciali e strategie politico-diplomatiche (1650–1700)*, in: *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche* 28 (2013), pp. 295–322. On the fundamental role of Genoa inside Latin America, see C. Brilli, *Genoese Trade and Migration in the Spanish Atlantic, 1700–1830*, Cambridge, UK 2016.

- 20 S. D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley 2010; R. W. Ferrier, *Trade from the mid-14th Century to the End of the Safavid Period*, in: P. Jackson/L. Lockhart, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 6, *The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, Cambridge, UK 1986, pp. 472–490. See also: *A Journey to Persia. Jean Chardin's Portrait of a Seventeenth-century Empire*, transl. and ed. by R. W. Ferrier, London / New York 1996, pp. 165–186.
- 21 On this issue, see my contribution "Chinese Silk and European Trade. A Balance (16th–19th century)", in: Ciriaco, *Luxury Production*, pp. 253 sqq.
- 22 A. C. S. Peacock, *The Economic Relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Southeast Asia in the Seventeenth Century*, in: A. T. Gallop/A. C. S. Peacock (eds.), *From Anatolia to Aceh. Ottomans, Turks and Southeast Asia*, London 2015, pp. 63–73. On the geographical exploration undertaken by the Ottoman empire, and the (not always fully exploited) scope for increased trade that resulted there from, see the arguments advanced by G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, Oxford 2010.
- 23 G. Rota, *Diplomatic Relations between the Safavids and Siam in the 17th Century*, in: Kauz (ed.), *Aspects of the maritime silk road*, pp. 71–84.

2. Russian Expansion: From the West to the East

After the decline of Genghis Kahn's empire, both the Timurid and the Yuan dynasty, which governed China, were far from being minor players in what was transpiring in Central Asia, which was experiencing the arrival of new players: the Russians, the English, large nomadic populations, and the Moghuls in India as well as numerous Asian regions (independent from or economically connected to China). Regarding the Silk Road, most traders were limited in transporting their wares from one place to another – that is to say, they did not complete the entire route from east to west. Furthermore, this route was strongly influenced by climate change, as Jan Blanchard observes: rain fall “and abated temperatures resulted in more verdant grass growth in Mongolia” moving progressively southward of the great silk road”.²⁴

The direction of trade was influenced by this climate change. One route affected was towards the northern shore of the Black Sea (to Kaffa in the Crimea) and towards Taman on the Sea of Azov, with Western merchants carrying their wares through Istanbul over the Black Sea and then passing on through Kaffa to Trebizond and Persia beyond. Another was in the direction of Indian markets through the Central Asian khanates – Kokhand, Bukhara, and Khiva – which acted as way stations for merchants passing along the Silk Road. In this sense, the traditional demand/offer of products exchanged along the Silk Road experienced a new lease of life. The newcomers, such as Russians and the English, interacted with numerous populations and tribes – engaging with their interests and activities – inside Central Asia, which were dependents of the Celestial Empire – a literary name for the Chinese Empire – and, before that, of the Dzungar dynasty, which governed from 1678 to 1754/58. It seems that during the phases that experienced climate improvement, described by Blanchard, the area at the eastern end of the Silk Road in the Tarim Basin enjoyed factors that were favourable for trade throughout the seventeenth century. Cities such as Karashar, Kucha, Aksu, Ush, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, and Turfan could profit from “a trading network that linked China, the Middle East, India, Transoxania, Russia, and Siberia”.²⁵ A favourable fiscal system, founded on a low tax rate (even on foreign trade), was introduced by the Dzungar dynasty and would be upheld by the Chinese authorities after the fall of the former dynasty. Of great importance, this fiscal policy was then followed by the Chinese authorities themselves in their expansion toward the West, as has been highlighted by Peter Perdue.²⁶

24 Blanchard, *The “Great Silk Road”*, p. 255.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 253–275. For an investigation of the cartographical aspects of this, see J. Tucker, *The Silk Road. China and the Karakorum Highway. A Travel Companion*, with a foreword by P. Theroux, London / New York 2015, pp. 122–164.

