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Conceptualising the far west: early Chinese notions of Da Qin and the Indian Ocean trade

Matthew A. Cobb

In the *Liangshu* 梁書 (*Book of Liang*), a seventh-century Chinese history (primarily covering the period 502–557 CE), a curious incident is reported about the arrival of a merchant called Qin Lun 秦論 on the coast of Jiaozhi 交趾 in 226 CE – a region equating to the Red River delta in Vietnam.¹ This merchant, who is said to have been from Da Qin (literally ‘Great Qin’), a term often interpreted by many modern scholars as referring to the Roman Empire, was sent by the prefect of Jiaozhi to the ruler Sun Quan 孫權 (r. 222–252 CE) of the state of Wu, who asked him to provide a report on his native country and its peoples. After being gifted ‘men and women/boys and girls, ten of each’ Qin Lun returned home. It is stated in the passage directly preceding this anecdote that merchants from Da Qin frequently visit Funan 扶南, a Prefecture in the Mekong delta, as well as Rinan 日南 (Annam) and Jiaozhi, but few of the inhabitants of these southern frontier states have travelled to Da Qin.

If it is accepted that Da Qin does in fact refer to the Roman Empire in this instance, and that this comment is directly connected to the anecdote about Qin Lun, then we would, on the face it, appear to have attestation of supposed frequent travel by merchants from the Roman Empire to areas along the coast of what is today Vietnam during the early-third century CE (possibly also from the end of the second century CE).² However, this seems an unlikely proposition given our understanding of the levels of direct participation by Roman merchants in the Indian Ocean trade at this time, as is clear from the intensity of occupation at the key Egyptian Red Sea ports of

Myos Hormos and Berenike, as well as the comparatively more limited distribution of Mediterranean finds (ceramics, bronze-wares, glass-wares, etc.) at sites in East Africa, Southern Arabia and India in this period.³ Additionally, as will be outlined subsequently, most merchants from the Roman Empire confined their activities to the northwestern Indian Ocean (Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea). Regular travel to the regions of Funan, Rinan and Jiaozhi for merchants setting out from the Red Sea would probably take up at least two trading seasons – entailing travel from the Arabian Sea region, into the Bay of Bengal, and then subsequently into the South China Sea (at each stage following the rhythms of the monsoon winds). Given the availability of goods from this latter region in western Indian ports this would seem to make little economic sense.⁴ This raises the conundrum of how this passage should be interpreted.

The problem posed by this passage also feeds into a broader debate on how to interpret and utilise claims made about Da Qin in early Chinese texts of the first millennium CE. Since at least the nineteenth century, scholars like Friedrich Hirth, who produced his seminal *China and the Roman Orient*, have attempted to match the claims made in these texts with what is known of the history and geography of the Roman Empire or parts of the eastern Roman Empire.⁵ This broadly credulous approach to the early Chinese narratives about Da Qin has continued in both sinology and classical scholarship up to the present day; although there are certainly scholars, like Shiratori Kurakichi, who have argued that we need to be more cognizant of imaginative elements in these narratives.⁶ Raoul McLaughlin, for example, has sought to utilise these narratives in his discussion of Roman participation in the Indian Ocean trade. He is willing to accept the claims made in these texts at face value, going so far as to describe them as ‘credible and compelling’. He assumes that information derived from travellers coming from the Roman Empire who reached the Chinese court was the source of the claims that appear in these Chinese texts.⁷

Similarly others like Sitwell, Li Feng and Christopoulos have assumed that many of the claims about Da Qin derive from what the envoy Gan Ying 甘英 heard while in Parthian territory in 97 CE.⁸ The consequence of this set of assumptions is that the claim made in the *Liangshu* about the frequent arrival of merchants from Da Qin on the coast of Vietnam would be taken at face value.⁹

It is the aim of this chapter to consider these early Chinese narratives about Da Qin and whether they can be used as uncomplicated evidence for the development of Indian Ocean trading activity in the early-mid first millennium CE as scholars like McLaughlin have done. In order to do this a brief contextual outline will be given of the nature of the texts themselves, the origin and meaning of the term Da Qin, what claims these texts make about direct contact between the Chinese world and people from Da Qin and finally a consideration of Indian Ocean trading networks in a wider context.

