Perceiving the Silk Road Archipelago: Archipelagic relations within the ancient and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road

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Abstract: This paper analyses the ancient Maritime Silk Road through a relational island studies approach. Island ports and island cities represented key sites of water-facilitated transport and exchange in the ancient Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Building our analysis upon a historical overview of the ancient Maritime Silk Road from the perspective of China's Guangdong Province and the city of Guangzhou, we envision a millennia-long 'Silk Road Archipelago' encompassing island cities and island territories stretching across East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Africa. Bearing in mind the complex movements of peoples, places, and processes involved, we conceptualise the ancient Maritime Silk Road as an uncentred network of archipelagic relation. This conceptualisation of the ancient Maritime Silk Road as a vast archipelago can have relevance for our understanding of China's present-day promotion of a 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. We ultimately argue against forcing the Maritime Silk Road concept within a binary perspective of essentialised East-West conflict or hierarchical relations and instead argue for the value of a nuanced understanding of relationality.

Keywords: archipelagos, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China, Guangdong, islands, Maritime Silk Road, relationality

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Introduction

The Merriam-Webster (2020) dictionary defines the 'Silk Road' as an "ancient trade route that extended from eastern China to the Mediterranean Sea." Encyclopaedia Britannica (2020) begins its entry on the Silk Road by defining it as an "ancient trade route, linking China with the West, that carried goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and China." In these and similar definitions, goods and people depart China and wind their way toward destinations in the West. For all its twists and turns, this is a road that leads from one place to another. By its very nature, it presupposes a binary relationship between essentialised ideas of East and West, relegating the spaces in between to mere detours, oases, or stops along the way.

The 'Silk Road' and the derived idea of the 'Maritime Silk Road' are Western concepts. They arose in late-19th and early-20th Century Continental European geographical scholarship and were popularised in fits and starts, before eventually returning to the fields of academic research and public policy (Waugh, 2007). As Rezakhani (2010) argues, the romantic notion of ancient overland trade routes linking China with Europe is anachronistic: far from being mere stops along the road to 'the West', the cities of India, Transoxiana, and Persia represented the real targets of Chinese trade and diplomacy. Retrospective European glorification of the Roman Empire should not mislead us into imagining that all Han Dynasty roads led to Rome; that direct interactions between European and Chinese people were anything other than extremely limited during this period; or that Chinese economic, political, and cultural actors regarded a European 'West' as existing in a privileged form of conceptual conflict with a Chinese 'East'. The 'Silk Road' and 'Maritime Silk Road' concepts may have offered "symbolic representation" to the "ancient trade and cultural exchange routes [that] had far-reaching influences on Eurasian socio-economic development" (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 326), but they also skewed subsequent perceptions of this exchange.

Although the ancient Silk Road connecting "the two great civilizations of Rome and China" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020) is a 20th-Century European fiction, extensive relations of economic, political, and cultural exchange between China and countries and peoples to the south, east, and west did indeed exist in the ancient world. In the case of the so-called Maritime Silk Road, many of the key sites of water-facilitated exchange were island cities and territories. By pursuing a relational island studies approach, the present paper argues that, while actors will always view peoples, places, and processes from particular perspectives, the movements of peoples, products, and ideas within the ancient Maritime Silk Road can be conceived of as an uncentred network of archipelagic relation. As a result, we can envision a 'Silk Road Archipelago' encompassing such diverse island cities as Aden (in present-day Yemen), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Hormuz (Iran), Kilwa (Tanzania), Kochi (India), and Mombasa (Kenya) (Pollard & Kinyera, 2017; Sen, 2016; Seland, 2014; Schottenhammer, 2012; Nakamura, 2011).

The ancient Maritime Silk Road is sometimes understood as an overseas projection of Chinese power or as the interlinking of an essentialised East and West. Such understandings occur, however, within a conceptual framework of binary conflict and centre-periphery relations that may not be particularly accurate or complete. The Maritime Silk Road can alternatively be represented as the creation of a new geography—a vast archipelago spanning East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia (Middle East), and East Africa. This understanding may also be significant for conceptualisations of the so-called 21st-Century

Maritime Silk Road, a present-day Chinese government project within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

We begin with a discussion of our theory and methods. We proceed to describe the development of the ancient Maritime Silk Road, taking a perspective (as one must inevitably take a perspective) from China's Guangdong Province. This is followed by an analysis of how the Maritime Silk Road can be understood as an uncentered network of archipelagic relation and how this understanding is evident in the conceptualisation of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road project. We end with a brief conclusion.