26 Another issue of strategic importance for China and its westward expansion was the matter of borders and the empire's attitude to its neighbours and competitors, be they Russians, the British at Canton, or such nomadic populations as the Kazakhs and Zunghars (these latter finally becoming subjects under Chinese rule). See Perdue, *China marches West*, pp. 402–403 and 518–519; N. Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, Cambridge, UK 2002; *Idem*, *State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History*, in: *Journal of World History* 10 (1999) 1, pp. 1–40; H. R. Clark, *Frontier Discourse and China's Maritime*

On the opposite side of Central Asia, Russian expansion eastward, which started in the sixteenth century, was certainly inspired by such fiscal policy. The north-south trade route became increasingly valuable after the conquest of Kazan and the foundation of Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea in the sixteenth century, connecting the southern market with the northern – and with Arkhangel'sk in particular, a port through which Russian commerce flowed to Western Europe (especially the Low Countries). Already in the fifteenth century, Kazan's importance is unmistakable, with the city linking economic interests in Moscow with an area that reached as far as Bulgaria as well as the Muslim world. Already by the beginning of that century, "Russian merchants from Moscow, Pskov, and Novgorod operated regularly in the territory of their Muslim neighbour to the east, the khanate of Kazan, where Bulgars, central Asians, and Cherkassy also resided".²⁷ Even the colonization around the Aral Sea during the sixteenth century is a clear expression of the interest in Central Asia, which ultimately led to Russian control over many central Asian states.

It was Peter the Great who had profited from the fall of the Safavid dynasty after the invasion of the Afghani, entering the valuable silk trade and even trying to control the entire Iranian economy.²⁸ Part only partially successful attempt to gain access to the Indian market, this push in the direction of Persia and Afghanistan was meant to complement (and counterbalance) the role played in the north by the foundation of the city of St. Petersburg. Elsewhere in Russia, by the early years of the seventeenth century one of the many major routes for the silk trade already ran in the direction of Siberia and Arkhangel'sk on the White Sea.²⁹ As Edmund Herzig points out:

raw silk could follow a number of different routes from the production area to Europe and these were: 1) overland to Bursa and Istanbul and onward by sea, or by land across the Balkan peninsula to the Adriatic; 2) overland to Aleppo in Syria from where it was trans-

Frontier: China's Frontiers and the Encounter with the Sea through Early Imperial History, in: *Journal of World History* 20 (2009) 1, pp. 1–33. For more in-depth discussion of the political history and characteristics of the numerous peoples of Central Asia (Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Turkmen, Tatars, Uzbeks, Kalmyks, etc.), see the fundamental work N. Di Cosmo / A. J. Frank / P. B. Golden (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia. The Chinggisid Age*, Cambridge, UK 2009. On the issue of the "East influenced the West", an interpretation that takes the opposite view to J. Goody: i.e. the reciprocal influence of the West on the East (see footnote 14) is to be found in I. Bellér-Hann, *Silk Road Connectivities and the Construction of Local History in Eastern Xinjiang*, in: *Comparativ* 28 (2018) 4, pp. 93–119. Also see B. Teissier, *Russian Frontiers: Eighteenth-Century British Travellers in the Caspian, Caucasus and Central Asia*, Oxford 2011, where the reports by these travellers make it clear that, in direct competition with the Russians and Chinese, the British were interested in events in Central Asia. On this issue, also see M. Hue (Évariste Régis), *Travels in Tartary, Tibet, and China during the years 1844–56*, transl. by the French, London 1856; A. Beer, *Geschichte des Westhandels im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, Wien 1864, vol. 1, pp. 370–404.

27 E. Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia. Trade in early Modern Eurasia*, Ithaca/London 2016, pp. 96–97.

28 Teissier, *Russian frontiers*, p.181.

29 Venice itself was present in this port. As Stefano Villani stresses, when the Russian ambassadors were in Tuscany with the aim of opening up trade relations with Italian cities, one of their primary goals was "to encourage Venice to use the commercial base of Arkhangel'sk, and obtain the right for Russians to purchase luxury Venetian fabrics without having to pay customs duties", see Villani, *Ambasciatori russi a Livorno e rapporti tra Moscovia e Toscana nel XVII secolo*, in: *Nuovi Studi Livornesi* 14 (2008), pp. 37–95. My thanks to the author for pointing this out.