It is argued here that very few people from the Mediterranean world made it as far as China, and vice versa, though this does not preclude the possibility of interaction at intermediary ports. However, it seems more likely that if information did reach China about the Roman world, it would very often be disseminated by intermediary cultures. Moreover, it is difficult to definitively prove the origins of claims made about Da Qin in texts like the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu*, and each needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. In fact, it is apparent that many of the claims made in these texts can be better understood within Chinese mythical, religious, cultural and geographical frameworks for viewing the world – especially the more fantastical and utopian claims. Finally, it is argued that the term Da Qin had become sufficiently nebulous in meaning by the time the *Liangshu* was written (seventh century CE) that the claim made about

merchants from Da Qin frequently visiting Vietnam may reflect conflation with other groups, if not outright fabrication on the part of the author.

Early Chinese texts, ethnography and the meaning of Da Qin

It is necessary to start our contextual discussion with an outline of some of the key early Chinese texts that discuss Da Qin. The most important of these texts from the perspective of (purported) Romano–Chinese contact are the *Weilüe* 魏略, compiled by Yu Huan 魚豢 in the third century CE, and the *Hou Hanshu*, compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 in the fifth century.¹⁰ As noted earlier there are also histories of additional interest, including the aforementioned *Liangshu*. The reason for focusing on the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* is that these are the earliest texts to describe Da Qin, and that later texts are often very derivative. Other poetic and noncourt texts also make brief allusions to Da Qin from the early centuries CE, such as the botanical text the *Nanfang caomu zhuang* 南方草木狀 (*Plants of the Southern Regions*).

Standard histories and ethnography

Works like the *Hou Hanshu* and *Liangshu* were included in the canon of 24 Histories, a grouping retrospectively created in the Ming period (1368–1644 CE). The *Weilüe* is not included in this list, but the section surviving to us was incorporated into the commentary of one of these standard histories, namely the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*), and was certainly a work compiled from official records and earlier histories.¹¹ The process of compilation means that later works often repeat many of the claims made in earlier histories – only rarely do we see attempts to verify or critique earlier material, although this is not to say new claims and embellishments were never added.¹² The authors of the *Weilüe*, *Hou Hanshu* and

Liangshu were writing several generations or centuries after the purported incidents of contact (or attempted contact) and it is not always clear which earlier accounts they drew upon.¹³ But as noted above, it is often inferred that they are based on reports from men like Gan Ying who travelled as far west as Southern Mesopotamia. Leslie and Gardiner argue that the *Hou Hanshu* reflects knowledge originally derived from the first to second centuries CE, while the *Weilüe* reflects the early third century CE.¹⁴ However, this is entirely based on their own internal reading of the information contained within the texts and is far from conclusive.

A fairly consistent feature of these histories is that they contain one or more chapters dealing with peoples living beyond the imperial bounds of China – such ‘ethnographic’ and geographic discussions have been a feature since at least the *Shiji* 史記 of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–86 BCE).¹⁵ In the case of the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* they conveniently collate their discussion of Da Qin in the ‘Western Regions’ sections of their work. Unsurprisingly they tend to present a Sinocentric viewpoint and make little use of ‘external’ sources. As a result, any detail provided needs to be understood in relation to the interests of the Chinese compilers and scholar-officials (who were the primary audience for these texts) – which in the case of standard histories often tends to relate to the realities of imperial administration.¹⁶

One fairly common feature of what might be termed ancient ethnography is the attempt to explain other cultures and people within reference to one’s own. Scholars in previous decades have tended to focus on antithesis, extreme opposites, as a feature of these types of ethnographic study. It has often been assumed that part of the reason for this antithesis was that it provided a means of reflecting on one’s own cultural identity in opposition to the ‘Other’, rather than as a means of understanding the Other itself, consequently making redundant any attempts to use these accounts to establish clear comprehension of different cultures. However, recently various

scholars have sought to nuance this perspective. Not all ethnographic narratives are focused solely on the polar – ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – some appear to implicitly and explicitly explore cultural relativism and commonality (or universality) – common, shared or similar values, customs and lifestyles perceived as being universal to all cultures.¹⁷ Of course, the latter may also be subject to authorial construction (i.e. they are not necessarily, unmediated factual reports). These caveats should be taken into consideration when analysing Chinese ‘ethnographic’ and geographic ideas about Da Qin.

What is striking about the narratives concerning Da Qin in the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* is that this land is not presented as an ‘Other’ in terms of polar opposition. Indeed, many ideas about Da Qin are fantastical and utopian, with these peoples being presented as very much like the Chinese, as we shall see.