Theory and methods

Archipelagos and relational island studies
In recent years, the field of island studies has devoted significant attention to the concept of 'relationality', a development that, as Jonathan Pugh (2018, p. 93) notes, is connected with the field's growing interest in the archipelago as a unit of analysis, in "archipelagic thinking, which disrupts the static island form." Stratford et al. (2011, pp. 115-116) initiated this discussion with their call to move beyond island/mainland binaries:

> [Islands are typically defined by] the complete encircling of land by water. The creation of distinctive 'inside' and 'outside' spaces implied in the boundedness of islands highlights two ideas of them: as complete in and of themselves; and as isolated from others and insular unto themselves. [The island] is typically held in opposition to a continent, a relation which is usually materialized as a particular mainland. In a sense, islands and continents are each other's 'other'.

Consideration of island–island relations does not automatically provide a corrective to these essentialised views, for archipelagos (groups of islands) are frequently themselves essentialised and treated as a single, undifferentiated unit, with "archipelago term [deployed] uncritically as a descriptive, physical geographical referent" (Stratford et al, 2011, p. 118).

It has long been understood that 'islands' are not *simply* units of geography, are not *just* pieces of land surrounded by water. Islands may be weighted with a cultural meaning that transcends their geographical attributes (Baldacchino, 2019; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017; Gillis, 2004). Using the case of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), a territory with an island status that is conditional upon who one asks and when one asks them, Grydehøj (2018, p. 5) argues both that islands are primarily mental constructs and that "an island is only an island if it is brought into relation with a mainland (including perhaps a larger island that serves as a mainland)." Those who live on pieces of land surrounded by water may 'de-island' or 're-island' their homes, depending on their needs and circumstances (Pigou-Dennis & Grydehøj, 2014), an act that is significant given that islandness can prove empowering in some circumstances and disempowering in others (Grydehøj, Nadarajah, & Markussen, 2020; Hau'ofa, 1994).

If islands can be mentally created and destroyed in this manner, then so can archipelagos. Both islanders and mainlanders strategically deploy diverse and contradictory representations of archipelagic belonging in pursuit of their cultural, social, political, and economic interests. Islands can be mentally created, territorialised, and joined together into archipelagos from above as well as from below, from the outside as well as the from the inside (Hong, 2020, 2017;

Rivas, 2019; Roberts & Stephens, 2017; Baldacchino & Tsai, 2014; Anckar, 2007). As Pugh (2013, p. 11) suggests, part of what makes islands distinct is the manner in which they "act in concert," in which "island movements" grant meaning to the archipelago. Such a relational island approach cannot neglect that "the ocean is not a space that merely facilitates movement, it is also a relational space that is constituted by movement itself" (Pugh, 2016, p. 1043).

Pugh's (2013, 2016, 2018; Chandler & Pugh, 2020) analyses highlight the danger of engaging in static or essentialised island-mainland, centre-periphery, and even island-island relational approaches. Qin (2018, p. 117), arguing for a theory or relationality focused on "mutual constitution and enabling between the relational context and actors in such a context," emphasises that to say "identities are formed in and through relations does not mean a binary of the self and the other [and does not mean] the self's identity can only be formed with a negative and hostile other" (Qin, 2018, p. 134). A relational understanding may instead attend to a multitude of processes and perspectives, recognising that just because actors are always at the centre of their own networks, this does not mean that relations between actors are fundamentally characterised by conflict.

When we analyse the ancient Maritime Silk Road from the perspective of Guangdong Province in this paper, this does not mean the paper is focused on activities or events occurring in Guangdong. It is instead an acknowledgment that our own understanding of the ancient Maritime Silk Road is rooted in epistemologies that developed in the island cities and urban archipelagos of Guangdong. If we are envisioning an ancient Maritime Silk Road that stretches outward from China, then it is because our mental journey is beginning in China, not because the ancient Maritime Silk Road necessarily had Guangdong as its centre.

Island cities and urban archipelagos

Within island studies, islands have traditionally been analysed in terms of their remoteness, isolation, and peripherality. Even when researchers seek to challenge these tropes, they often paradoxically reify the association between islandness and marginalisation—despite the fact that islands are disproportionately well represented among the world's major cities and ports. Examples of prominent historical and present-day cities located largely or in significant part on islands include Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Lagos, Mexico City, Mumbai, New York City, Paris, St Petersburg, and Singapore, yet with few exceptions (e.g. Venice; Grydehøj & Casagrande, 2020), such places are rarely thought of as *island* cities.