ported to the port of Iskenderun and onward by sea; 3) overland to Izmir and onward by sea; 4) across the Caspian to Astrakhan from either Rasht/Anzali in Gilian or Shamakha/Niyazabad in Shirvan, then up the Volga to Moscow and onward either overland to Central Europe or by way of the Baltic or the White Sea to Holland and England; 5) overland across Iran via Isfahan to Bandar Abbas and onward by sea via the Cap route.³⁰

A particularly dynamic role here was played by Dutch ships, which themselves carried silk and caviar towards Italy specifically and the Mediterranean in general. According to one estimate (which may be seen as applicable in a broader sense):

[T]he Sephardi silk broker Sebastian Pimentel reported that in 1630 only 20 per cent of Dutch silk imports were arriving from the Mediterranean. This means the rest, 80 per cent of Persian silk reaching the Netherlands, was arriving via other routes, including from the Dutch East India Company circumnavigating Africa or from Dutch merchants in Russia. According to Jonathan Israel's estimates, in 1630 four hundred bales of Persian and Armenian silk reached Western Europe via Moscow and Arkhangel'sk [...] and only three hundred silk bales reached Western Europe from Levant and Italy. Thus, bearing in mind the silk traded by the VOC, one might estimate that a good one-fifth of the total silk arriving in Europe came from Russia.³¹

Raw silk was shipped directly from the Iranian market to the Russian market and there was “a considerable increase in the export of raw silk through Astrakhan, which varied from 20,000 to 100,000 kilograms per year at the turn of the eighteenth century”.³² The considerable Russian interest in the Italian market included finished silks and fabrics³³ as well as two exports that would become of vital importance for trade with European markets: caviar and rhubarb (the latter was a medicinal plant for which there was great demand amongst seventeenth- and eighteen-century European consumers, and the trade therein was a monopoly controlled by the Moscow authorities).³⁴ It is no coincidence that it was with the grand duke of the silk-producing Tuscany that Tsar Aleksei Mikhailov signed a commercial agreement in 1658, granting the former a monopoly over the caviar trade within the Italian market in return for the payment of an agreed sum – the grand duke obtained the concession that half of that payment would be calculated in “silk, as was the common practice at Arkhangel'sk”.

Certainly, Russian expansion in Central Asia took advantage of the growing prominence of the Asian khanates, showing an increasing interest in what for Europeans was “the

30 E. Herzig, The Volume of Iranian Raw Silk Exports in the Safavid Period, in: *Iranian Studies* 25 (1992) 1–2, p. 62.

31 Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia*, p.60.

32 N. G. Kukanova, quoted by A. Stanziani, *After Oriental Despotism. Eurasian Growth in a Global Perspective*, London 2014, p. 80.

33 See R. Mazzei, *Sete italiane nella Russia della seconda metà del Seicento. La produzione lucchese alle fiere di Arcangelo*, in: *Rivista di Storia Economica* (2015) 2, pp. 473–515.

34 In Gemelli Careri's description of the rich array of goods traded in Asia, we are told that the best rhubarb was that grown in Bhutan and sold by the Tartars, see *Giro del mondo del Dottor Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri*, Tomo secondo contenente le cose più vedute nella Persia, Venice 1719, p. 3..

East" and for Russians might also be "India" (as Manohan calls attention to, "the term 'India' in early Russian sources could encompass an area much larger, including even China"³⁵). It is now widely accepted that by the end of the seventeenth century "Russia was heavily integrated in the expanding European world economy, linked to colonial economies of the English and Dutch via Arkhangel'sk and with the Silk Roads trade through the Volga-Caspian and Siberian trade routes".³⁶ As already mentioned, while Arkhangel'sk served as Russia's window to the West, it was Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga River into the Caspian Sea, that became its window to the "Orient".³⁷ This is evidenced by a small but active community of Indian merchants, who were part of a much vaster network that extended from Lahore and Multan to Kandahar, Isfahan and Bukhara, linking the north of India with Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, and Russia.³⁸ At the same time, as Nicolaus Visscher points out, Persian goods were travelling up the Volga to Astrakhan.³⁹ All of this confirms the existence, in parallel with a complex of Western interests, of Asian interests, which although perhaps being more traditional in character were extremely important.

The Russians were skilled at exploiting divisions among the tribal nomadic peoples of the region (above all, the Kazakhs), and they managed to penetrate such trading centres as Kokhand, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khivan (in modern-day Uzbekistan), taking advantage of the role played by these cities' merchants. Without them, it would not have been possible to establish trade with Kabul, Herat, Kashmir, and the Chinese cities of Xinjiang.

