China's Development from a Global Perspective
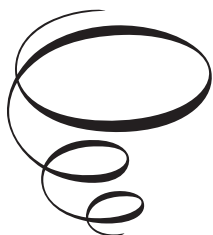
China's Development from a Global Perspective

Edited by

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CHAPTER TWO

IMPERIAL ROME AND CHINA: COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION TRANSMISSION

ANNE KOLB AND MICHAEL SPEIDEL

As leading world powers, the *Imperium Romanum* and the ancient Chinese Empire of the Qin and Han dynasties were in contemporary existence from around the mid-second century BCE to the first half of the third century CE. Between them, it has been reckoned, they controlled half the entire world population.[1] Yet, they lacked a common border. They were separated by the enormous distance between the opposite ends of the Eurasian continent and a forbidding topography that included some of the highest mountains and deadliest deserts on the planet. Nevertheless, particularly from the first century CE onwards, sources from both ancient empires record increasing commercial and diplomatic interchange, as well as a significant interest in written accounts on the other. Depending on the value attributed to these sources, modern scholars have proposed contradicting views of either independent or interacting empires. Thus, it has recently been argued that "the two world empires remained hidden to each other in a twilight realm of fable and myth" and that they unconsciously took part "in a major world system of trade that had developed, while few if any of the participating parties knew much about the others."[2] That in turn led others to conclude that both empires had minimal interaction and developed independently of each other, thus creating an ideal opportunity for studies in comparative history.[3] Others, however, presuppose frequent and routine contact. Thus in a recent book on geography in classical antiquity one scholar maintains that "the Romans reached as far as China, establishing contacts with the local" people. The Romans, we are told, "traded with the

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[1] Scheidel, "Introduction," *State Power*, 5.
[2] Fibiger Bang, "Commanding," 120. Loewe, "China's Early Empires," 83.
[3] Scheidel, "Introduction," *State Power*, 5.

Chinese and had reciprocal contacts with the court there as early as the time of Augustus."[4] Earlier adherents of this school of thought even suggested that in 122 CE the Roman emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of the great stone wall in the north of the province of Britannia because travellers' accounts of the Great Wall of China had inspired him to do so.[5] A re-assessment of the flow of information between the two great empires, of the nature and state in which the data was preserved, and of the channels and agents that conveyed it, therefore seem apposite.

Western Data

By the fifth century BCE, Chinese silk had reached the West.[6] China, however, remained unknown to Western contemporaries. Thus, although Herodotus seems to have known of a trade route used by Scythians and Greeks that connected the Black Sea with Central Asia,[7] his informants had nothing but fanciful stories based on rumours and hearsay to offer about the creatures, peoples and countries in and beyond the adjacent mountain barrier.[8] According to the reports he collected (but refused to believe), these mountains were inhabited by men with goats' feet, and beyond these there was a people who slept for six months of the year. He also heard of one-eyed men and gold-guarding griffins on the near side of the mountains. Over a century later, in the years 334–326 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered the countries between the eastern Mediterranean and the Punjab. Yet even now Western literature had nothing reliable to say of the Chinese.

But Alexander's conquests and, over 100 years later, the unification of China in 221 BCE under its first emperor Qin Shihuang laid the foundations that would eventually enable the unparalleled success of ancient long-distance trade to develop along the network of routes we now usually refer to as the "Silk Road."[9] Still, according to tradition it took

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[4] Dueck, *Geography*, 62.

[5] Stevens, "Hadrian," 397–399. Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, 32. Cf. Campbell, "Chinese Puzzle," 371–376.

[6] Miller, *Athens and Persia*, 77ff.

[7] Hdt. 4, 23–25. Cf. 101.

[8] See Hdt. 4, 13.4, 25–27 with the interpretation by Walter, "Seidenstrasse," 87–93, and Walter, *Entstehung früher Fremdbilder*, 63–73.

[9] See most recently Hill, *Jade Gate*, Liu, *Silk Road*, and esp. Graf, "Silk Road." For an overview see also Olbrycht, "Seidenstrasse," 67–87. For early Hellenistic influence in ancient Chinese art see Nickel, "First Emperor."

another century before the trade route became fully operational in the late second century BCE, for that was only the result of the establishment of the Seleucid and later the Parthian kingdoms in Persia, the Maurya kingdom in India and the great Chinese expansion under the Han emperor Wu (156–87 BCE). The vast size of these realms, their comparatively small number, the will of their rulers and their at least adequate authority created an environment that was favourable to long-distance trade, not least with regard to costs for protection and to taxation. Since the late second century BCE at the latest, a flow of trade, envoys and information surged between these kingdoms. By the mid-fourth century CE, the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, without a notion of surprise, mentions "a very long road" (*iter longissimum*) through Central Asia that "frequently" or "periodically" (yet in either case recurrently: *subinde*) led merchants past a place called "Stone Tower" to the land of the "Seres" (Silk People) whose rich and vast country was encircled by "great walls."[10]

Ammianus also knew of a maritime trade route that connected the eastern Mediterranean with India and the land of the Seres, and that brought goods to markets in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Osrhoenian Batnae, in particular).[11] For the long-distance trade system between East and West only reached its final and most complete state in antiquity after Rome's conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE. Rome's take-over of Egypt not only politically united the entire Mediterranean Basin, it also established the maritime route through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean as an economical alternative and thereby included it into the trade system of the "Silk Roads."[12] As a result, the trade routes linked the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific. Although sea-faring merchants from the Roman Empire first traded for Chinese goods in India,[13] some appear to have sailed as far as modern Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam.[14] Since the end of the first century BCE, exotic goods from India and China were being sold in Rome and in markets throughout the Roman world in fairly large

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[10]Amm. 23, 6, 60: *Praeter quorum radices et vicum, quem Lithinon Pyrgon appellant, iter longissimum patet, mercatoribus pervium, ad Seras subinde commeantibus.* ("Along the base of these [i.e. the mountains Ascanimia and Comedus] and through a village, which they call Lithinos Pyrgos [Stone Tower], a very long road extends, which is the route taken by traders who recurrently journey to the land of the Seres"). "Great walls": Amm. 23, 6, 64. Campbell, *Chinese Puzzle*, 374, takes this to be no more than a "poetic description of mountains."

[11] Amm. 14, 3, 3.

[12] Speidel, "Wars, Trade and Treaties."

[13] *PME* 64–5.

