
Xin Wen

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This collection of concise and enlightening essays originated from a symposium accompanying the exhibition *Secrets of the Silk Road* at the University of Pennsylvania in 2011. Seven chapters of case studies covering trans-Eurasian exchanges of various kinds from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity are followed by a conclusion that challenges many of these previous chapters. Collectively they paint a complex picture of the prehistory and early history of the areas covered by the Silk Roads, where grains, textiles, horses, and even languages were constantly moving, often within overlapping networks. By emphasizing the ritual and diplomatic dimensions as well as exchanges stimulated by migration, these chapters successfully dissociate the history of the Silk Roads from the almost mandatory invocation of the importance of “merchants,” and present a much more multifaceted picture.

All contributors are established scholars in their respective fields, so the articles serve not only to advance new ideas but also to summarize existing research, some of which was conducted by the very same authors (see the bibliographies following each chapter). For instance, readers interested in the Proto-Indo-European homeland problem will find new developments of an old debate in the chapters by David Anthony and Dorcas Brown and J. P. Mallory, as well as Colin Renfrew’s foreword.

Beyond that I would highlight a few notable new lines of thinking. Peter Brown argues that instead of commercial trade, the exchanges on the Silk Road in “Late Antiquity” should more appropriately be seen as efforts by kings and aristocrats to acquire status through “prizing difference” (p. 18). Victor Mair provides exciting new possibilities for the reconstruction of the early history of Xinjiang with the proposition of the Small River-Northern Cemetery cultural complex, which transcends and questions the exceptionality of Small River Cemetery. Michael Frachetti offers a fascinating discussion of the ceremonial use of grains in burial contexts at the site of Begash in southeastern Kazakhstan, and proposes that this practice can be found across Inner Asia, thus pointing to an example of the exchange of grains for ideological rather than economic reasons.

The most provocative and potentially significant point is, however, made in the conclusion by Philip Kohl, where he argues that “the real Silk Roads began in the Iron Age at the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 1st millennium BC” (p. 94). The tentative nature of such a claim reflects the fragmented status of our knowledge. But it also provides a working hypothesis that could potentially unite various threads of research in archeology, history, and historical linguistics, on which future revisions can be made with a greater deal of focus and precision.

**Xin Wen**

*Harvard University*

xwen@fas.harvard.edu