Bukhara, for example, had no industries that worked raw materials, and so it was purely a trading centre. The city was particularly significant as its merchants supplied Orenburg and the Russian fairs of Nijni and Novgorod with not only cotton (a major commodity) but also dried fruit, rice, raw and dyed silk thread, silk fabrics, shawls, and indigo. Caravans under the control of the Kyrgyz⁴⁰ ran from Bukhara to Kashgar, which remained independent from China until the empire conquered the whole of Xinjiang in 1758. This state of affairs enabled the Russians to export not only their own goods but also those which came from Central Europe, such as cloths, fine coral, pearls, cochineal, cloth of gold, velvet, silver and gold wire, German otter-skins, marten-skins, copper, sugar, hides, large mirrors, wheel rims, needles, glass-wares and Russian nankeens. In

35 Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia*, p. 362. Also see M. Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier. The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1880*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2002; D. N. Druhe, *Russo-Indian Relations, 1466–1917*, New York 1970.

36 Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia*, p. 53.

37 Findlay/O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, p. 303.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 244. Manuzzi was more focused on the institutions and social aspects of India than on economic issues. On his presence in the subcontinent, see P. Falchetta (ed.), *Storia del Mogol di Nicolò Manuzzi veneziano*, Milan 1986. See also the comments made by Subrahmanyam in *Mondi connessi*, pp. 183–219.

39 N. Visscher, *Atlas minor*, Amsterdam [ca 1710].

40 5,000 to 6,000 camels were used per year. The load of a single camel was estimated to be 60 ducats in value, which was calculated to be RUB 3,500,000–4,000,000. A single camel could carry 18 to 20 pud, a pud being the equivalent to 40 Russian pounds or 36 Chinese pounds (Bokhara: its Amir and its People, translated from the Russian of Khanikoff by the Baron Clement A. De Bode, London 1845, p. 220).

turn, “Kokhand merchants brought to Bukhara fine white cotton sheets to be dyed, silk stuffs, which were more durable than those of the Bukharans, and about 500 puds (ca. 8 tons) of raw silk of inferior quality to that of Bukhara. Tashkent sent to Bukhara much the same merchandise but in lesser quantity”.⁴¹ Bukhara had a large population (Florio Beneveni, who visited during his travels of 1721 to 1725, mentions 15,000), with a sizeable number of Jewish traders closely linked to the Russian fairs of Nijni and Novgorod (the latter a city that was emblematic of the traditional Russian interest in expansion into Central and Southern Asia). Astrakhan, too, seems to have been equally important as a trading centre. At the crossroads of Eurasian trade, the north-south routes from Russia along the Volga intersected with the merchandise arriving from the Silk Road that was directed towards the ports of the Caspian Sea, Persia and beyond – trade which saw the involvement of Armenians, Indians, Persians, and different Tatar groups.⁴² Nevertheless, the number which some sources give for the population of Astrakhan in 1740 – a total of 100, 000 – seems excessive, even if it is taken up by Tesseir: we know that in 1811 the population numbered only 37,000, which had increased to just 42,800 by 1863.⁴³ Both sericulture and manufacture were developing widely inside this area, which was at the centre of the Silk Road and looked westward towards Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Persia, connecting these regions to China. Eighteenth-century Russian interest in this strategic area (and in Bukhara in particular) is entirely understandable, and equally understandable is the interest shown here by the English East India Company, which was looking towards India (a focus that would have decisive consequences in the future). It is no accident that a treaty was signed in the first half of the eighteenth century by Russians and British to guarantee equal profits from Central Asian trade, especially with regard to that moving through Bukhara and Kiakhta. However, it seems that throughout the eighteenth-century Russia profits in Bukhara did not match those obtained by the British.