[14] Jos., *AJ* 8,6, 4ff. Ptol. 1,14. *Liang-Shu*, 54. *Wei-Shu*, 102. Ferguson, "China and Rome," 586. Hill, *Jade Gate*, 291ff.

quantities.[15] Unsurprisingly it thus seems China was firmly integrated into the Western concept of the inhabited world, the *oikumene*.[16]

It is surely no coincidence that by the time Western authors began to take notice of China and the Chinese, i.e. the first half of the first century BCE, silk had become a well-known and highly desirable luxury good at Rome and in the Hellenistic East.[17] The significance of the Chinese to the Greeks and Romans is immediately betrayed by the name they were given: "Seres", the "Silk People."[18] Apparently, the true name of the "Silk People" was as yet unknown to Western authors. Still, they unanimously located them in the easternmost parts of the inhabited world, occasionally by associating them with other (better-known) peoples from the distant East.[19] However, geographical knowledge of the Far East in the surviving works of Western geographers was mostly nebulous. Thus, for instance, Pomponius Mela wrote: "The Seres inhabit roughly the middle part of the East, with the Indians and Scythians on the extremities, both occupying broad swathes, and spreading, not only in this place, to the ocean."[20] It therefore remains impossible to establish beyond doubt whether the term "Seres" referred to the Chinese proper or to middlemen (e.g. from the Tarim Basin), to locate their capital city Sera, to define their exact relation to the term "Thina(e)"/"Sinai" of Ptolemy and the *Periplus*,[21] or even to establish whether all references in ancient Western literature to the Seres were to one and the same people.[22]

The Seres were portrayed as a people of inoffensive manners best known for the trade (*commercium*) they conducted, though they were accused of the barbarian habit of shunning intercourse with the rest of

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[15] Thus also Graf, "Silk Road."

[16] Cf. e.g. the survey of Western sources in Ferguson, "China and Rome," *passim*, to which one might add the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (*Sera Maior*: 11 B 5, for which see most recently Speidel, "Fernhandel"). McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 131–132.

[17] Ferguson, "China and Rome," 592. Strabo 11,11,1 quoting Apollodoros of Artemita is the earliest reference to the *Seres*. Cf. Poinsotte, "Réalités et mythes," 432f. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (23, 6, 67), silk had become available "even to the lowliest" by the fourth century CE.

[18] Ptol. 11,11. 15,1. There remains some uncertainty whether in some cases the term *Seres* refers to middlemen from the Tarim Basin.

[19] Cf. e.g. Strabo 11,11,1. Hor., *Carm*. 1, 12, 56. 3, 29, 227. 4, 15, 23. Pomp. Mela 1,11. *PME* 64–65. Ptol. 1, 11. Amm. 23, 6, 60. Hld. 9,16–18. *TP* 11 B 5 (Sera Maior).

[20] Mela 1, 11.

[21] *PME* 64–65. Ptol. 7, 3, 1. 7, 3, 6.

[22] The interpretative optimism of Dueck, *Geography*, 62, and the respective pessimism of Campbell, "Rome and China," mark the extremes in recent literature.

mankind, awaiting the approach of those who wished to traffic with them.[23] With some Western authors they also had a reputation for being excellent archers and charioteers, as well as for living long lives and for being particularly just.[24] In the early third century CE, Bardaisan, a philosopher and member of the royal court at Edessa in Northern Mesopotamia (and thus from one important branch of the "Silk Road"), praised the Chinese for having laws and legal courts that structured and regulated their daily lives (rather than astrological superstition).[25] Also in the third century, Celsus and Origen believed the Seres to have been atheists (a reference to Confucian scepticism?).[26] Ammianus Marcellinus, in the fourth century CE, described the Seres as peaceful, "for ever unacquainted with arms and warfare," and "troublesome to none of their neighbours."[27] Pliny, quoting from a source from Sri Lanka, claimed that they were tall, with golden hair and blue eyes.[28]

Evidently, much of the data collected by these (and other) Western authors was either meaningless or simply wrong. Equally uninformed statements and hazy reports about the West can also be found in the Chinese sources, as we shall see below. One school of thought therefore holds that little if any real information passed from one great ancient empire to the other.[29] The question therefore arises whether there is anything in our sources to suggest that real information occasionally flowed from one empire to the other, or whether our sources, just like in the days of Herodotus, continue to convey fanciful stories, differing from earlier ones only in occasionally sounding more "credible." In other words, must we accept that the surviving ancient literature reflects the extent of knowledge on ancient China that was available in the Roman Empire?

Perhaps not. For the loss of texts from the Roman world is unfathomable, particularly of those texts whose authors and readers issued from social levels below those of the imperial elites. The lost works no doubt included not only texts like the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, but also the entire and once abundant travelogue literature that provided much of

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[23] Mela 3,60. Plin., *NH* 6, 20, 54.

[24] Hor., *Carm*. 1, 29, 7ff. Prop. 4, 8, 23.

[25] "Book of the Laws of the Countries" 116ff. Cf. Euseb., *P.E.* 6, 10, 12f. Compare also Caesarius 2, 109.

[26] Origen., *c. Cels*. 7, 62–64.

[27] Amm. 23, 6, 67.

[28] Plin. *NH* 6, 24, 88. Cf. Sánchez Hernández, "Pausanias," 7.

[29] Cf. e.g. Scheidel, "Introduction," *Rome and China*, 3. Campbell, "Rome and China," 49. Fibiger Bang, "Commanding," 120. Loewe, "China's Early Empires," 83.

the underlying data.[30] It is very likely that at least some of these texts would have conveyed more informed views of the Far East, and that they contained more accurate geographical, topographical, political, economic, cultural and other information than can be found in the surviving writings of the ancient geographers. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* sheds light on the nature and quality that the data transmitted by this branch of literature could attain, and thereby gives an impression of the extent of the loss. For if this text, which is transmitted only by a single manuscript, had shared the fate of the rest of its genre, we would be deprived of most of our present knowledge concerning Rome's first century CE maritime trade with South Arabia, East Africa and India, and of nearly every detail this unique text records, for hardly any of the rich and superior data it contains can be found elsewhere. It therefore seems prudent not to draw rigid conclusions from the assumption that the surviving literature reflects nearly everything that was once known about ancient China and the Far East in the Roman world.

Envoys and Merchants

Ancient Chinese historiographical texts, it seems, only began to refer to the Roman Empire in the distant West in the first century CE.[31] The term they used was "Da Qin," Greater China, "apparently thinking of it as a kind of counter-China at the other end of the world," as the great sinologist Edwin Pulleyblank put it.[32] Remarkably, the earliest Chinese texts on Rome contain no transcriptions based on the names *Roma* or *Imperium Romanum*, which echoes the parallel absence of a transcribed name for China in the earliest Western sources.[33] At any rate, the existence of the other great empire was henceforth an integral part of the concept of the inhabited world both in imperial China ("Da Qin") and the Roman Empire ("Seres"). Moreover, there was now a considerable interest on both sides of the Eurasian continent in producing knowledgeable accounts about that distant other empire. The growing flow of trade along the various branches

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[30] See in particular De Romanis, "Periplus Maris Erythraei."

[31] See esp. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*. Pulleyblank, "Han China." Hill, *Jade Gate*.

[32] Pulleyblank, "Han China," 71–79, esp. 71. Cf. also Ying, "Ruler," 327. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 263–306, esp. 270. Yu, "Survey," 1–268, esp. 28–29. For other notions of the term "Da Qin" see the literature conveniently collected in Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 488, and below at n. 80ff.