Since the mid-2010s, however, there have been efforts to study the myriad ways in which urban culture, politics, environment, infrastructure, society, and economy are affected by island status (e.g. Larjosto, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Steyn, 2015; Swaminathan, 2014). Particular spatial benefits to near-shore island status have been identified as encouraging urban agglomeration, concentration of political and economic power, and the development of port industries (Grydehøj, 2019, 2015). This urban island studies approach has been particularly strong in China and has been deployed in relation to the Zhoushan Archipelago (e.g. Zhang & Grydehøj, 2020; Wu et al, 2020; Chen & Dong, 2019); Hainan Island (Ou & Ma, 2017; Grydehøj & Ou, 2017); and—significantly for the present paper—the islands of China's Greater Bay Area (e.g. Hong, 2020, 2017; Leung et al, 2017; Sheng, Tang, & Grydehøj, 2017; Su, 2017), which consists of the Guangdong Province cities and the special administrative regions (SARs) surrounding the Pearl River Delta.

Guangdong's simultaneously estuarine and mountainous geography, with its vast numbers of islands, bays, and peninsulas, has contributed to an exceptionally long coastline (4114 km). Many of the cities within the Greater Bay Area are archipelagic in nature, with Guangzhou, Zhuhai, Hong Kong SAR, and Macao SAR each furthermore possessing constituent and distinctly islanded territorial niches that are focused on particular industrial areas. Thus, for example, Guangzhou deploys Xiaoguwei Island as a higher education 'mega center', Shamian Island as a cultural heritage district, and the Guangzhou International Bio Island as a biotech industrial zone; Zhuhai uses Hengqin Island as a leisure and tourism district and cross-border free trade zone with Macao SAR; Macao SAR itself dedicates Cotai to the gambling and leisure industries; and Hong Kong SAR has concentrated its financial industries on Hong Kong Island while shifting its heavy port industries to the island of Tsing Yi and the adjacent shoreline across the Rambler Channel. That is to say, the Pearl River Delta consists of a multitude of archipelagos (islands that have been mentally and in some cases jurisdictionally placed into clusters), but the growing Chinese state emphasis on development of this region as the Greater Bay Area *per se* has made these various island and archipelago cities increasingly interlinked and brought them into increasingly intense *archipelagic* relation.

It is unlikely to be just a coincidence that there are an awful lot of islands and archipelagos within the ancient Maritime Silk Road and the 21ˢᵗ-Century Maritime Silk Road. Islands and archipelagos the world over are especially likely to host the kinds of processes of mobility and exchange associated with the Maritime Silk Road concept.

Methods

Although we recognise the potential pitfalls of overly deductive island research (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 8; Hay, 2006) and acknowledge that care must be taken when imposing conceptions of islandness upon people who may or may not live on islands (Pigou-Dennis & Grydehøj, 2014; Baldacchino, 2008), we nevertheless take an island theory-led approach to our subject matter. This is not because an island studies or archipelagic perspective is the only or even the best potential perspective from which to consider the ancient Maritime Silk Road or 21ˢᵗ-Century Maritime Silk Road. These concepts have previously been fruitfully researched from a wide range of perspectives. However, given that islands play especially prominent roles within both the ancient Maritime Silk Road and the 21ˢᵗ-Century Maritime Silk Road, we feel it worthwhile to apply a relational island studies approach to these concepts so as to potentially produce fresh insights. This can provide us with "different angles for observation and different perspectives for understanding and interpretation" (Qin, 2018, p. ix).

We do this by producing an island-focused description of the development of the ancient Maritime Silk Road, from the perspective of China's Guangdong Province. We then analyse this development in terms of relational island studies theory. In so doing, we seek to perceive a Silk Road Archipelago.

Guangdong and the development of the ancient Maritime Silk Road

The people of South China have since ancient times used small boats to navigate rivers and coastal waters. Over the millennia, openness to adopting and adapting foreign material and social practices was facilitated by the region's dense network of rivers, which linked inland plains with the sea and encouraged the mobility of people, products, and ideas (Szto, 2006,

p. 58; Xiong, 2014, pp. 1231-1232). This geographical advantage proved critical to present-day Guangzhou's emergence as a major port over two thousand years ago, a status that the city has retained until today, despite enormous cultural, economic, and political upheavals in the interim.