While Bukhara and Kashgar were important in Russian trade with China, it seems evident that the major centre for this commerce was Kiakhta, through which passed porcelain plates (decorated with the Greco-Roman designs in demand among European consumers), cotton, Japanese lacquer work, artificial flowers, sugar, tobacco, rice, rhubarb, ginger, musk, and musical instruments. In fact, the rhubarb from Tartar territories was considered better than that from India, and there was no question that the rhubarb that came via Central Asia was better than that transported to Europe by ship, which was exposed to excessive humidity during the voyage. Another central export from China to

41 Ibid., pp. 144, 208, 212, 215–217; William Coxe, *Account of the Russian Discoveries Between Asia and America. To Which Are Added, The Conquest of Siberia, And The History Of The Transactions And Commerce Between Russia And China*, London, J. Nichols for T. Cadel, 1780, pp. 231–243 and 332–343.

42 Tesseir, *Russian Frontiers*, p. 232; N. Di Cosmo, *A Russian Envoy to Khiva: the Italian Diary of Florio Beneveni*, in: *Proceedings of the XXVIII Permanent International Altaistic Conference: Venice, Wiesbaden 1989*, pp. 73–114.

43 See H. Palli et al., *La démographie historique en URSS (avant 1917)*, in: *Annales de démographie historique* (1986), pp. 379–391. This source was kindly pointed out to me by Maurice Aymard, of the *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme* in Paris, whom I would also like to thank for his painstaking reading of the present article.

Russia was tea; exports had begun earlier than the 18th century and were linked with the trade in rhubarb itself (the finer quality of this latter came from Kiakhat, while that from Kashgar was of a lesser quality). It is true that the tea itself still had to compete with the green tea from India (over which the British had a monopoly), but it is nevertheless the case that tea would long remain the key Chinese export not only towards Russia but also to European markets. According to some sources (yet to be assessed and compared), the Chinese tea that was sent to Russia was sometimes believed to be of higher quality than the tea that China exported to Europe.

As for silk, the other vital product, while it is true that the Chinese had banned the export of raw silk, there was also sizeable flow of contraband through Kiakhta, given the great demand for such silk on the Russian market. In effect, the Russians enjoyed considerable advantages in their overall trade with Kiakhta, given that they could export their furs and livestock to the city: for example, when the Chinese were at war with the nomad Kalmyks, these latter depended upon Russians for the supply of horses. So, while it has been calculated that in 1777 Russia actually had a trade deficit in this area (1,484,712 as opposed to 1,313,621 roubles), over the long term it had everything to gain from such trade. Nor should one forget that it exported not only its own fabrics but also those imported from Europe (British, French, and Prussian).

Nevertheless, it was Orenburg more than Kiakhta that became the strategic hub of the internal Asian trade. It even surpassed Astrakhan thanks to its varied commerce: partly luxury items from the Far East and partly traditional ones, such as horses, camels, pelts, and utensils from Russia. It is undeniable "that caravan commerce was revived and that there was a shift from the Iran-Caspian-Astrakhan line to overland routes through Central Asia to Orenburg".⁴⁴ Trade was largely managed by central Asians and Tatars from Kazan and Orenburg to the detriment of Russian merchants themselves; like other European merchants inside Asian markets, these latter were dependent on native interpreters and guides.⁴⁵

3. English, Chinese, Russians: The Italian Avatar

What was happening in Central Asia, however, should not lead one to underestimate the role of maritime trade and the dominance of a port such as Canton, thanks to the growing presence of the British, whose activity there reveals the existence of clear trade links with India – links whose "colonial" nature is not less evident than the "Russification" in Central Asia over the course of the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ With regard to tea, for example, in 1800 Canton would export some 23 million pounds worth, while "only" 2.5 million

44 Stanziani, *After Oriental Despotism*, p. 84.

45 This issue was already raised by D. Lombard, *Questions on the contact between European companies and Asian societies*, in: L. Blussé et al. (eds.), *Companies and Trade*, Leiden 1981, pp. 180–187.

46 U. Hofmeister, *Civilization and Russification in Tsarist Central Asia, 1860–1917*, in: *Journal of World History* 27 (2016) 3, pp. 411–442.

pounds worth passed through Kiakhta (the quality, and therefore the price, of tea could vary depending upon where it was being exported to – for example, Siberia, Britain, Europe or Russia).⁴⁷ The two centres of Canton and Kiakhta thus alternated in standing, even if the latter – due to its geographical position (in the heart of Siberia) – was definitely a fundamental hub for the export of furs and skins, often of very high value (such as beaver, winter fox, sable, etc.). In fact, for a long time, such products and the duty on them would make a sizeable contribution to Russian revenues, even if there were complex negotiations with the Chinese over those taxes: the Chinese wanted to reduce such duties in order to increase their trade with Russia but at the same time expected to be able to levy high exit taxes on their own goods.⁴⁸