[33] Pulleyblank, "Han China," 77. Contra: see the references in Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 488.

of the "Silk Road" entailed an increasing stream of information. Although envoys and merchants can be identified as the carriers of relevant information, it remains a matter of debate whether either ever established direct contact between Rome and China.[34] Diplomatic contacts between the major powers along the "Silk Road" trade system are well attested and include both Chinese and Roman contacts with representatives of various intermediate countries.[35] Soon after the Roman conquest of Egypt, and no doubt as a direct consequence of the new conditions at the western end of the long-distance trade routes, Western sources report a surge of diplomatic missions from far-away eastern countries, some located in India and Central Asia, to Rome's new sole ruler, Augustus. It is said that they came to conclude agreements of "friendship" (*amicitia*) with him and the Roman people.[36] Unfortunately, none of these agreements between imperial Rome and distant eastern rulers has survived, but most of them were no doubt concluded in (written) Greek, as that language served as the lingua franca for merchants and diplomats throughout the Red Sea Basin, Parthia, Central Asia and as far as India.[37] Yet whatever the exact contents of such agreements may have been, the appearance of so many foreign envoys at the court of Augustus in the aftermath of his accession to sole rule over the Roman world is one of many revealing examples of the efficient long-distance transportation of news by merchants to their respective political centres at home.[38] Such information could then obviously be transferred onto written documents, further developed or condensed, stored and retrieved to serve as bases for conclusions and political, fiscal or military decisions. The same is evidently true for the information that was officially and secretly collected and transported by official envoys.[39] We even know of entire missions that imperial Rome

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[34] Cf. recent discussions e.g. by Graf, "Chinese Perspective," 200. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 150–162. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 304–310. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 111–140. Graf, "Silk Road." Schulz, *Entdeckungsfahrten*, 387ff.

[35] Cf. e.g. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 139–162. Ziethen, "Legationes Externae." Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 263–266. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 111–140. Arbach and Schiettecatte, "diplomatie," 388–390. Graf, "Silk Road."

[36] Speidel "Fernhandel." Cf. Speidel, "Almaqah," 246f., and Speidel, "Wars, Trade and Treaties," 111ff.

[37] Strabo 15,1,73. Cf. Strabo 15,1,4. Dio 54,9,8. Cf. Speidel, "Wars, Trade and Treaties," 112–119. On Roman long-distance trade with the Far East see esp. Raschke, "New Studies." Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*. Graf, "Silk Road."

[38] On the subject in general see Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 162–165. 175–177. Austin and Rankov, *Exploratio*, esp. 26–28, 87–88, 94, 100, 210.

[39] Cf. e.g. Hdt. 3, 17. Plut., *Alex.* 5, 1. See Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 166–170. Austin and Rankov, *Exploratio*, 120–123.

occasionally set up and sent out to collect information on distant foreign countries.[40]

The record of foreign envoys to Augustus includes a group of Chinese. This mission is known through a single Roman author, Florus (from the early second century CE), who notes the arrival at the court of Augustus of envoys of the Seres.[41] Florus' account mingles the Chinese envoys with Indians "who live immediately beneath the sun. Though they brought elephants amongst their gifts as well as precious stones and pearls, they regarded their long journey, which took them four years, as their greatest tribute. And indeed their complexion proved that they came from beneath another sky." Florus is not quite clear on whether the Chinese, of whom he has nothing else to say, arrived together with the Indians, and how they communicated with the Romans. Yet Florus' testimony is generally rejected, for not even the chapter on foreign embassies in Augustus' *res gestae* mentions envoys from the Seres. We would indeed expect Augustus to have done so, for Roman rulers never hesitated to interpret, accept and promulgate any such visits as signs of submission.[42] The next Chinese effort on record to establish direct contact with imperial Rome occurred roughly one century later. According to a Chinese account, in 97 CE the General Ban Chao sent his chief ambassador Gan Ying on a mission to establish contact with Da Qin. The general context appears to have been a military one, but the mission failed because the Parthians thwarted it, allegedly because they feared losing control of the overland silk trade.[43] At any rate, although Gan Ying never actually reached the *Imperium Romanum*, he is said to have made it to the shores of the Persian Gulf in 97 CE, where he surely collected as much information on Da Qin as he could.[44]

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[40] Sen., *Q. nat*. 6, 8, 3.Plin., *NH* 6,35,181. 184–186. 12, 8, 19. Dio 63, 8, 1. Cf. e.g. Austin and Rankov, *Exploratio*, 114–118. Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 170–182.

[41] Florus 2, 34.

[42] Cf. e.g. Ferguson, "China and Rome," 592–593 ("an enterprising merchant or a piece of wishful thinking from an adulatory historian"). Poinsotte, "Réalités et mythes," 435 ("sans doute confondus avec les Bactriens"). Ziethen, "Legationes Externae,"189–192 ("Betonung der herausragenden Bedeutung des römischen Kaisers").

[43] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 10 and 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23 and 27). Feng, *Early China*, 281. See also below at n. 58.

[44] On Gan Ying's mission and his much debated itinerary see *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 10: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23) and Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. II, 16–20. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 141–148. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 299–300. Yu, "Survey," 5 and 10–17.

Several direct Roman contacts with the Chinese are also on record. The geographer Marinus of Tyre, for instance, referred to a first century CE account by an otherwise unknown merchant from Roman Macedonia named both Maës and Titianus, who had used information provided by his agents and freedmen to note travel times and distances along the route that led from a commercial station in the Pamirs (the "Stone Tower") to "Sera," the capital the Seres. Unfortunately, both Maës' record and Marinus' account of it are lost. Both are only known to have existed because the Alexandrian geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus mentions them in a short paragraph in his *Geography*, in which he quotes Maës as his source for the claim (which he and Marinus disbelieved) that it was a seven-month journey from the "Stone Tower" to "Sera," the capital city of the Seres.[45] It was precisely this route passing the "Stone Tower" to the land of the Seres that Ammianus Marcellinus later qualified as *iter longissimum* and of which he reports that it was "frequently" or "periodically" used by merchants in the fourth century CE.[46]

According to ancient Chinese texts, the earliest Roman "embassy" to visit China only arrived in 166 CE, and came from the South (thus via the Red Sea and Indian Ocean maritime route).[47] The Chinese recorded the arrival of "envoys" of the Roman emperor Āndūn (i.e. Marcus Aurelius, or, perhaps, Antoninus Pius) at the Chinese court with offers of rhinoceros horn, ivory and turtle shell. The Chinese naturally took these gifts for tribute, but having expected jewels and exotica from the king of Da Qin, they were not impressed and began to suspect that the wondrous accounts they had heard of the Roman Empire were altogether exaggerated.[48] For in the ancient world, the local value of imported goods directly reflected on the reputation of their country of origin as well as on the significance of

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[45] Ptol. 1,11. Cf. also Ptol. 1.12.1–10. For a full discussion see now Heil and Schulz, "Maes Titianus." Whether the journey was noted in Chinese historical accounts remains a matter of speculation: Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 149. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 126–128. The place named "Stone Tower" is mostly identified with Taškurgan or Darautkurgan: Poinsotte, "Réalités et mythes," 445 n. 54 and Paul, "Maès Titianos," 955, with further bibliography. "Sera metropolis" remains to be identified.

