

EURASIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL
ERJ, Vol. 8, No. 4, 457-461, Autumn 2026

Eurasian
 Research
 Journal
 Autumn 2026
 Vol. 8, No. 4

<https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.4-06>

IRSTI 03.23.55

ISSN 2519-2442, KAZAKHSTAN

Book Review

**REIMAGINING THE SILK ROADS:
 INTERACTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ACROSS EURASIA**

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Received: 16.10.2026

Accepted: 26.10.2026

For citation: Belyalova, A. (2026). Review of the book *Reimagining the Silk Roads: Interactions and Perceptions Across Eurasia*, edited by Julian Henderson, Stephen L. Morgan, Matteo Salonia. *Eurasian Research Journal*, 8(4), 457-461. <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.4-06>

Reimagining the Silk Roads: Interactions and Perceptions Across Eurasia (Routledge, 2025), edited by Julian Henderson, Stephen L. Morgan, and Matteo Salonia, reassesses the historical networks that connected Eurasian societies over several millennia. Bringing together 24 chapters across five thematic parts, the volume challenges conventional interpretations of the Silk Roads as predominantly overland commercial routes linking China with the Mediterranean. Instead, it presents a more complex history of exchanges involving goods, technologies, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Drawing on archaeology, environmental history, economic history, and political studies, the collection seeks to reconsider both the geographical boundaries and the historical significance of the Silk Roads.

The editors begin by questioning the concept's origins, tracing its modern formulation to Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877. They argue that the term, although useful, has encouraged an overly narrow understanding of Eurasian interactions centered on major sedentary empires. Rather than abandoning it, they propose a broader framework incorporating maritime routes, Central Asian societies, nomadic populations, and other historical actors whose contributions have often received insufficient attention. This approach emphasizes the changing and polycentric nature of Eurasian connections, providing the conceptual foundation for the studies that follow.

The first part examines the environmental dimensions of these connections. Matthew D. Jones explores climatic variations during the Common Era, highlighting their influence on human societies while cautioning against explanations that attribute historical developments directly to environmental change. Tengwen Long extends the discussion into prehistory by investigating the diffusion of agriculture and domesticated species across Eurasia. The

westward movement of millet from East Asia and the eastward spread of wheat from Southwest Asia demonstrate that significant exchanges preceded the conventional chronology of the Silk Roads. Long's analysis also emphasizes the role of the Eurasian steppes in facilitating mobility and interaction between distant communities. These findings broaden the historical perspective, although extending the concept to prehistoric agricultural exchanges also raises questions about its chronological boundaries.

Chapter 4, by Chris King, examines the transmission of diseases through interconnected Eurasian networks, focusing particularly on the fourteenth-century Black Death. Combining historical, archaeological, and genetic evidence, King demonstrates how expanding commercial and transportation networks facilitated the movement of pathogens while acknowledging continuing debates concerning their transmission. The chapter offers an important counterbalance to idealized representations of the Silk Roads by illustrating the destructive consequences that could accompany intensified connectivity.

The second part turns to material culture and the reconstruction of historical exchanges through archaeological evidence. Andreas J. M. Kropp examines Roman Palmyra as a commercial center linking the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean regions, demonstrating how long-distance trade shaped its prosperity and political development. Julian Henderson subsequently investigates interactions between the Abbasid Caliphate and Tang China, drawing on discoveries from the Famen Temple and the Belitung shipwreck. The circulation of West Asian glass and Chinese ceramics provides evidence of extensive commercial connections, while the incorporation of imported objects into new cultural and religious settings reveals processes of adaptation beyond economic exchange. The Belitung findings are particularly significant in demonstrating the importance of maritime trade during the Tang period.

Scientific approaches receive further attention in Qin-Qin Lü's analysis of natron glass and the investigation by Gilberto Artioli, Ivana Angelini, and Massimo Vidale into the possible Chinese provenance of material used in Venice's bronze lion of St Mark. Both studies illustrate the potential of scientific techniques to identify connections not fully documented in written sources. However, the proposed Chinese origin of the lion does not establish its precise historical journey, underscoring the distinction between identifying material provenance and reconstructing trade routes. These contributions highlight the value of interdisciplinary investigation while directing attention to the people and communities responsible for sustaining such exchanges.