The Nanyue Kingdom (204-112 BCE) is believed to have manufactured large wooden ships (Szto, 2006), facilitating considerable maritime material and cultural exchange, with major export items being lacquerware, silk, pottery, and bronze and major import items being gems, oxen, fruit, and textiles. Goods were shipped from the Guangdong ports of Panyu (today's Guangzhou) and Xuwen and out to present-day Vietnam before being transported abroad by foreign ships (Allard, 2006, p. 237). Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) territorial expansion and the destruction of the Nanyue Kingdom strengthened Chinese control over a range of coastal ports and commercial cities within the Yue and Lingnan cultural regions, including Panyu, Xuwen, Hepu, Long Bian (today's Hanoi, Vietnam), Guangxin (today's Wuzhou), Bushan (today's Guigang), and Guilin. This heightened the importance of river networks as transport channels between inland regions, the coast, and then overseas. With the development of mulberry breeding and the textile industry, silk fabrics became China's main exports. According to the records of *Book of Han* 汉书, the Emperor Wu of Han (141-87 BCE) dispatched a fleet that sailed out from South China, through Southeast Asia, and across the Indian Ocean, eventually reaching Sri Lanka. Over the coming centuries, maritime trade between China and states and peoples to the West increased in volume and importance, though this trade continued to depend upon foreign ships and crews (Schottenhammer, 2012, p. 68).

In 226 CE, early in the Three Kingdoms Period (222-280 CE), the Kingdom of Wu established Guangzhou Prefecture in order to bolster maritime trade, and by the start of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 CE), Guangzhou's role as the starting point for Chinese maritime trade across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region had become firmly entrenched. Trade and diplomatic contact went in both directions, and in some cases, tributary relationships were established. Whereas silk continued to be the main export from China, imported products included a vast range of precious animal, plant, mineral, and textile products. As Clark (2009, pp. 23-24) notes, the distinction between tribute missions and trade missions was obscure, with foreign visits during the 200s-500s CE being motivated in large part by a desire to profit from China's "immense wealth and technological sophistication" and with communities of foreign merchants possibly establishing themselves in Guangzhou as early as the 4th Century CE.

Much of today's China was unified during the short-lived Sui Dynasty (581-618 CE), which also consolidated Chinese control over the South China Sea. The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) saw the adoption of an open and outward-looking foreign policy as well as the development of a comprehensive system for state management of foreign trade and a supportive legal and regulatory framework, which was conducive to increasing maritime trade. This was in part prompted by growing tensions along overland trade routes and in part by the sophistication of navigational and marine technologies in the Arab world (Schottenhammer, 2012, p. 73). During the reign of Emperor Gaozu of Tang (618-626 CE), the presence of Arab traders in Guangzhou led to the establishment of a significant Muslim community in the city. This period also saw a rise in religious travel, with a succession of monks journeying by sea between China and India, including the Chinese monk Yijing 义

净 (635-713 CE), who made his way from Guangzhou to Sumatra and then on to India, and the Indian priest Bodhisena, who travelled via China to Japan (Revire, 2015, pp. 131-132).

Tangible evidence of the breadth and volume of China's interactions with distant states and peoples is provided by the so-called 'Belitung shipwreck', the remains of a 15 m Arabian dhow-type ship, which sank off Indonesia in the first half of the 800s CE, laden with products from across China (George, 2015, p. 587), including 60,000 ceramics pieces:

> The range of cargo also attests to the extensive supply networks garnered by West Asian merchants. These reached deep into China, from Hebei in the north through Henan and Hunan in the centre to the mouth of the Yangzi river and Guangdong in the south. The goods were probably sourced through Chinese middlemen and gathered in port cities: the mirrors and metalwork, together with the ceramics from Hebei, Henan, Yue and possibly Hunan, point to Yangzhou or Hangzhou, whence they would have been shipped to Guangzhou. Whether or not the Belitung ship began its journey in that region, its cargo must have been consolidated at Guangzhou, as suggested by the presence of ceramics from Guangdong, and most of all by the position of that city as the main Chinese hub of this trade, at the south-western edge of the Chinese coast.

This ship would have formed part of the substantial commercial trade between present-day Iraq and China (George, 2015, p. 6):

> The waters at [Basra and Ubulla] were too shallow for the largest sea-going ships, and Siraf, on the Iranian coast, emerged as the major storehouse at which goods were unloaded and brought onto smaller vessels or despatched overland. From the Gulf, eastbound ships would sail to Suhar or Muscat, in Oman, then either follow the coast of Sindh or use the monsoon winds to sail across the Arabian sea to Khambhat, in Gujarat, followed by southern India and Sri Lanka (Mantai), before crossing the Gulf of Bengal to reach Thailand, the straits of Malacca and head north towards Guangzhou, the main port for this trade in China. Some ships pushed further north towards Hangzhou or Yangzhou, at the mouth of the Yangzi River, which was connected to Chang'an, the Tang capital, through a network of rivers and the Grand Canal.

As the above account makes clear, it would be an oversimplification to regard this system of China-Iraq trade as something solely or even primarily attributable to Chinese policy. Such relations of trade required great numbers of actors in many countries and territories.