The meaning of Da Qin

As previously noted, the term Da Qin has frequently been assumed by many scholars to refer to the Roman Empire or at least parts of the eastern Roman Empire (like Syria) – though some have sought to connect it variously with Macedonia, Egypt and Arabia. The term literally means ‘Great Qin’.¹⁸ This should most likely be understood as a reference to the Chinese notion of a significant civilisation (like itself) that existed in the extreme West. The term seems to be entirely Chinese in origin and does not have any derivation from another language. Its earliest use appears to connect to the explorations of the envoy Gan Ying in 97 CE.¹⁹ The debate over exactly which region the term Da Qin refers to has tended to focus on scholarly attempts to connect topographical and geographical descriptions to what is known about the Roman Empire. These arguments, of course, rest on the assumption that the information in the Chinese sources is based on some original factual report, rather than being the product of literary imagination.

Indeed, Shiratori Kurakichi has suggested that the term Da Qin might actually be a physical reference to the size of the people (see below).²⁰

The term Da Qin was not the only one in use. The *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* also mention Lijian 犁鞬 as an alternative, as well as the term Haixi 海西, meaning ‘West of the Sea’. This latter designation is used both as a description and as an alternative name. The meaning and origin of these alternative names has generated a fair amount of contention among scholars. Debate surrounds whether they represent confusion or conflation in the sources, with their potential original denotation of another area. For example, the name Lijian has been variously interpreted as originally referring to Petra, Alexandria, the Seleucid Empire or possibly the region of Hyrcania.²¹ Likewise, Christopoulos has suggested that Haixi in fact refers to Egypt.²² Unlike the term Da Qin, these terms appear to have been transliterated foreign words, and attempts to identify them have particularly relied on phonology, an approach not free of difficulties given the nature of the source material.²³

In light of these issues, it is probably best to accept that the Chinese sense of what Da Qin was remained quite vague and nebulous, in the same way that Roman notions of the Seres (‘Silk People’) continued to reflect a hazy conception of the distant East.

Embassies and reaching China via Indian Ocean networks of exchange

There are a variety of means, both direct and indirect, by which information about particular cultures might be transmitted in the ancient world. The movement of peoples is one of the most obvious factors behind the transmission of ideas – this movement potentially being spurred by trade, migration, proselytization or other drives. The ‘quality’ of this information could vary, ranging from personal observations and direct contacts to secondhand reports and hearsay. More

incidentally, material goods might also inform cultural perceptions, although the origins of this material (and its original significance) might not always be fully understood by the recipient culture.

Embassies

Evidence for direct contact between peoples from the Roman world and China appears to be very limited on the available evidence. This is further complicated by the fact that the ethnographic terminology employed in both cultures is far from precise. In the Graeco-Roman literary tradition there are references to the Seres ('Silk-People'), Sērikē and Sinai/Thinai, which are located by the author of the *Periplus* and Claudius Ptolemy at the distant eastern edge of the οἰκουμένη.²⁴ However, the identification of these people has proved quite contentious, with suggestions ranging from an origin in Central Asia, East Asia or China. However, such ideas were probably quite nebulous and attempting to fix them in a specific geographic and cultural sense is almost certainly misguided.²⁵ In any case, the epitome of Florus and the *Historia Augusta* are the only western sources to speak of emissaries from the Seres coming to the Roman Empire. Florus purports that one such embassy came during the reign of Augustus (along with ambassadors from the Scythians, Sarmatians and Indians), while the author of the *Life of Aurelian* makes reference to the Seres visiting during his triumph in 274 CE.²⁶ There are no accounts of 'ambassadors' being sent from the Roman Empire to the land of the Seres, Sērikē or Sinai/Thinai.