The third part of the volume turns to the religious communities and social groups that sustained Eurasian connections. In Chapter 9, Junqing Wu examines Buddhist missionaries at medieval Chinese courts, showing how the spread of Buddhism depended partly on relationships with political authorities. Foreign monks acted not only as religious teachers but also as advisers to rulers, adapting their activities to changing political circumstances. Similarly, Teng Li's study of Christianity in Chapter 12 traces the development of Christian communities during the Tang and Mongol periods, highlighting the influence of imperial patronage, religious persecution, and migration. George Woudhuysen's examination of the Huns and Romans in Chapter 11 broadens this discussion by reconsidering the significance of nomadic populations in late Roman history.

Together, these contributions illustrate the importance of human mobility and political relationships in shaping exchanges across Eurasia.

Central Asian participation is particularly evident in Pin Lyu's account of the Sogdians in Chapter 10. Describing them as the "Cultural Bees" of Eurasia, Lyu examines their role as commercial and cultural intermediaries connecting different societies. Archaeological evidence from Sogdian tombs in China reveals how these communities adopted local funerary practices while retaining elements of their religious and cultural traditions. The findings illustrate selective cultural adaptation rather than complete assimilation, challenging interpretations that regard Central Asian merchants simply as intermediaries between larger civilizations.

The importance of Central Asia is further developed in Chapter 13, where Irina Arzhantseva and Heinrich Härke investigate the early medieval settlement of Dzhankent in present-day Kazakhstan. Drawing on archaeological investigations and the settlement's location near the Syr Darya and Aral Sea, they propose that Dzhankent may have served as a junction linking northern steppe networks with commercial centers farther south. Its possible involvement in the transportation of enslaved people is also considered. However, the limited coin finds and absence of direct confirmation in written sources leave aspects of its commercial role unresolved. This careful distinction between archaeological findings and historical interpretation makes the chapter a valuable contribution to understanding the potential significance of lesser-known trading centers.

In Chapter 14, Marek Jankowiak examines connections between Central Asia and northern Europe during the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly the exchange of Islamic silver dirhams for furs and enslaved people. He suggests that these northern networks may have developed partly in response to the disruption of established overland connections with China. His analysis challenges the assumption that Eurasian trade routes formed a continuous and stable system, instead emphasizing their changing geographical and economic orientation. Claire Taylor's examination of slavery and human trafficking in Chapter 15 adds a necessary social dimension to this discussion. By addressing the experiences of enslaved individuals alongside the institutions that facilitated their movement, Taylor exposes the coercive relationships underlying aspects of medieval commerce and challenges romanticized interpretations of Silk Roads exchange.

The fourth part examines changing patterns of Eurasian trade and geographical knowledge. Georg Schindler's Chapter 16 compares fifteenth-century European cartography, demonstrating how Mediterranean mapmakers generally possessed more detailed information about Asia than their German counterparts, whose representations relied heavily on older traditions. In Chapter 17, James Fujitani explores diplomatic gift-giving among China, Korea, Japan, and the Ryukyu Islands, showing how exchanges of luxury goods reflected the interaction between political ceremony and commercial interests. These studies demonstrate that Eurasian connections influenced not only the movement of commodities but also the ways distant societies were perceived and represented.

Maritime commerce receives particular attention in Chapters 18 and 19. Matteo Salonia examines Portuguese and Spanish expansion across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, explaining how maritime connections facilitated the

circulation of spices, silver, religious ideas, and geographical knowledge. He also highlights the relationship between commercial ambitions and missionary activities, which did not always pursue compatible objectives. Stephen L. Morgan places Southeast Asia at the center of these exchanges, emphasizing the significance of regional ports, merchant communities, and overlapping trading networks linking the Indian Ocean with East Asia. His analysis demonstrates that maritime commerce depended substantially on Asian actors and institutions rather than emerging solely through European expansion. Together, these chapters reinforce the importance of viewing Eurasian exchange as a changing system of interconnected land and maritime networks. They also raise questions about how the history of these connections has subsequently been interpreted and employed in modern political narratives.