[46] Cf. above n. 10. According to Campbell, "Chinese Puzzle," 372, Ammianus, in this passage, was simply displaying knowledge he had extracted from Ptolemy.

[47] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27). See e.g. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 133ff. Schulz, *Entdeckungsfahrten*, 389f.

[48] Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 223. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27 and cf. 307–308.

their rulers.[49] Éduard Chavannes, in 1907, therefore argued that the Roman "envoys" were in fact Roman merchants.[50] If the episode is based on a real encounter, Chavannes' clearly is the most attractive solution, although the question of how the two parties communicated remains unsolved.[51] It is difficult to imagine from which other professional group official "envoys" of the Roman emperor to the distant ruler of the Seres might have stemmed. At any rate, we should probably assume that Roman "envoys" usually were free-born Roman citizens, but the story of the Roman knight who travelled 600 miles through Germania to the shores of the Baltic Sea to buy amber during the reign of Nero (54–68 CE) shows that not all long-distance merchants were necessarily of modest social status. Moreover, Roman authorities are also known to have entrusted foreign merchants with the delivery of messages to far-away addressees.[52] However, there is no record of the embassy of 166 CE in Western sources, and not all scholars believe in its historicity.[53]

The Chinese recorded the contact of 166 CE as "the very first time there was [direct] communication" (i.e. between the two empires). That seems to imply that several more such visits followed, but only two further direct contacts are on record for the third century, both known only from Chinese sources and both concerning Roman visitors to China. Thus, a Chinese account from the sixth century using material from much earlier periods (*Liang-Shu*, 54), reports the visit in 226 CE of a Roman merchant to the court of the king of Wu (the later emperor of Wu), Sun Quan, at Nanking. Allegedly this merchant (named Qin Lun in the Chinese texts), who seems to have arrived via the sea route, left a now-lost detailed account of the Roman Empire with the Sun Quan.[54] Again, nothing is said

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[49] For a Roman assessment see Tac., *Ann.* 2,60. For Sri Lanka: Plin., *NH* 6, 24, 85 and Cosmas 11, 338. For China: *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27).

[50] Chavannes, *"Heou Han Chou,"* 185 n. 1, followed by Wheeler, *Imperial Frontiers*, 174. Cf. also more recently Loewe, "China's Early Empires," 83. Fibiger Bang, "Commanding," 120.

[51] *Pace* e.g. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 308. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 133–135. Feng, *Early China*, 281–282.

[52] Roman knight: Plin., *NH* 37, 11, 45. Foreign merchants: Tac., *Ann.* 14, 25. Hillers and Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*, 2754.

[53] E.g. Campbell, "Chinese Puzzle," 373 n. 21: "commentators naively assume the former [scil. the name An-Tun] to be the phonetic equivalent of [Marcus] Antoninus." Campbell, "Rome and China," 49: "Marcus Antoninus … bears only a superficial similarity to 'An-tun'."

[54] Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 100–101 and 158–159. Cf. Hirth, *China*, 46–48. McLaughlin, *Trade Routes*, 136f. This account does not appear to have

about how communication was established, and how language or translation possibly affected the recorded information. In 284/85 CE, another Roman "embassy" bringing "tribute" (apparently including asbestos) is recorded in other Chinese sources to have arrived in China (probably via the sea route).[55] No further details appear to be known. Thus, the extant sources, with the exception of Ammianus Marcellinus, do not imply much direct interaction between the two great empires at the opposite ends of the Eurasian continent during the first three centuries CE. In fact, the account which records the visit of 226 CE (*Liang-Shu*, 54) explicitly states that Roman merchants often visited Fu-nan (Cambodia), Jih-nan (Annam) and Chiao-chih (Tongking) but rarely travelled to China. This goes well with the statement of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*PME* 64) that "rarely do people come from it [i.e. 'Thina'/China], and only few." It is thus generally held that merchants did not travel the entire route from east to west or vice versa, but that long-distance trade was organized in stages and involved several intermediaries.[56]

Yet, perhaps one should not *a priori* exclude the possibility that some individuals indeed travelled the entire distance, or very substantial parts of it.[57] For the story of Maës, as well as Ammianus Marcellinus' reference to the long road leading to the "Silk People" and the *Liang-Shu*'s claim that Roman merchants sailed as far as modern Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam but only rarely to China, all appear to imply the existence of a small group of individuals that occasionally did travel very long distances between the two imperial realms. More importantly, however, there apparently was a will and ample opportunity to meet somewhere *en route* between the empires. Thus, Ban Chao's mission is explicitly on record for having attempted to establish direct contact with Da Qin. Even though his envoy Gan Ying never actually reached the *Imperium Romanum*, he is said to have made it to the shores of the Persian Gulf in 97 CE, where he must have had the opportunity to collect much information on Da Qin. Yet, instead of finding out about viable routes to the frontiers of the Roman Empire, Gan Ying let himself be discouraged by stories of a horrendous and potentially deadly sea passage, which he was told by "sailors of the

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been the source of the information given in the *Weilüe* (for which see below), as that text is exclusively concerned with the land route.

[55] Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 159–160.

[56] See e.g. Ying "Ruler." Ruffing, "Seidenhandel." Sanchez Hernandez, "Pausanias," 8–9. Graf, "Silk Road."

[57] Thus also Ruffing, "Seidenhandel," 73.

western frontier of Parthia," and turned home.[58] But Gan Ying was not the only Chinese to reach Parthia during the Han Dynasty.

Parthia had diplomatic and commercial contact with both the Roman and the Chinese empires.[59] It is not unlikely, therefore, that despite Chinese claims of Parthian attempts to thwart direct contact, Parthia offered opportunities for individuals from both ends of the Eurasian continent to meet, as there is no evidence to suggest a total and permanent blockade of the land route through Parthia for Roman merchants.[60] The Oasis of Merv (Antiochia/Alexandria in Margiana), in particular, may have been a place where merchants from both empires met recurrently.[61] More such opportunities for repeated direct contact may also have occurred at other intermediate market-places in India, Central and Southeast Asia, or South Arabia.[62] If true, that is of considerable significance, for within pre-industrial societies market-places played a crucial and notorious role in the circulation and dissemination of information.[63] No doubt, information thus collected and brought back to the Roman and Chinese empires by merchants and envoys, could eventually find its way into documents that were at the disposal of imperial decision-makers. The Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy, for one, quoting from Marinus' account of the journey of Titianus' agents to Central Asia, explicitly acknowledged that "all this became known through an opportunity provided by commerce."[64] Moreover, Étienne de la

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[58] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 10: cf. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23). Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 46.
[59] For embassies to and from China see *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 10: cf. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23) Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 46 and 139–143.
[60] Thwart contact: *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: cf. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27) and Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 51. *Weilüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe* sect. 11, and Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 70. Cf. also Hirth, *China*, 42. Blockade: Isidor of Charax's *Mansiones Parthicae*, Ptolemy's account of the journey Maës Titianus' agents undertook (1,11), and the *Tabula Peutingeriana* suggest that the passage was possible (at least at times). Graf, "Silk Road." *Contra*: Walter, *Entstehung früher Fremdbilder*, 113. Overall, however, the evidence implies that merchants from the Roman Empire preferred the sea route, due perhaps to unfavourable conditions for Roman merchants in Parthia.
[61] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: cf. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23 and 248–249). Plin., *NH* 6, 18, 46–47. Isid. Char. 14. Cf. Graf, "Silk Road." Coloru, Traina and Lycas, "Parthians," 49–58.
[62] Cf. Lewis, *Qin and Han*, 143. Fauconnier, "Graeco-Roman Merchants." Feng, *Early China*, 279.
[63] Cf. Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 175–177. Austin and Rankov, *Exploratio*, 27, 209–210.
[64] Ptol. 1, 11.