By contrast, no Chinese historical tradition makes reference to any of their ambassadors reaching Da Qin; although we are told of an attempt by Gan Ying, who was sent by the General Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE) to explore as far as the western sea. In the course of his journey it is claimed that he reached what appears to be the mouth of the Persian Gulf, before apparently being told by

those in the region that if he wanted to reach Da Qin he would need to take a sea voyage that would entail a round trip of anywhere between two months to two years. Bulking at this prospect Gan Ying decided to return home. Most scholars tend to assume that this refers to a sea voyage round the Arabian Peninsula, in which rounding it and entering the Red Sea it would be possible to reach Egypt.²⁷

We do not hear of any subsequent attempts to send embassies to Da Qin, but it is claimed in some of the Chinese dynastic histories that envoys from Da Qin were sent by the king Andun 安敦 (usually identified as Marcus Aurelius Antonius) in 166 CE.²⁸ The envoys mentioned in this passage are often considered to be merchants rather than genuine representatives of the Roman Empire, and the precious but not spectacular goods – ivory, rhinoceros horn and turtle shell – were probably picked up in the course of their voyage.²⁹ The next chronological date we have for contact is that of Qin Lun in 226 CE, in the aforementioned passage of the *Liangshu*. After this the *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, a seventh-century reference encyclopaedia, records the claim that a few people from Da Qin came via southern China (Guangxi – i.e. via the Sea route) in 282 CE, bringing with them ‘tribute’, including fire-washed cloth (asbestos cloth).³⁰ The *Nanfang caomu zhuang*, an early fourth-century botanical work, claims that in 284 CE Da Qin sent 30,000 roles of honey fragrance paper to China.³¹ McLaughlin goes so far as to suggest that the incidents in 282 and 284 CE represent attempts by private merchants from Alexandria to establish trade connections with the Chinese court. However, this is purely speculation on his part.³² Indeed, there may be some confusion in these sources, with this being a single ‘embassy’ connected to the year 284/285 CE.³³

As a side note, it is worth stating that these few reported incidents of contact all relate to individuals arriving via the southern sea route (i.e. Indian Ocean and South China Sea) and not

overland through Central Asia. Indeed, there is little reason to believe that people from the Roman Empire ever travelled the whole way along what is known as the Silk Road, or more accurately Silk Routes. Goods conveyed along these routes would have been exchanged by various groups at different stages. In fact, the only evidence we have for such an extended land journey is the expedition sent by Maes Titianus, a Macedonian merchant – the account of which was recorded by Marinus of Tyre (and survives in Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography*). This expedition got as far as a place known as the Stone Tower, which is usually located in the region of the Pamir Mountains, the area merging with the Hindu Kush, the Himalayas and the Tianshan mountain range.³⁴

Connecting West and East: wider Indian Ocean trade networks in the first millennium CE

These few instances in which we hear of 'envoys' or merchants arriving in China appear to be quite exceptional and do not suggest regular direct contact. This is perhaps unsurprising, especially with regards to regular merchant activity. Not only because of the vast distances involved, but also from what we know about Indian Ocean trading patterns. The first millennium CE did see substantial (if not always even) growth in the level of interconnections between different parts of the wider Indian Ocean world. In the western Indian Ocean (especially the Arabian Sea region) networks of exchange developed between the Mediterranean world, East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and western India. Similarly, in this same period, the eastern Indian Ocean also saw the growth of various trading links between eastern India and Southeast Asia.³⁵

However, many traders operating in the northern Indian Ocean are likely to have confined their activities to a particular sphere like the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal, likewise for those

operating in the South China Sea in the case of Sino-Southeast Asian commercial relations.³⁶

The regional patterns of the monsoons winds, as well as more localised conditions, meant that travel from the Red Sea all the way to the South China Sea was probably not achievable within a single sailing season, at least prior to the development of steam-powered ships.³⁷ Of course, the existence of subsystems in the wider Indian Ocean did not preclude the wide-ranging movement of goods across the Afro-Eurasian world. Chinese silks were brought to the Mediterranean, often changing hands a number of times, while Roman coins and glassware appear to have found their way to Southeast Asia, most probably via intermediaries. Certain regions or entrepôts acted as conduits between the different trading spheres: India (and later Sri Lanka) as a conduit between the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, and the Thai-Malay Peninsula as a conduit between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea.³⁸ It is not inconceivable that a small group of Roman merchants were occasionally adventurous enough to sail as far as Southeast Asia (and travel on even as far as China), but this should be seen as the exception rather than the rule.³⁹ Likewise, travel from southern China to southeast India would have been fairly lengthy (at least two years for a return journey) and probably irregular.⁴⁰

