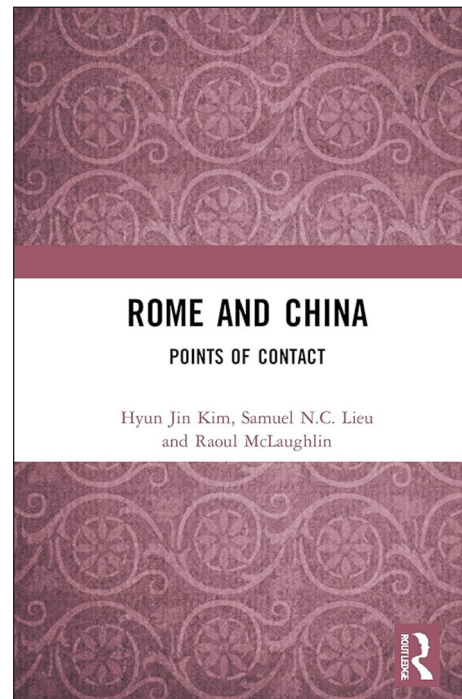


Book Review

Kim, Hyun Jin, Samuel N.C. Lieu and Raoul McLaughlin. 2021. *Rome and China: Points of Contact*. London: Routledge; 978-0-36768-412-9 paperback £39.99.

This short volume, originally published in 2021 and appearing in paperback in 2023, consists of four main chapters and an introduction and conclusion (109 pages, excluding the bibliography, index and front matter). It is concerned with (in)direct contact between the Roman world and lands dominated by China, with a particular focus on how this was facilitated by Inner Asian migrants, ambassadors and invaders. It is avowedly not a work about the ‘Silk Routes and Eurasian empires’ (p. 2); although the theme of commercial exchange (including of silk products) certainly does feature across a few of the chapters. To their credit, the authors do provide a good amount of attention to key Central Asian and Inner Asian polities that existed during the early and mid-first millennium AD.

However, this does not mean that the work completely eschews the focus on empires and the establishment of stable corridors of exchange which has been a mainstay of a lot of Silk Road studies literature (on this issue, see Høisæter 2023). The introduction and conclusion of the book do a reasonable job at highlighting many of the key themes which connect the chapters, but there is not much direct cross-referencing within the main chapters.



Chapter 1 (co-written by R. McLaughlin and Hyun Jin Kim) deals with the subject of (attempted) diplomatic contact between the Roman world and China, with some contextual discussion of trade routes, conflicts in Eurasia and environmental and geographic issues. It is perhaps the most problematic chapter in the volume, since it can sometimes be weak on source criticism and critical engagement with other scholarship. For instance, a claim in the *Weilue* about ‘sixty commodities from the Roman Empire’ being ‘known to Chinese authorities’ (p. 6) is given without the important qualification that not all the items listed actually derived from the Empire, and that the account is tinged with utopian themes. These types of utopian themes, often focusing on the imagined riches of Da Qin, also appear in later texts like the *Taiping Yulan*, which, for example, claims that the houses in Da Qin are made from turquoise crystal. Several assertions are also put forth without direct supporting evidence, such as the claim that the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* ‘survived because it was archived in Roman state records’ (p. 16). What we do know is that this work survived thanks to its inclusion in a single manuscript (the ninth century AD *Cod. Pal. graec.*, another copy in the British Museum is completely derivative) and that it was part of a tradition of travelogue literature and was misattributed to Arrian of Nicomedia (see Casson 1989; De Romanis 2016).

Chapter 2 (authored by Hyun Jin Kim) is an improvement over the preceding chapter and discusses the groupings known as the Xiongnu and the Huns, as well as how the Eurasian Steppe acted as a conduit for the exchange of peoples and ideas. Quite rightly, Hyun Jin Kim cautions that while we can look for connections between the Xiongnu and the Huns, it would be a mistake to simplistically equate them as if they were ‘ethnically and racially’ homogeneous (p. 31). Instead, it is emphasized that the Xiongnu were a ‘polyglot and multiethnic confederation’ and that what is more important is the fact that the Huns claimed the ‘political and cultural legacy of the Xiongnu’ (p. 32). One can find more source criticism in this chapter, such as a recognition of how Chinese cosmological ideas impacted on the description of non-Chinese polities in court histories and other literature.

Chapter 3 (co-written by R. McLaughlin and Hyun Jin Kim) returns to the themes of diplomacy, commerce and interstate conflict, but with a focus on Late Antiquity (primarily the sixth century AD). Various topics are stitched together, including Late Antique Indian Ocean networks, Sogdian overland trade, and relations between the Göktürks, Sassanians, Avars and the Eastern Roman Empire. The narrative is interesting and the intersections between these topics are apparent. A few claims made in the chapter could be better supported by reasoning and/or direct evidence, such as the assertion that ‘[a] Roman fleet of sixty merchant ships could have imported eastern

goods worth close to 1.2 million solidi per annum' (p. 48). The number of merchant ships is based on a reference in a text about the martyrdom of St. Arethas which refers to the Emperor Justin's support of the Axumite invasion of Himyar (it should be noted that some of the ships listed in *MSA* are 'Indian', i.e. Axumite). However, it might be asked, what is the basis for assuming the average capacity of these vessels and the likely value of their typical cargoes? To be sure, no argument is made here against the practice of producing hypothetical calculations, but the basis for such modelling needs to be less opaque and the potential uncertainties signposted more clearly.

The final chapter (co-written by Samuel N.C. Lieu and Hyun Jin Kim) is, to this reviewer's mind, the best in the volume. It investigates the activities of the so-called Nestorians (those linked to the Church of the East) and Manichaeans in Eastern and Inner Asia during the Tang period (AD 618 to 907). Particular attention is given to the Xi'an Stele, as well as Christian and Manichaean documents in Dunhuang and Turfan. The authors provide a useful mixture of historical contextualization and critical commentary on these texts, with these being comparatively understudied from a Classical Studies perspective (unsurprisingly, they have received greater attention in the field of Sinology).

Overall, this volume is a mixed bag, but Chapters 2 and 4 stand out for offering some stimulating analysis of key evidence and concepts (like identity). There is not a significant amount of engagement with theory in this book (which is likely to be of concern to readers of *TRAJ*), but those interested in the topic of contact, mobility and exchange across (Late) Antique Eurasia may still find it worthwhile to read.

Matthew A. Cobb
 Institute of Education and Humanities
 University of Wales Trinity Saint David
m.cobb@uwtsd.ac.uk

References

Ancient Sources

Codex Palatinus Graecus 398, folios 40–54.

Modern Sources

Casson, Lionel. 1989. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

De Romanis, Federico. 2016. An exceptional survivor and its submerged background: the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and the Indian Ocean travelogue tradition. In: Giulio Colesanti and Laura Lulli (eds). *Submerged Literature in Ancient Greek Culture: Volume 2 Case Studies*: 97–110. Berlin: De Gruyter. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110428636-008>

Høisæter, Tomas Larsen. 2023. Islands in a sea of sand: the role of Tarim Basin polities in global trade during Late Antiquity. *Journal of Global History* 18(3): 401–425. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022823000189>