Vaissière has recently convincingly argued that Ptolemy's description of the Tarim Basin in his *Geography* is based on three different trading itineraries, which he used as sources for his depiction of Central Asia, and especially of Xinjiang.[65] All this highlights the extent to which the nature and the limitations of the surviving Western evidence are owed to written material produced by long-distance traders.

Chinese Data

Sadly, all official records from the Roman world that may have contained information on foreign peoples and countries have disintegrated. It is therefore particularly fortunate that some ancient records with "official" information on the other have survived in China.[66] These documents offer a unique opportunity to study the transmission of information from Rome to China. Ever since Friedrich Hirth, in 1885, published his monograph *China and the Roman Orient* with a selection of ancient Chinese texts containing information on the Roman and Byzantine empires (including translations and an extended commentary), these records have attracted scholarly attention, though until recently primarily among Sinologists.[67] The recorded Chinese interest in the Roman Empire was on the whole not unlike Roman interest in China. For the Eastern texts provide information on the routes to and the communication with Da Qin and other "Western Regions," on its geography, its capital, its administration and infrastructure, on dependent kingdoms, on its agriculture and stockbreeding, on textiles, perfumes and herbs, and on other natural resources, as well as on the population and their appearance and daily life. Clearly, therefore, the data transmitted by these texts needs to be checked against what is known about the Roman imperial world from Western sources, if we want to establish the value of the information on Da Qin that was recorded in ancient Chinese accounts.

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[65] De la Vaissière, "Ptolemy's Xinjiang."

[66] Translations are conveniently at hand e.g. in Hirth, *China*. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*. Hill, *Weilüe* and Hill, *Jade Gate*. The present authors have worked entirely from translations of the Chinese texts. We feel justified in this only because the observations we present in this contribution are based primarily on the gist of passages of which the available translations all appear to be in agreement. Quotations are from the translations of John Hill.

[67] Hirth, *China*. For bibliography see Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 3–6. Hill, *Jade Gate, passim*. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 266–269. Yu, "Survey," 43–127. See also Kordosis, *China and Greek World*, with Naerebout, "Review," *China and Greek World*, and Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*. For important remarks by an historian of the Roman Empire see Graf, "Silk Road."

Two texts in particular need to be mentioned, the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe*. Recent scholarship describes them as follows.[68] The *Hou Hanshu* is the official history of the Later (or "Eastern") Han Dynasty (25–221 CE). It was compiled mainly by a man named Fan Ye in the first half of the fifth century CE from earlier works. It contains sections on the "Western Regions" which are primarily based on a report by Ban Yong (the son of Ban Chao) to the emperor An in c. 125 CE and replaced earlier accounts.[69] This report included descriptions of the Roman Empire that stemmed from information Ban Chao's envoy Gan Ying had collected during his mission to Da Qin in 97 CE. The other early historiographical text containing important information on Da Qin, the *Weilüe*, is a chapter on "Peoples of the West" from a now-lost "Brief Account of the Wei Dynasty," compiled at an unknown date in the third century CE by Yu Huan.[70] The chapter has survived as an extensive quotation in a work of the fifth century. It both repeats earlier information on Da Qin (including much that can be found in the *Hou Hanshu*) and also supplies valuable new material, which seems to date mainly to the second and early third century CE.[71]

In short, these texts are, at least in part, of truly official nature and stem from a period that is contemporary with the existence of the *Imperium Romanum*. Nevertheless, various problems are connected with the Chinese historical accounts and their interpretation, and there is no consensus on how much real information on the Roman Empire they actually contain.[72] The compilation of these texts in ancient China was a bureaucratic procedure that involved much copying of earlier accounts and relied on records and archives.[73] Thus, the precise origins and date of the underlying original pieces of information often remains unknown. At any rate, the specific nature of these texts apparently reflects what was officially held to

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[68] For what follows see Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, xvi–xxiii, with Mansvelt Beck, *Treatises of Later Han*, 1, and Bielenstein, *Restoration Han Dynasty*, 16–17.

[69] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 1: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 13 and cf. p. 161–163).

[70] See Chavannes, "Wei lio," 519–571. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 65–78. Hill, *Weilüe*. "About the Text" and "About the Dating and the Background of the Text." Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 268–269.

[71] For other (later) ancient Chinese accounts relevant to the ancient Mediterranean world see Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 3, 33, 57, 80. Cf. also Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 268–269.

[72] See for instance the opposing views of Kordosis, *China and Greek World*, and Naerebout, "Review," *China and Greek World*, or Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*.

[73] Cf. e.g. Loewe, "Introduction," *Cambridge History of China*, 2–6. Loewe, "Early Empires," 75–77. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 19–31. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 269, all with further bibliography.

be true at the time of their redaction (which, of course, does not exclude the possibility that other knowledge of the West existed simultaneously). It is interesting, therefore, that the *Hou Hanshu* characterized the Romans as "honest in business: they do not have two prices," for this appears to betray Chinese interest in the people of Da Qin as being primarily commercially motivated.[74] The *Liang-Shu* (54) even characterized the inhabitants of Da Qin as a trading people.[75] Long-distance trade is indeed a very prominent and recurring topic in the Chinese historical accounts of the Far West. In particular, long lists of desirable goods are characteristic of the description of Da Qin in the *Hou Hanshu* and even more so in the *Weilüe*, as similar lists do not appear to recur with the description of other Western countries in these texts.[76] Thus they are clear evidence for the very pronounced commercial interest of the Chinese in Da Qin. Moreover, these texts characterize both Roman and Chinese long-distance trade (to which they apparently refer as "communication" between countries) as an essentially "national" affair, in which diplomacy opens trade routes and markets.[77] This is perhaps not simply to be taken as a specifically Chinese representation of transnational trade, for Roman sources also imply that diplomacy and international agreements were involved in facilitating long-distance trade.[78]

The *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* describe Da Qin as a large (and, by implication, powerful) state with many dependencies.[79] They praise its inhabitants as "tall and honest,"[80] but they have nothing at all to say about its armed forces or their battlefield successes. There are no descriptions of Rome's army, military capacity or martialness.[81] Given the general Chinese interest in military matters this is perhaps surprising, as China

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[74] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27). Ying, "Ruler," 339.

[75] Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 100.

[76] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 25. *Weilüe* 12: Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 12.

