

Diplomatic Gifts on the Silk Road: Evidence from Dunhuang (850-1000)

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Abstract:

In 1877, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) coined the term the “Silk Road” to denote ancient routes that connected East Asia with the Mediterranean world. Thirteen years later, in 1900, an obscure Chinese Daoist monk Wang Yuanlu (1851-1931) discovered a cave containing about 50,000 multilingual manuscripts sealed up in the early eleventh century in Dunhuang—a key stop on the “Silk Road” between China proper and Central Asia. The Dunhuang manuscripts collection, as I show in this paper, can shed much corrective light on the ill-defined concept of the “Silk Road.”

Unlike the conventional picture of merchants journeying in caravans with their commodities between civilizational centers, Dunhuang manuscripts reveal a world in which the state sponsored the vast majority of trans-regional travels, and most of those who traveled trans-regionally self-identified as diplomats. These diplomats formed reciprocal guest/host relations with the people they encountered on the road, and interacted with them through the exchange of gifts, the main social lubricant for long-distance travel at this time.

In this paper, I explore the practice of diplomatic gift-exchange among states in the Eastern Eurasian world in the ninth and tenth centuries. Reading multilingual (Chinese, Tibetan, Khotanese, Uyghur and Sogdian) manuscripts from Dunhuang in the context of transmitted historical records in China proper, I examine the relations between the states in China proper (Tang, Five Dynasties, and the Song) and Central Asian states including Dunhuang, Ganzhou Ughyur, Khotan, Turfan, and the Kharakhanid khanate. Through an analysis of the types of gifts exchanged, I argue that the goal of the exchange was primarily political: the mutual adorning of the kings and emperors. By contrast, gifts of wider appeal beyond the courts, such as aromatics and medicines, while often offered, particularly by Central Asians to the Chinese, were sometimes limited and occasionally rejected. Therefore, instead of creating a network of commercial interests, these diplomatic gift-exchanges resulted in a diplomatic network of prestige, the main function of which was the mediation of the relative status of the kings and emperors.