By the 800s CE, Chinese products were being widely traded in East Africa (Pollard & Kinyera, 2017, p. 932) as part of the West Asian trade network. Tang Dynasty maritime traffic likewise travelled to the east and northeast, with the islands of the Zhoushan Archipelago in the East China Sea and the Changshan Archipelago in the Bohai Sea forming border zones or interstitial zones between the cities of continental China and Korea and Japan.

In the second year of Tang Xuanzong's reign (714 CE), the post of Overseas Trade Commissioner 市舶使 was established in Guangzhou, and growing numbers of local nobles, officials, and civilians started engaging in maritime trade. Taken as a whole, during this period,

the influx of wealth, the growing foreign cultural influences, and the emergence of new livelihoods and pathways to status occasioned significant changes in China's social structure and the daily lives of both officials and the civilian population.

During the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), the state sought to further institutionalise and systematise foreign trade. This policy was undertaken both to ensure that incoming goods continued to be channelled toward the political power centres in the north and to boost the quantity, quality, and ultimately value of foreign trade. This "commercial revolution" increasingly saw "the Chinese economy [become] linked to production for overseas markets" (Finlay, 2008, pp. 331–332). That is, demand in West Asia was changing the nature of Chinese business. The Song Dynasty generally maintained friendly relations with the states of Southeast Asia, for which Guangzhou served as the gateway to and from China. Guangzhou was, in effect, used as a pilot zone for testing new overseas trade management systems, which were later rolled out to other Chinese coastal cities. Guangzhou was thus a vital economic and cultural hub for the country but remained on the political periphery. The continual but strictly controlled development of maritime trade during the Song Dynasty greatly increased the financial revenues of the imperial court, but it also enriched Guangzhou and led to a hitherto-unprecedented degree of urbanisation within Guangdong.

By the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), China was engaged in trade and relations with a large number of foreign states and territories. The international maritime trade laws established during the Tang and Song Dynasties were made systematic and comprehensive during this period, yet the start of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE) saw the implementation of new trade restrictions and the limiting of mutual exchanges to tribute ships. That is, the Chinese state only desired foreign trade in the context of the subordination of external political entities. Guangdong was to some extent excluded from these restrictions, however, forming a kind of special economic zone. Non-tributary ships were permitted to enter Guangdong for trade, and the Portuguese were permitted to establish a presence on and rent the island of Macao. The wider maritime trade ban (*haijin*) 海禁 (1371–1567 CE) nevertheless initiated a long-term decline in China's maritime industries.

It was during this time of heightened restrictions on private trade that the Chinese state's official maritime activity reached its peak. The Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424 CE) organised a series of large-scale expeditions led by the Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433 CE), beginning in 1405 CE and ending in 1433 CE and involving hundreds of boats and tens of thousands of soldiers and other crew members. Zheng He's ships reached states and territories around the rim of the Indian Ocean, making it as far to the southwest as Kilwa. Zheng He's voyages had numerous objectives and impacts, playing a "role in asserting naval supremacy over a vast maritime space, the reordering of long-distance commercial and diplomatic relationships, and the circulation of people, animals, ideas and cultural objects across the Indian Ocean" (Sen, 2016, p. 609). Zheng He's willingness to show favour to particular local elites and establish new centres of overseas trade had a profound influence on the Indian Ocean world, with a special impact on life in island ports, cities, and states.

It might seem somewhat paradoxical that China's maritime trade ban coincided with this period of assertive maritime network creation by the Chinese state. However, as Sen (2015, pp. 621–622) argues, it was precisely the maritime trade ban that laid the groundwork for Zheng He's success, leading to:

an outflow of Chinese traders from the coastal regions of Ming China to locations in South-East Asia. These groups of Chinese settled in places such as Sumatra and Java and not only traded with the Ming as representatives of these polities, but also started operating networks that extended to the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea regions.

Sen (2016, p. 626) sees Zheng He's fleet as "a remarkable representation of the Indian Ocean on the move, a depiction perhaps of 'floating cosmopolitanism'," with crews comprised of thousands of "people from different regions of China. There were interpreters, seamen, doctors, judges, soldiers of various ranks, and eunuch commanders. There were also foreign navigators, guides, guardsmen, diplomats and captives." At the same time though, as Finlay (2008, p. 336) posits, Zheng He's mission was not simply to promote trade and relations but to channel these toward state interests:

> Functioning as a state trading commission, the voyages of Zheng He encompassed both private commerce and tribute trade. In the grandest manner, [the Yongle Emperor] aimed at eradicating the roots of coastal criminality, providing employment for mariners and entrepreneurs, reaching overseas markets with Chinese products, securing desired goods for Chinese consumers, enlarging the sphere of tribute states, and displaying imperial majesty in the southern seas. In the course of seven expeditions, the Ming emperor established tribute relations with forty-eight states, many of them for the first time. Yongle extended imperial power to foreign lands while also ensuring the supremacy of his own policies against the protests of Confucian officials, who were opposed to the emperor peddling Chinese commodities as well as seeking foreign ones.