[77] E.g. *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27): "The king of this country [scil. Rome] always wanted to send envoys to Han [scil. China], but Anxi [scil. Parthia] wishing to control the trade with multi-coloured Chinese silks, blocked the route to prevent [the Romans] getting through [to China]." *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 15: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 31): "This region [scil. Northwest India] … communicates with Da Qin." *Weilüe* 12: Hill, *Weilüe*, section 12: "That is why this country [scil. Rome] trades with Anxi [scil. Parthia]."

[78] Speidel, "Wars, Trade and Treaties," and Speidel, "Fernhandel."

[79] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23). *Weilüe* 11 and 14: Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 11 and 14.

[80] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 25).

[81] Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 260.

was in occasional direct contact with the Parthians, who were at war with the Romans on several occasions. Perhaps Parthian informants were unwilling to provide the Chinese with such information. At any rate, the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* portray the Romans as a peaceful and just people, not unlike descriptions of the Chinese in some ancient Western texts. Despite Chinese attempts at collecting accurate and real information on the Romans and their empire, even the term "Da Qin" is at the root of a number of interpretative problems. For Chinese conceptions of Da Qin were "confused from the outset with ancient mythological notions" of a utopian empire in the Far West.[82] Such notions were at the very origins of the term "Da Qin," for it literally meant "Greater China" and was not a transcription of a foreign name for the Roman Empire.[83] Moreover, the existence of a "Greater China" at the opposite end of the world conflicted with the ancient Chinese conception of the real world, which held that China (the "Middle Kingdom") was its cultural centre. According to this conception, the farther away a foreign people lived from the centre, the more "barbarian" they were believed to be.[84] But of course it was unthinkable that the people of "Greater China" should have been the most uncivilized people on earth. Therefore they were portrayed as resembling "the people of the Middle Kingdom, and that is why this kingdom is called Da Qin."[85] The Romans were described as "tall and virtuous like the Chinese, but they wear Western clothes." An explanation was also provided: "They [i.e. the Romans] say they originally came from China, but left it."[86] It is evident therefore that such utopian and fanciful notions of Da Qin originated in China and need to be identified if we want to investigate the extent of real information that reached China from the West.

Another particularly complex issue, which also affects our understanding of the term "Da Qin," concerns the notorious difficulties in identifying

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[82] Laufer, "The Name China." Graf, "Chinese Perspective," 199–216, esp. 199–200. Pulleyblank, "Han China," 78. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 264. Yu, "Survey," 69–70. Walter, *Entstehung früher Fremdbilder*, 116–117.

[83] Thus Pulleyblank, "Han China," 71 and 77. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 266–271. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 269–271. Yu, "Survey," 1–43. Cf. also Naerebout, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 376, and Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 488.

[84] Cf. e.g. Creel, *Sinism*. Wang, "History, Space, Ethnicity," 285–305.

[85] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23).

[86] *Weilüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 11. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 70. Cf. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 267.

topographical and geographical features in the ancient Chinese accounts.[87] The main difficulty is that the transcription of foreign place names from Chinese characters and the reconstruction of their phonological values in the Han period requires a highly specialized knowledge of Chinese historical phonology and, apparently, nevertheless often produces highly controversial results. Moreover, it is not usually taken into account that many places in the Roman East, in particular, had more than one name (depending mainly on time and language: e.g. Yerushalaim, Hierosolyma, colonia Aelia Capitolina and Iliya, to mention just a few ancient names for Jerusalem), and that the Chinese authors may have transcribed pronunciations of place names that (multiple) transmission by non-Greek and non-Latin speakers had significantly distorted. The matter is clearly important if we want to understand and make use of these texts. The introduction to the chapter on the Roman Empire in the *Hou Hanshu* might serve as an illustration: "The Kingdom of Da Qin is also called Lijian. As it is found to the west of the sea, it is also called the Kingdom of Haixi [='West of the Sea']."[88] Nearly the same statement was also included in the *Weilüe*.[89] It is perhaps not entirely surprising that the legendary empire of "Greater China," as a real state, also had other, less mythical names, which derived from existing political or geographical entities. However, there is no consensus as to which countries or regions Lijian and Haixi referred to, and it therefore even remains unclear what parts the term "Da Qin" exactly denoted. Thus, the equation of Da Qin, Lijian and Haixi, as well as other attempts to identify place names in the sections of the ancient Chinese records on Da Qin, has led to a confusing and still-ongoing debate, in which, however, the number of options under discussion does not appear to have changed much since those established by Friedrich Hirth and his immediate successors. Essentially, the proposed solutions for the meaning of "Da Qin" as an existing polity are the Roman Empire, the eastern regions of the Empire (as already suggested by Friedrich Hirth), particularly Syria and

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[87] On the matter in general see esp. Pulleyblank, "Han China." Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, xx–xxiii. Cf. also Kordosis, *China and Greek World*, 171. Naerebout, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 375–376, and Gizewski and Kolb, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 487–489.

[88] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23).

[89] *WeiLüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe*, section 11: "The kingdom of Da Qin is also called Lijian. It is west of Anxi [Parthia] and Tiaozhi, and West of the Great Sea." Cf. also Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 67.

Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, or different things depending on the context of the narrative.[90]

So much confusion and so many contradictory interpretations by specialists of the relevant fields of Sinology might discourage scholars of the ancient Mediterranean world to make use of the ancient Chinese accounts of the Far West.[91] Yet there is, perhaps, an approach that leads to more reliable results.[92] For the context implies that whatever the terms "Lijian" and "Haixi" may have referred to, they were not fully synonymous with "Da Qin" but rather designated parts or aspects of it. This is, for instance, suggested by statements, recorded in the *Hou Hanshu*, maintaining that one comes "into Haixi to reach Da Qin" or that "in these territories [of Da Qin], there are many precious and marvellous things from Haixi."[93] Another passage from a different chapter of the *Hou Hanshu* mentions a group of musicians and magicians in 121 CE who claimed that they were from Haixi, which the Chinese who recorded it identified as Da Qin.[94] Interestingly, the term "Lijian" does not recur in the sections on Da Qin of the *Hou Hanshu* or the *Weilüe*. Haixi is the only concrete geographical aspect of Da Qin these texts single out. John E. Hill recently convincingly argued that "Haixi," as a part of "Da Qin," refers to Egypt, principally because it complies with the geographical location ("West of the Sea"), with the distances (from Parthia in particular) and with the country's most prominent topographical feature given by the ancient Chinese accounts (a river that flows into another great sea), and also because it apparently provides a reasonable phonetic representation of the country's Greek name Aigyptos.[95]

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[90] Laufer, "The Name China." Weller, "Mahacina." Kordosis, *China and Greek World*, 160. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, xxi–xxvi and 232. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 266–271. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 269–271. Yu, "Survey," 1–42.

[91] See e.g. Naerebout, "Review," *China and Greek World*, 376. Fibiger Bang, "Commanding," 120.

[92] For the following cf. also Kolb and Speidel, "Perceptions from Beyond," 137ff.