The key goods that reflected the future commercial destinies of the two nations were the raw silk and cotton imported from China via Bukhara and Kiakhta. The case of raw silk might be seen as emblematic of the overall situation, given that in 1751 it accounted for 24 per cent of the total Chinese imports into Russia but by the end of the century made up no more than 12 per cent. Russia, however, would continue to import raw silk from Iran as well as wool and cotton from both China and India – all to supply a process of industrialization that may not have matched the phenomenon to be seen in the British Isles but would remain significant for some decades to come. Still, there is no question that most of Russia's exports would continue to be made up of "bulk goods with a low ratio of value to weight, such as hemp and flax, wax and tallow, hides, skins and leather, pitch and tar, timber, and increasingly over time grain".⁴⁹ Just like China's foreign trade, Russia's would be linked throughout the eighteenth century to classic exotic products, and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would the formulation "luxury products versus mass products" see the latter prevail.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in the case of Russia, the process of a "modern" development seems to have been largely underappreciated by traditional historiography.⁵¹ Furthermore, even it is difficult to deny the importance of maritime traffic and the penetration of British interests and trade originating in Southern Asia (especially India), during the nineteenth century Russia's control of markets

47 On this point, see M. Mancall, *The Kiakhta Trade*, in: Ch. D. Cowan (ed.), *The Economic Development of China and Japan*, London 1964, p. 44.

48 M. I. Sladkovskii, *History of Economic Relations between Russia and China*, Jerusalem 1966, pp. 32–33. See this text for the role of caravans financed by the Russian state in the export of furs and other products (due to pressure from the Russian state itself, that trade was gradually to be taken over by private entrepreneurs). On the fiscal systems in Russia and China (the latter perhaps dating back further and generally more efficient), see P. Gatrell, *The Russian fiscal state, 1600–1914*; K. G. Deng, *The continuation and efficiency of the Chinese fiscal state, 700 BC–AD 1911*; and R. Bin Wong, *Taxation and good governance in China, 1500–1914*, in: B. Yun Casalilla et al. (eds.), *The Rise of Fiscal States: A Global History 1500–1914*, Cambridge, UK 2012, pp. 191–212, 340–352 and 365–372 resp.

49 Finlay/O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, pp. 299–304, esp. p. 302 over time grain and bar iron.

50 P. Verley, *Marché des produits de luxe et division internationale du travail (XIXe–XXe siècles)*, in: *Revue de Synthèse* (2006) 2, pp. 359–378. See also S. Richter/G. Garner (eds.), „Eigennutz“ und „gute Ordnung“. *Ökonomisierungen der Welt im 17. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 485 sq; Ciriaco, *Luxury Production*.

51 On this issue, see Stanziani, *After Oriental Despotism*, pp. 107sq.

inside Central Asia would become firmly established and remain a defining feature of the political history of the region⁵² until the implosion of the Soviet Union.

If we are interested in the role Italian merchants did play in that region over these centuries, the limited information that is available provides us only with just one figure: Florio Beneveni, originally from Ragusa (Dubrovnik), appointed as a Russian envoy on a mission to Khiva in 1725, which is described in the journal that he wrote in Italian. His mission to Central Asia took place at a time when there were many Europeans at the court of Peter the Great, and Russia was expanding into the Central Asian khanates.⁵³ Indeed, this Russian expansion was not limited to Asia but, as I have underlined, was also in the direction of the Mediterranean, through the increased importance of the Black Sea. Perhaps comparable to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, Kaffa would become an important port on the Black Sea after the waning fortunes there of the Genoese and Venetians, a transition that merits more attention.⁵⁴

A no less essential role would be played by the ports of the eastern Mediterranean as well the traditional terminals of Asian caravans, first and foremost those connected to Aleppo.⁵⁵ This latter destination remained vital throughout the eighteenth century, the port continuing to be the final destination of the German products transported by the Venetian ships (fustians, worked cottons, and metal ware). On the other hand, Venice remained the final destination for the luxury products transported by caravans from the Middle East – at that time, Baghdad, Basra, and ancient Babylon.⁵⁶ Iran and India also have to be considered in this larger picture. For example, the presence of the Republic of Venice inside the Indian peninsula was very relevant – think, for instance, of the role of diamonds and the techniques for cutting the stones developed by Venetian artisans.⁵⁷ Nor should one overlook the fact that certain Chinese products began to compete with such typical Venetian objects as false coral on international markets. Undoubtedly, the trade between Venice and these Mediterranean ports (Alexandria and Aleppo) has to be