Finlay (2008, p. 330), however, urges against taking at face value official imperial proclamations of strictly hierarchical relations between China and overseas territories: "Dealing with other states and peoples was a matter of a usefully muddled blend of cultural propaganda, reasoned diplomacy, and economic pragmatism. In particular, the tribute system was primarily a way of intermeshing Chinese civilization with other East Asian societies." Although Zheng He's voyages were not succeeded by similar official state expeditions, they established culture and trade connections that continued to flourish in the subsequent centuries.

The arrival of European colonialism in South, Southeast, and East Asia in the 16th Century led to dramatic changes in the manner in which and the terms under which this network of maritime exchange operated. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) saw the extension of maritime trade routes to Russia, the Pacific, and the Americas as well as a growth in the number of Chinese ports open to foreign trade, including the so-called 'treaty ports', which were established under European coercion. This shift from the Chinese state's efforts to control trade to European powers' efforts to maximise resource extraction led to changes in the dominant imports and exports. Major export commodities included silk, cloth, and porcelain, while imports were dominated by cotton, woollen textiles, and opium.

What we now regard as the ancient Maritime Silk Road had multifaceted effects on Chinese society, encouraging industrial focus on certain export commodities; facilitating the development of a market economy; and incentivising urbanisation, particularly in coastal

regions that had previously been at the periphery of Chinese state power. That which we now regard as the Greater Bay Area furthermore developed into a home for communities with longstanding links to countries and peoples in Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, East Africa, and Europe. In the same manner as many immigrants from across the Indian Ocean region have made Guangzhou their home over the centuries (Su, 2017), many of the Chinese emigrants who settled in Indian Ocean communities originated from Guangdong, producing interpersonal networks of mutual exchange.

The abstract and anachronistic nature of the ancient Maritime Silk Road as a concept does not diminish the degree to which the South China has been influenced over time by the overseas exchange of products, people, and ideas. It is at least in part a result of these millennia-long processes that today's Greater Bay Area is a centre of manufacturing, knowledge industries, tourism, and transport services.

Analysis: A road without a destination, a network without a centre

Communication, exchange, and relation among the islands of the Maritime Silk Road have been so intense for so long that it is impossible to say when the Maritime Silk Road first came into being. Above, we have considered the ancient Maritime Silk Road from the perspective of Guangdong. This perspective has made it possible to imagine the ancient Maritime Silk Road as radiating outward from southern Chinese port cities and as a system for projecting Chinese power out to overseas states and territories. Such an idea is not, of course, so far from the official discourse of the imperial Chinese state, which, as we have seen, was apt to seek to formalise trading systems and establish hierarchical tributary relations. However, as we have also seen, such formalisations of inter-state and inter-territorial hierarchy likely always meant something different to the Chinese state than they did to those with whom the Chinese state engaged (Clark, 2009; Finlay, 2008). Furthermore, this Guangdong-centred perspective has largely excluded portions of the Indian Ocean network of maritime relation that had little to do with China and has paid little attention to the motivations of actors outside of China.

A Chinese perspective on the ancient Maritime Silk Road is not inevitable. Zhao (2012, pp. 45-46), for example, has envisioned the Indian Ocean region during the ancient Maritime Silk Road era as a multinodal network of exchange:

> It was the Indian Ocean rather than the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean that was the first of the interconnected world oceans. […] The interconnection of maritime and terrestrial routes combined with regular and significant trade activity led to the foundation of Eurasian and African world-systems as early as the first century c.e. This earlier intercontinental trade system was restructured according to the rhythm of economic cycles over the centuries. Between the first and the sixteenth centuries c.e., the Afro-Asian maritime zone can be divided into three main areas, in accordance with geographic factors and exchange networks. These areas are the China Sea, the eastern Indian Ocean, and the western Indian Ocean, which can be further divided into the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, a division valid for most of the medieval period. Each of these subsystems had its own 'core', that is China, India, western Asia, and Egypt. These cores determined the hierarchical structure and nature of the trade within each area, especially with their peripheries.

Similarly, Seland (2014, p. 387) presents ancient long-distance trade in the western Indian Ocean as a process through which people "brought with them culinary habits (e.g., crops), technologies (shipbuilding, glassmaking, weaving traditions), and ideas (symbols and religions), making the ocean and its coasts an area of cultural integration and diffusion." Such perspectives challenge Eurocentric and binary representations of East–West, North–South relations. While other perspectives—European, West Asian, Chinese, East African—are both possible and worth pursuing in certain circumstances, these various perspectives are all subsumed within a wider set of relations (Zhao, 2012, pp. 46-48).