[93] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 27). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 52. *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 10: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 47.

[94] Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 42. Pulleyblank, "Han China," 75. Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 306. Cf. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 270. Yu, "Survey," 22.

[95] Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 263–266. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 276–282, at length argues for the less convincing identity of Haixi with the cities of Rome or Syrian Antioch, but concludes (282) that "it is more likely that the Chinese did not have enough information about the exact extension and the political system of the Roman Empire," and that "Da Qin referred to different things depending on the context."

A closer look at the passages of the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* describing the government of Da Qin/Lijian/Haixi suggests that they are not dealing with the Roman Empire at large. For the *Hou Hanshu* records: "Their kings are not permanent. They select and appoint the most worthy man. If there are unexpected calamities in the kingdom, such as frequent extraordinary winds or rains, he is unceremoniously rejected and replaced. The one who has been dismissed quietly accepts his demotion, and is not angry."[96] The equivalent passage in the *Weilüe* reads: "The ruler of this country (the reference appears to be to Haixi) is not permanent. When disasters result from unusual phenomena, they unceremoniously replace him, installing a virtuous man as king, and release the old king, who does not dare show resentment."[97] This statement is alternatively thought to refer to the second century CE imperial practice of appointing a successor to the throne by adoption (the *Adoptivkaisertum*), to the Republican system of elected consuls or the Roman provincial governments of the fourth to seventh centuries CE in the East, or to be nothing more than a fanciful story of an ideal country far away.[98] However, other parts of the same passage suggest a different solution. In these, the king is said to have regularly left his palace to hear cases, and, according to the *Hou Hanshu*: "a porter with a bag has the job of always following the royal carriage. When somebody wants to discuss something with the king, he throws a note into the bag. When the king returns to the palace, he opens the bag, examines the contents, and judges if the plaintiff is right or wrong."[99] The parallel passage in the *Weilüe* reads: "When the king goes out, he always orders a man to follow him holding a leather bag. Anyone who has something to say throws his or her petition into the bag. When he [i.e. the king] returns to the palace, he examines them and determines which are reasonable."[100] The same passages in both texts also contain references to governmental archives and to a group of counsellors.

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[96] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 25). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 49.

[97] *Weilüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe*, section 11. Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 70. The same statement is also contained in the *Hou Hanchi* and the *Chinshu*. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 61 and 81.

[98] Ferguson, "China and Rome," 593. Kordosis, *China and Greek World*, 160ff. Gizewski and Kolb, "Review" *China and Greek world*, 487. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 49 n. 62 with further bibliography. Hill, *Weilüe*, notes 11.18. Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 276–282. Yu, "Survey," 619.

[99] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 25). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 48.

[100] *WieLüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 11. Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 71. The same statement is again also contained in the *Hou Hanchi*, an abbreviated

It is very tempting to understand these comments not as fantasies of imperial rule but as fact-based references to Roman provincial government. For it is not difficult to recognize a detailed description of central aspects of a provincial governor's duties: the round trip through his province hearing cases, the well-known system of collecting petitions, preparing responses and making use of archives, as well as discussing matters of state with his *consilium*. Consequently, the former quote concerning the replacement of kings may perhaps not refer to true kings either. Rather, by conveying the notion that the country had no permanent ruler but a system (which the Chinese who recorded it did not entirely understand) by which "worthy" and "virtuous" men were selected to replace their predecessors, these ancient Chinese texts again seem to refer to Roman provincial government. That, in any event, goes well with John Hill's proposal that "Haixi" of the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* referred to Egypt. One might object that the Chinese accounts explicitly refer to a "king," not to governors, and therefore seem to be concerned with the Empire at large and with its capital, Rome. However, reports of the powers and splendours of Roman provincial governors, not least those of the *praefectus Aegypti* who resided in the palace of the former Ptolemaic kings and ruled the country in their stead (*loco regum*), might well have led commentators from the Far East to mistake such governors for local kings. Moreover, the *Hou Hanshou* and the *Weilüe* claim that Da Qin (not "Haixi") had established several tens of minor "dependent kingdoms," which might be understood as a reference either to the Roman Empire's provinces or to Rome's eastern allies.[101]

If correct, these observations reveal some important insights into the transmission of information from the Mediterranean world to the Chinese Far East. Above all, they imply that some real and detailed information concerning the Roman Empire indeed reached China during the first two centuries CE. However, it appears that Chinese knowledge of the Roman Empire (Da Qin) was both partially defective and largely restricted to information on the provinces, Egypt in particular. That in turn implies that

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version is to be found in the *Chinshu*. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 60 and 81.

[101] Splendors: Tac., *Hist*. 1, 11, 1. Strabo 17, 1, 12. For a recent discussion and further bibliography cf. e.g. Jördens, *Praefectus Aegypti*, 11–15. Pont, "Rituels civiques," 185–211. Dependent kingdoms: *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 23). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 47. *Weilüe* 15ff. Cf. sect. 11 and 14 (the reference here is to dependent kings): Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 15ff., and Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 71 and 76–78. For Rome's eastern allies and their role in long-distance trade see Speidel, "Fernhandel."

the bulk of the information on the Roman Empire that was recorded in ancient China originated from the eastern Roman provinces, Egypt in particular. This goes well with the sea route that most Roman "envoys" of the Chinese sources are reported or assumed to have taken. Finally, the fact that the Chinese did not fully understand the governmental system which they recorded can be taken to indicate that they had no further advice at hand from anyone with first-hand knowledge of Roman provincial administration, which again suggests that only few individuals travelled the entire distance between the two empires.

Merchants were well known and major sources of information in the ancient world.[102] The news and data they offered from far-away countries was often first hand, and in any event more recent than what could be found in geographical treatises.[103] Geographers from the Roman world such as Strabo, Pausanias and Ptolemy acknowledged their debt to merchants for information.[104] Although traders were sometimes criticized as unreliable sources, they even occasionally provided strategic intelligence.[105] Some of this information was surely passed on orally (particularly among fellow merchants) but much of it was also recorded in now-lost documents.[106] As mentioned above, such documents also provided most of the underlying data on the Far East contained in the writings of ancient Western geographers and texts such as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.[107] It is remarkable, therefore, that the Chinese *Hou Hanshu* and *Weilüe* contain paragraphs with contents and structures that resemble those of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, but apparently are without comparable counterparts in the sections that treat other countries.[108] Perhaps, therefore, these seemingly unique formal features in the sections on Da Qin are traces of the transmission of information by Roman merchants.

Be that as it may, as noted above, information on Rome rarely came to China directly. This is also reflected by the fact that some of the

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[102] Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 161–163. Austin and Rankov, *Exploratio*, 25–27.

[103] Cf. e.g. Plin., *NH* 6, 31, 140. Paus. 3, 12, 4, 9, 21,4–5.

[104] Strabo 2, 5, 12. Plin., *NH* 6, 31, 140. Paus. 1, 42, 5. Ptol. 1, 17, 3–4.