There is some evidence (Arabic and Chinese literary testimony) for a brief period during the last few centuries of the first millennium CE (although possibly going back to the late Sassanian period) of Persian (Bosi 波斯) and Arab (Dashi 大食) merchants sailing as far as Guangzhou (Canton), in southern China.⁴¹ The Belitung shipwreck has been assumed to be representative of this activity.⁴² However, it should be noted the nature of the excavations has proved controversial and the types of wood (both African and Indian in origin) that were used in its construction, as well as the wadding material (possibly Southeast Asian), complicates attempts at definitively confirming an Arabian, Indian or other origin of construction.⁴³ In any case, by the beginning of

the early second millennium CE this more direct trade activity came to an end, while places like Southern India and the Malay Peninsula continued to function as key intermediary points of exchange. There is little evidence to suggest that around the early third century CE we should see merchants from the Roman Empire as forerunners to this later (temporary) direct trade undertaken by Persian and Arab merchants. The vast majority of material culture from the Roman Empire found across sites in the wider Indian Ocean world clearly connect to Arabian Sea networks of exchange (integrated into overland and riverine networks in East Africa, Arabia and Central and South Asia). Moreover, it has been reasonably suggested that much Graeco-Roman information about Southeast Asia seems to have derived from Indian informants, since the former contain less detail than the Indian accounts but list similar place-names.⁴⁴

Given the issues just outlined, and the fact that the literary sources suggest very limited contact with peoples from Da Qin, it is unlikely that direct contact was a significant means by which knowledge about the Far West was disseminated to China. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that some information about political structures, trading patterns and social and commercial networks could have been disseminated via intermediaries or at intermediary ports. There are certainly parallel historical examples pertaining to the Indian Ocean that indicate that information about other cultures could be indirectly acquired. A case in point is the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* – a mid-first century CE merchant's guide to the Indian Ocean. The account was written by a Greek-speaking merchant operating from Egypt, who clearly had personal experience of the trade.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, De Romanis has convincingly argued that the author's descriptions of coasts, sea routes and commodities reflect the accumulation of information from a variety of different sources (including, but not limited to, personal observations).⁴⁶ The author of the text aimed to provide key details about the major ports of the northwestern Indian Ocean

littoral, including giving a description of the coast of East Africa below the Horn. The detail in the account suggests a reliance on secondhand information (it is notable that Claudius Ptolemy later mentions only two named Roman mariners who had explored the coast as far as Rhapta, one of whom had been blown off course by accident).⁴⁷ Most likely the author of the *Periplus* heard reports from Arab skippers and agents from the Southern Arabian Peninsula who frequently engaged with and intermarried into the local population of Rhapta (probably near Dar es Salaam), and, as a result, had knowledge of the area and the language of its people.⁴⁸

Chinese notions of Da Qin

Having outlined the nature of the texts, the debates over the meaning of Da Qin and the evidence (or lack thereof) for Romano-Chinese contact within the context of the wider Indian Ocean trade, it is worth turning to the claims made in the texts themselves. The authors of the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* make various statements about the kingdom of Da Qin, including its supposed political structures, wealth, the dress and appearance of the people and its proximity to the realm of Xi Wangmu 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West). Many of these claims are quite fantastical and are not easily married to what is known of Imperial Roman history. These details tend to elicit two broad responses. The first, adopted by scholars like McLaughlin and Christopoulos, we have already noted. This position holds that the information contained within these texts represents genuine transfer of (at least some) knowledge about this distant western region, albeit with a great deal of misconception resulting from its transmission and its filtering through the lens of Chinese cultural conceptions. However, there is a second broad approach that can be taken to the narrative in these texts. Namely that they largely reflect a construct of the distant West based on (rather than simply being moulded by) Chinese mythical, religious, cultural and geographical

frameworks for viewing the world. If the former position is adopted, the Indian Ocean might be seen as a clear conduit through which knowledge of the Roman Empire (however, limited) filtered into the Chinese world. Whereas the latter position suggests little meaningful transfers of knowledge beyond the basic awareness of a powerful kingdom existing in the West.

It is not necessary for us to take an absolutist view with regards to either position. It is not unreasonable to suppose that some reports or hearsay gleaned about this distant land in the west could easily have been woven into a narrative that is heavily influenced by Chinese conceptions of the universe in which they lived. Attempting to disentangle this is no easy task. Any assessment about the claims needs to be done on a case by case basis. I would, however, argue that a great many of the claims can be best explained in reference to Chinese mythical, religious, cultural and geographical frameworks for viewing the world. Clearly a great deal of the narrative we get from these texts is a construct, which has obvious implications for any scholar wishing to utilise statements from these narratives to further our understanding of the ancient Indian Ocean trade.