Far from being a static entity, the ancient Maritime Silk Road expanded, shrank, split, and reformed as a consequence of shifting sociotechnical systems. Particularly important for understanding the development of relations between the island communities that were so critical to the Maritime Silk Road were the advances in maritime skills and technologies that occurred in Western Asia. Highly localised processes of technological change ultimately conditioned wider political and economic potentials and made possible maritime movements throughout the region and beyond.

When discussing relations, it is tempting to regard having relations as good and having more relations as better. A true relational approach, however, sees relations as essential to existence of the self (Qin, 2018), without implying that any one relation is harmful or beneficial to the self. The Maritime Silk Road and the changes it underwent over the millennia produced winners and losers. Whether one regards the development of important centres of trade (frequently supported by external political and economic actors) in places such as Colombo and Guangzhou as good or bad depends on one's own positioning, on the spatial scale (local, national, regional, global), and on the temporal scale within which one is making assessments. For example, Zheng He's mission played a role in Kochi's emergence as a key port city, but this came at the expense of the rulers of Kozhikode to the north (Sen, 2019). The rise of Swahili Coast island trading posts such as Kilwa, Lamu, Mombasa, Pemba, Takwa, and Zanzibar had major impacts on East African and Arab political, cultural, and economic systems (Steyn, 2015)—impacts that we now tend to take for granted but that caused significant upheaval at the time. Socotra, for its part, became an ancient trading hub but is now seen as an exceptionally remote and isolated island (Seland, 2014); the Maritime Silk Road may have affected life on Socotra, but these effects have become invisible over the intervening millennia. How, then, are we to assess the positive and negative impacts of the Maritime Silk Road on Socotra and the peoples who have made this island home? The relational perspective presents opportunities for seeing that societies within the ancient Maritime Silk Road were both mutually dependent and mutually constituted, even if they did not necessarily realise this was the case and even if not all relations were equally beneficial to all actors.

The same holds true for the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, which alongside the Silk Road Economic Belt, forms part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Liu and Dunford (2016, p. 326) suggest that China's strategic use of the Silk Road concept to frame the discourse surrounding the BRI is rooted precisely in the fact that the Silk Road is "an iconic Chinese product" that is not actually *about* China:

> China intended not simply to re-establish the ancient trade routes but to use the cultural meaning of Silk Road as a 'soft' basis for international cooperation. First, the

> Silk Road is probably the only symbol of the common cultural heritage and close historical trade and cultural relationships of most countries in Asia, Europe and Africa.

The Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road are helpful shorthand for connectivity, mutual benefit, and non-hierarchical relations. They are a powerful "brand" (Bhoothalingam, 2016, p. 47).

This branding exercise is evident in the manner in which the BRI's overarching framework is set forth in the National Development and Reform Commission's (2015) *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*: this document presents the BRI as "a systematic" project by the Chinese government seeking to "instill vigor and vitality into the ancient Silk Road, connect Asian, European and African countries more closely and promote mutually beneficial cooperation to a new high and in new forms." Within this vision, China's BRI is situated within a deep history and wide geography; China leads the way, but the BRI does not focus on China as such:

> More than two millennia ago the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges that linked the major civilizations of Asia, Europe and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road by later generations. For thousands of years, the Silk Road Spirit—"peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit"—has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilization, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.

The Chinese state has deployed precisely the vision of the ancient Maritime Silk Road as an uncentred network of relation as a conceptual foundation for the BRI. Within such a vision, constructed in part through what Winter (2019) terms 'heritage diplomacy', the network of relations between China and other states will build upon the lasting impacts of historical processes, and the other actors in these relations will continue having their own perspectives on the matter. The Chinese state's discourse of the 'Silk Road Spirit' is quite possibly romanticised, and its non-localised vision of peaceful intercultural cooperation would quite likely be unrecognisable to people living within the ancient Maritime Silk Road. Furthermore, whereas the ancient Maritime Silk Road was only conceptualised as such in retrospect, the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is being promoted by a particular state in real time. As Wang (2019, p. 205) notes, this decentred approach and its "idea of a cultural route promotes and legitimizes a new category of territory without boundary and calls for transnational actions to move towards a borderless understanding of the heritage world," yet such an approach privileges a specifically Chinese notion of what borderlessness should like and how transnationality ought to operate.