[105] Unreliable: Strabo 15, 1, 3–4. Plin., *NH* 12, 42, 85. Ptol. 1, 11, 4 and 7–8. Eunap. fr. 66, 2 / 13–14. Strategic intelligence: Xen., *Hell*. 3, 4, 1. Plin., *NH* 6, 24, 88. Tac., *Agr*. 24. Cf. also Plut., *Nik*. 30. Cf. Sánchez Hernández, "Pausanias," 7.

[106] For the loss of this literature in the West see above.

[107] De la Vaissière "Ptolemy's Xinjiang." De Romanis, "Periplus Maris Erythraei."

[108] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 25–27: "Products of Da Qin"). *Weilüe* 12 and 14–20: "Products of Da Qin" and "Dependencies of Da Qin." Hill, *Weilüe*, sections 12 and 14–20.

information included in the sections of the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* on Da Qin seems to have had Chinese rather than Roman origins. At least in one instance it appears that cultural and administrative realities of the ancient Chinese Empire contaminated the information from the Roman Empire. Thus, knowledge of local Chinese institutions appears to have affected the short descriptions of the Roman imperial system of transport and communication. Both the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* refer in surprising detail to the rest stops of this system, to the distances between them and to their appearance: "At intervals they have established postal relays, which are all plastered and whitewashed … Each ten *li* [4.2 km] there is a postal stage, and each thirty *li* [12.5 km] a postal station."[109] The purpose of this Roman institution was also recorded by the Chinese: "Relay stations were established in strategic positions allowing orders to travel quickly between the main postal stations at all seasons."[110] These statements have been understood to refer to the *vehiculatio* or *cursus publicus* of the Roman Empire, as it was indeed among the purposes of this Roman institution to transmit official communications quickly, and as the description of its infrastructure in the Chinese accounts appears to be accurate enough.[111]

However, distances of 10 *li* (4.2 km) between postal stages and thirty *li* (12.5 km) between the larger postal stations are not confirmed by Roman sources. Although Roman itineraries do list small and large stopping places, they are recorded at intervals of 6–12 miles (c. 9–18 km) and 25 miles (37 km), which correspond to around half a day's and a whole day's journey by foot respectively. That amounts to two or three times the distance indicated by the Chinese sources.[112] In particular, the very short distances of 4.2 km were not in use in the Roman Empire. Perhaps there was confusion between postal stations and local inns, which probably lay at rather close intervals in the vicinity of cities. Yet, another perhaps more plausible solution might be that the Chinese authors' knowledge of their own postal system contaminated the account of Da Qin, for these texts insist that the Roman and Chinese postal systems were practically

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[109] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 11 and 12: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 26 and 27). Cf. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 47 and 52. For the respective passage in the *Weilüe* (sect. 11) see Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 11, and Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 70. Cf. also Hoppál, "Chinese Sources," 282.

[110] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 28: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 55).

[111] On the subject in general see Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer*.

[112] Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer*, 212–213.

identical: "They have … postal stations just as we have them in China."[113]
It is particularly suggestive, therefore, that Chinese sources from the Qin
Empire mention short distances of 2.6 miles between the postal stops,
which precisely equal the distance of 10 *li* (4.2 km) as recorded in the *Hou
Hanshu* and the *Weilüe*.[114] The perceived identity of these important
institutions both in China and in "Greater China" (Da Qin/Rome) may
therefore have encouraged the Chinese authors and compilers, who could
neither find the correct information in the available documents on Da Qin
nor ask anyone who knew, to insert the missing data from their knowledge
of Chinese institutions.[115]

Conclusions

Despite their inclusion of utopian and defective data, Chinese
historiographical texts turn out to be surprisingly rich sources for the flow
of real information between the Roman and Chinese empires. Contrary to
what is generally held, a significant percentage of the information stored in
the *Hou Hanshu* and the *Weilüe* (and other texts) can be recognized as
based on real data from the Roman Empire. Chinese interest in the Roman
world thereby resembled Roman interest in China: both sides betray a
particular interest in aspects of trade, yet both also sought more than
commercially relevant information, for the respective accounts also
include geographic, political, administrative and cultural data. However,
the Chinese texts strongly suggest that (the bulk of the) detailed
information on the Roman Empire that reached China originated from and
mainly concerned the eastern provinces of the *Imperium Romanum*, Egypt
in particular. Remarkably, such information reached China recurrently
(though not frequently), yet mainly (but perhaps not always) indirectly,
and almost exclusively through the channels afforded by long-distance
trade. The one exception of which sufficient historical detail is on record
to render it credible, the mission of Ban Chao's envoy Gan Ying in 97 CE,
had an unusually strong impact on the surviving Chinese accounts of the
Roman Empire, evidently because of the rank of the person who
transmitted it.[116] But Gan Ying's report on the *Imperium Romanum*, too,

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[113] *Weilüe* 11: Hill, *Weilüe*, sect. 11. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 70. See
also Hirth, *China*, 44 (*Chinshu*) and 70. Leslie and Gardiner, *Chinese Sources*, 81.
[114] Chang, *Rise of Chinese Empire*, 54, who also mentions intervals of 5.2 miles
(8.4 km).
[115] For the postal service of ancient China see Olbricht, *Postwesen in China*, 36.
Loewe, *Qin and Han*, 106–118.
[116] *Hou Hanshu* 88 (Hill sect. 1: Hill, *Jade Gate*, vol. I, 13).

was indirect and ultimately rooted (at least in part) in accounts of merchants. Language barriers and the methods to overcome them are not described in our sources. Their effects on the status of the preserved Roman and Chinese accounts are therefore not readily apparent. The transmission of complex geographical, political, administrative and cultural information through networks of long-distance trade not only affected the quality and variety of the delivered information, it could also impair the data and leave recognizable and characteristic traces in the surviving written documents. Such defects appear to reveal the absence of possibilities to verify the information before it was entered into the official Chinese records. In any event, such lacunas were often simply filled with either fanciful stories and stereotypes, or real data from elsewhere, before the result was finally adapted to utopian visions of a "Greater China" (Da Qin) at the other side of the inhabited world.

The enormous influence of written works and other reports by long-distance merchants in the surviving Western accounts of China and the Far East is also evident. However, the surviving Roman records on ancient China differ from their Chinese counterparts in one essential aspect: no official records from the West have survived. Nor are there any reliable reports of official reconnaissance missions or embassies to the Chinese court. If based on true facts, the Roman envoys mentioned in Chinese historiography are most likely to have been merchants. Moreover, the once abundant travelogue literature from the Western world (and texts derived from it) that would no doubt have shed further light on Central Asia and the Far East in Antiquity is entirely lost. That is all the more regrettable as the surviving texts have not made full use of all of the data that was once available in the Roman Empire (as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* illustrates). There is no reason, therefore, to believe that the information on ancient China, as recorded by the extant works of Western geographers, reflects the extent of the knowledge that was once present in the Mediterranean Basin under Roman rule. Finally, there is nothing in the written records of either the Chinese or Roman worlds to suggest that the transmitted data from one world inspired innovation in the other. Details are presented as curiosities, not as examples. Attitudes of cultural superiority are apparent in the accounts from both worlds.

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