The final part of the volume examines how the history of the Silk Roads has been studied, represented, and employed in modern political narratives. In Chapter 20, Jan Magnus Romgard explores the contributions of Sven Hedin and Johan Gunnar Andersson to the development of Silk Road studies in China. Examining geographical exploration and Sino-Swedish scientific collaboration during the Republican period, Romgard demonstrates how research developed alongside changing political circumstances and national priorities. His account also highlights the participation of Chinese scholars and institutions, illustrating the relationship between scientific knowledge and the historical contexts in which it is produced.

Chapters 21 and 22 extend this discussion to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Benjamin Barton assesses the initiative's development between 2013 and 2023, examining its geopolitical significance while questioning interpretations that portray it as a uniformly coordinated instrument of Chinese influence. His analysis emphasizes implementation difficulties, financial constraints, and the influence of participating states. David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown, meanwhile, examine the relationship between the BRI, Chinese nationalism, and the securitization of Xinjiang. They argue that narratives of historical connectivity have been employed to legitimize contemporary policies, while drawing attention to human rights concerns and the marginalization of ethnic minority communities. These contributions illustrate how interpretations of the Silk Roads can become instruments of contemporary political discourse.

The editors further explore historical representation in Chapter 23 through a visual essay illustrating the diversity of Eurasian material culture. The concluding chapter reinforces their argument for a polycentric understanding of the Silk Roads while questioning modern attempts to appropriate their history. The discussion of competing national claims surrounding the Belitung shipwreck is particularly revealing, demonstrating how archaeological discoveries can acquire different meanings through museum exhibitions and heritage narratives. This perspective underscores the importance of distinguishing historical evidence from its subsequent political interpretation.

The collection's principal strength lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which brings archaeological, scientific, historical, and economic perspectives into dialogue. Its attention to Central Asian merchants, nomadic communities, and maritime actors challenges interpretations that privilege major sedentary empires. Equally important is its treatment of disease, slavery, and political

conflict, which complicates idealized accounts of Eurasian exchange. By considering both the benefits and destructive consequences of interaction, the volume offers a more balanced understanding of historical connectivity.

Nevertheless, the considerable chronological and geographical breadth of the collection raises questions about the explanatory boundaries of the Silk Roads concept. Incorporating prehistoric agricultural diffusion, medieval religious movements, early modern maritime commerce, and contemporary geopolitical initiatives provides opportunities for comparison but also risks grouping historically distinct phenomena under an excessively broad category. This difficulty is especially apparent in Jankowiak's analysis of the northern commercial networks, which suggests that some trading systems were largely disconnected from, or replaced, earlier routes. Although the editors acknowledge differences between premodern exchange and modern globalization, clearer criteria for identifying the connections that constitute the Silk Roads would strengthen the volume's conceptual coherence.

The diversity of disciplinary approaches also produces differences in the interpretation and certainty of evidence. The proposed trading functions of Dzhankent and the possible Chinese provenance of Venice's bronze lion, for example, remain subject to important qualifications acknowledged by their respective authors. These cases demonstrate the need to distinguish material evidence of contact from the reconstruction of particular historical routes. Furthermore, despite the collection's ambition to challenge Sino-centric narratives, China remains a prominent reference point in numerous contributions. While partly reflecting the available historical and archaeological evidence, this tension suggests that a more consistently comparative approach could strengthen the proposed polycentric framework. The transition from historical case studies to contemporary BRI debates would likewise benefit from closer integration with the volume's overarching argument.

Despite these limitations, *Reimagining the Silk Roads* makes a substantial contribution to the interdisciplinary study of Eurasian history. Rather than establishing a definitive alternative to conventional interpretations, its value lies in questioning inherited assumptions and opening new directions for research. The collection will be particularly relevant to scholars of Central Asian history, archaeology, maritime commerce, and intercultural exchange, offering a valuable foundation for reconsidering the historical complexity of Eurasian connections.