The people of Da Qin

The constructive elements of these texts are immediately apparent from the physical descriptions given of the people of Da Qin. They are said to be tall and honest, like the Chinese, with the *Weilüe* even stating that they themselves claim to have originally come from China.⁴⁹ It seems most logical to assume that the authors of these texts, who relied on earlier reports/account (or at least claim to) took the term Da Qin (Great China) – which may simply have been used in origin as an unqualified designation of a significant kingdom in the west – and subsequently embellished their descriptions by assuming that the term implied some kind of ethnic or cultural similarities.⁵⁰ One other (complimentary) possibility is that in making Da Qin in some respects

like an idealised China, its use as an ethnographic ‘mirror’ became more palatable. That is to say a useful means of highlighting perceived issues or failings within one’s own culture by referencing another.

Location and environment

The geography of the kingdom of Da Qin also fits Chinese conceptions of the lands to the West in both a geopolitical and in a mythic-religious sense. It is said to be located west of Anxi 安息 (usually understood as referring to Parthia) and Tiaozhi 條支 (sometimes taken to refer to Characene and Susiana). Da Qin’s western borders stray into the realm of the mythic-religious. It is described as the furthest land one reaches before arriving at the realm of Xi Wangmu, the Shifting Sands and Weak Water.⁵¹ Beyond this is the region where the sun sets. Xi Wangmu was associated, particularly in Daoism, with prosperity, bliss and immortality. Other facets of the accounts of Da Qin are likely coloured by this association.⁵² For example, some of the products associated with this kingdom are not ones we would identify with the Roman Empire, such as jade.⁵³ If we consider that the Jade Mountain was said to be one of the homes of Xi Wangmu, then the Chinese association of jade with Da Qin is not too surprising.

More broadly the kingdom of Da Qin is represented as being very prosperous – the kings lived in palaces with pillars made of crystal or glass.⁵⁴ While the Roman Empire was known for its very fine glassware, it would be a bit of a stretch to take the ‘credulous’ view and suggest that this formed the underpinning of these descriptions. Perhaps more worthy of note is the fact that glass is frequently associated with fantasy worlds in the literature of the Han and Wei periods, such as in the *Shizhou ji* 十洲記 (An Account of the Ten Continents [pre-265 CE]), which mentions a glass palace in Fangzhang Mountain.⁵⁵

Governance and administration

The governance of the kingdom of Da Qin, as outlined in the *Weilüe* and the *Hou Hanshu*, also shows utopian elements and the influence of Chinese notions about ruler-ship. Most evident is the claim that the king is not permanent and can be replaced, particularly if unusual natural phenomena occur. Additionally, it is reported that the king has a council of 36 leaders/advisors who must be consulted, and that the common people can put their cases to the king, literally in sacks, to be addressed subsequently.⁵⁶ The former notion of the resignation of the king at signs of the displeasure of heaven seems plausibly connected to the notion of the Mandate of Heaven.⁵⁷ While the responsiveness of the king to his advisors and the concerns of the people also seem to broadly fit into an idealising trope, though why exactly the number of advisors was 36 is difficult to say.⁵⁸

Some scholars have sought to offer explanations for these claims that suggest a misconstrued (rather than fabricated) sense of Roman history on the part of these Chinese authors. Theories include the notion that this is an idealised interpretation of the swift succession of emperors during the third century or an allusion to consular elections or the Nervan-Antonine practice of adopting successors.⁵⁹ Similarly the practice of going around and collecting/listening to petitions has been connected with the practice of Roman provincial governors giving assizes (it was quite common for governors to tour their province, so as to hear legal cases and attend to related business), while some suggest that the replacement of kings may refer to the replacement of governors (like that of Egypt, who resided in the old Ptolemaic palace in Alexandria).⁶⁰ Further attempts to rationalise the information from these texts can be seen with regards to the 36 advisors/generals of Da Qin. One such idea has been to suggest that they represent the *consilium principis*, the small council of select senators and magistrates that consulted with the *princeps* on

matters of state.⁶¹ It is worth noting, however, that this was not a fixed body – either in terms of membership or operation under particular emperors (who could in any case consult as freely as they wished).⁶² A point that makes this group even less obviously based on anything tangible from Roman political history. It appears easier to place this claim into a broader idealising narrative (the ethnographic ‘mirror’).