52 E. Allworth (ed.), *Central Asia. 130 Years of Russian Dominance. A Historical Overview*, Durham / London 1994.

53 Di Cosmo, *A Russian Envoy to Khiva*, pp. 73–114. As was pointed out to me by Maurice Aymard, the reference is to Dubrovnik (Ragusa) and not to the Ragusa in Sicily, as Di Cosmo himself interprets it.

54 "Like Astrakhan, Kaffa was a great entrepôt and the most important port within the Khanate. Strong walls and ditches surrounded it. Its population was some 80,000 souls including some 5,000–6,000 Raya Greeks, Armenians, Catholics and Jews. [...] The town's trade was enormous. Yet even at this time the wares brought to it by way of the "Great Silk Road" constituted only a tiny part. The vast majority of the goods bought and sold at Kaffa were brought from, or despatched to, lands within the Ottoman trade-system of the Black Sea and the Turkish lands beyond the Bosphorus" (Blanchard, *The "Great Silk Road"*, p. 274). On the role of the Black Sea, see G. Harlaftis, *Black Sea and its maritime networks, 1770s–1810s. The Beginnings of its European Integration*, in: G. Nigro (ed.), *Maritime Networks as a Factor in European Integration (The 50th Settimana di Studi dell'Istituto Internazionale F. Datini, Prato 13–17 May 2018)*, Florence 2019; the argument there is already sketched out in Harlaftis et al. (eds.), *The New Ways of History*, London 2009.

55 A. Morana, *Relazione del commercio di Aleppo ed altre scale della Siria e Palestina*, Venice 1799.

56 L. Reinhardt, *Erben einer späten Seidenstrasse. Der Markt von Aleppo in osmanischer Zeit (16.–18. Jahrhundert)*, in: *Die Seidenstrasse. Handel und Kulturaustausch in einem eurasiatischen Wegenetz*, Hamburg 2001, pp. 237–250.

57 S. Ciriaco, *Diamonds in Early Modern Venice. Technology, Products and International Competition*, in: *Italian Technology from Renaissance to the Twentieth century (History of Technology 32 [2014])*, now in *Luxury Production*, pp. 229–252.

considered inside the framework of the economic relations between Russia and other major Italian economies, for instance the Republic of Venice, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and Genoa (however, it should be stressed that that latter was increasingly more interested in the Atlantic economy).

Thus, not only does Russia's economic penetration into Central Asia have to be taken into account but also its expansion towards the Black Sea, where it came up against European powers – a circumstance that would become the origin of the “Eastern Question”. Furthermore, Istanbul and Izmir on the Turkish coast, as well as Alexandria on the Egyptian coast (with land links to the Red Sea), have to be considered as vital terminals for trans-Asian trade. Through these ports, northern European markets and such central European centres as Vienna and Leipzig were connected to Asia.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of many Central Asian states – for example, Kazakhstan – and the exploitation of many mineral and fuel resources (gas and petrol) have given the continent an undeniable advantage, with harsh consequences for the West. There is no question that the strategic reaction here of Europe – and especially the US – has not been adequate. Peter Frankopan writes about a “road to catastrophe” and a “the road to tragedy”.⁵⁸ Interestingly, however, one can see the emergence of a new Silk Road following the same path as the old one – which tends as well to ignore desert areas. This new “Road”, nevertheless, is more a conduit for the flow of products and fuel resources than the exchange of discoveries and know-how as it was in the past (think of the technologies of silk and paper manufacture). How the West should intervene in the future depends on its capacity to react and to develop a wide-ranging political-economic response to the current situation, accepting – as Fernand Braudel stresses – that there are necessary limits to any such reaction.⁵⁹

58 Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, chapt. 24 and 25.

59 F. Braudel, *Les ambitions de l'histoire*, 2, Préface de Maurice Aymard, Paris 1997, pp. 97–125.