The BRI simultaneously means different things to different actors (Flint & Zhu, 2019). Each of us is at the centre of our own network of relation (Qin, 2018), without our individual perspective ever amounting to the totality of the network. For the average citizen of Mauritius, for example, China may well be the driving force behind the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, but Mauritius itself will remain at the centre of the 'island movements'

(Pugh, 2013) that make up the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road in practice. Peoples' thoughts about the BRI will inevitably be influenced by their own positions, experiences, and epistemologies, rather than adhere closely to the proclamations of Chinese state policy documents. China can promote the concept of the Maritime Silk Road, but it cannot independently determine the contents of this mutually constructed concept.

Similarly, in discussing the ancient Maritime Silk Road from a Guangdong perspective, we have engaged in narratives of the island-to-island movement of specific products out from China and to ports in Western Asia. Such narratives may encourage us to imagine processes dominated by highly directed trade and production policies within China, whereas in fact many of the routes and mechanisms within the ancient Maritime Silk Road were initiated by and continued to be led by actors located elsewhere in the region. Furthermore, while various islands may have possessed shared interconnections, these interconnections were not centrally organised. The ancient trade routes between China and Western Asia, for example, consisted of numerous individual journeys that would be undertaken by multiple sets of crews, vessels, and merchants. It is vital to recognise though that, when considering both the ancient Maritime Silk Road and the 21st-Century Silk Road, we are seeking to systematise and conceptualise (from our various perspectives) a diversity of interlocking political, economic, cultural, and technical actors.

It may thus be unhelpful to dwell upon the extent to which the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road truly does represent a revival of ancient traditions, given that the ancient Silk Road Archipelago was—like all archipelagos—always a product of the human imagination. Nevertheless, Winter (2016) suggests the necessity of considering how China's "historical narrative of silk, seafaring, and cultural and religious encounters opens up a space for other countries to draw on their own deep histories in the crafting of contemporary trade and political relations." The potential of the Maritime Silk Road concept lies precisely in its ability to circumvent understandings that focus on overseas projections of Chinese power and that perceive the Chinese state as constructing this network to link together East and West in an essentialised manner. We may find it more productive to perceive a vast, mutually constituted archipelago than to perceive a system of centre-periphery tensions and binary conflict.

Islands are only islands if we think of them as such, and an archipelago is only an archipelago if we decide to gather islands together into it (Grydehøj, 2018; Pigou-Dennis & Grydehøj, 2014). A conscious choice must be made not just to envision individual, bounded islands but to follow island movements (Pugh, 2016). We may choose to conceptualise the ancient Maritime Silk Road and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road as networks of archipelagic relation, connecting islands (and other places) throughout the Indian Ocean and beyond. Taken as a whole, as flows of exchange accumulated across the millennia, as something both deeper and more expansive than just the travels of Zheng He, the political philosophy of this or that Chinese emperor, or the geopolitical concerns of any one present-day power bloc, this Silk Road Archipelago has come to encompass such island and archipelago spaces as Abu Dhabi, Aden, Bahrain, Comoros, Dahlak Archipelago, Farasan Islands, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Hormuz, Kharg, Kilwa, Kochi, Lagos, Macao, Madagascar, Mafia Island, the Maldives, Mauritius, Mombasa, Mumbai, Penang Island, Qeshm, Seychelles, Singapore, Socotra, Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Tiran, Weh Island, and Zanzibar. As the conceptual scope of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road has continued to grow, so too has its constituent archipelago,

which now stretches eastward to Papua New Guinea and the Philippines and out to the small island states and territories of the Pacific.

This Maritime Silk Road has no starting point and no destination, no beginning and no end, no centre and no periphery.

Conclusion

There is nothing 'natural' about the Silk Road Archipelago; it is a human creation. Yet every archipelago is an 'archipelago of the mind', to adapt Gillis' (2004) phrasing. The archipelago is a conceptual tool that we use to forge mental connections, to understand the ways in which island identities are formed through relation. Within this archipelagic vision, neither the ancient Maritime Silk Road nor the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road need to be forced within a binary perspective of essentialised East–West conflict or hierarchical relation. 'Thinking with the archipelago' (Pugh, 2013) can help us shift away from inherently conflict-oriented conceptions of relations between states and peoples. The fact that we are dealing here with island communities within an archipelago is not merely incidental. The Maritime Silk Road evolved around and revolves around islands precisely because islands are exceptionally well placed for hosting processes of mobility and exchange. Recognising the role of islandness and archipelagic connection within the Maritime Silk Road tells us something about the nature of the Maritime Silk Road itself.

The relational island studies approach that we have taken here is not the only potential way of approaching the Maritime Silk Road, but we believe that, by taking this approach, we enable new ways of understanding both historical and present-day political, economic, social, and cultural processes.

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