The chief city of the king of Da Qin is said to be more than 100 *li* around (41.5 km) and located near the mouth of a river. Both the *Hou Hanshu* and *Weilüe* describe the chief city of Da Qin as having five palaces each located 10 *li* apart (4.15 km), with the king travelling to one of these palaces each day.⁶³ By the late first to second century CE the Palatine had become the main location for the wider palatial complex of the emperors, though they had property in other parts of the city as well, such as the Gardens of Sallust.⁶⁴ There is no obvious topographic connection with what is claimed in these texts. Attempts could be made to suggest that since Lijian (possibly originally a designation for Egypt, but later equated with Da Qin; see below) and Haixi (‘West of the Sea’) are equated/conflated with Da Qin, then the authors may have been describing another city like Alexandria or Antioch-on-the-Orontes. For example, Hirth interprets the descriptions of the topography and regions in the chief city of Da Qin as more likely representing Antioch rather than Rome.⁶⁵ Hoppál restates this case by suggesting the possibility that the authors may have conflated a prosperous administrative centre in the Roman East with the capital, that by the Late Antique period the western emperors were often away from Rome, that aspects of local administration of the city may suit the description of our sources and that they misconstrued some of the public buildings in the city as five palaces.⁶⁶ The problem with this theory is that it requires sufficient knowledge of the topography of this city to have been transmitted to China (of which we have no obvious indication of by what mechanism this might have happened), with a

simultaneous lack of knowledge of the political structures of the Roman Empire.⁶⁷ The suggestion that information about the chief city of Da Qin was based on an actual city (or conflation of a number of cities) cannot be ruled out, but the limited details make any attempt to assert a specific site a doubtful prospect.

An alternative explanation, which to my mind better fits, is that the five palaces accord with contemporary Chinese notions of the *Wuxing* 五行 (encompassing the Five Elements, Five Phases, Five Agents, Five Movements, Five Processes, Five Steps and Five Planets) and the cardinal direction, which had come to be associated with the Five Elements (west – metal, east – wood, south – fire, north – water, centre – earth).⁶⁸ Indeed, Shiratori Kurakichi, suggests this idea may connect to the notion of five celestial palaces and the legend of the Emperor Shun's periodic tour of inspection of the four sacred mountains.⁶⁹ Numerology was significant in Chinese culture, meaning it is very likely, though not absolutely certain, that some of the numbers given in the *Hou Hanshu* and *Weilüe* have a symbolic significance, although this can only be speculation.⁷⁰ In any case, there appears to be little obvious historical basis for the claim about the five palaces.

The products of Da Qin

Discussion of the products of Da Qin perhaps has most pertinence with regards to Indian Ocean trade. McLaughlin, working on the assumption that the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* faithfully reproduce information appearing in 'original reports', regards these texts as being able to provide information about Roman products reaching the Far East (the former text associating Da Qin with some 59 products).⁷¹ He even suggests that many of these goods, which are clearly from other regions such as Arabia and India, were reprocessed and reexported items from Roman workshops.⁷² On the face of it, it might be tempting to accept this premise, at least in part, since

some of the products listed in our Chinese texts do in fact derive from the Roman Empire (although not exclusively). These include gold, silver, various base metals, glass, red coral, asbestos cloth, realgar, storax, orpiment and saffron.⁷³ A few of these products like red coral were in fact highly regarded across many cultures.⁷⁴ While storax and glassware appear to have been particularly appreciated in China.⁷⁵ It might even be tempting to give some credence to the claim made in the *Weilüe* about the people of Da Qin reworking imported Chinese silk and reselling it at a profit.⁷⁶ This is because what seems to be corroborating evidence appears in a few Graeco-Roman sources. Pliny mentions women of the Empire dividing threads of silk and them reweaving them to make a lighter more gauze-like fabric; a practice also briefly alluded to in Lucan's *Pharsalia*.⁷⁷ Furthermore, there is a reference in the *Edict of Maximum Prices* to a variety of reworked silks including dyed and embroidered products (some with gold).⁷⁸

However, there are reasons to be more circumspect. In the case of the notion of reworking woven Chinese silk products, Hildebrandt observes that any such practice (pulling it out and stretching) would damage the fabric. She argues that instead 'Lucan may have alluded to a diaphanous, purple-dyed silken gown that was formerly a plissé-fabric, but stretched to make it transparent' and that Pliny is talking about the unravelling of the cocoons not woven fabric.⁷⁹ Further reason for doubt also derives from the fact that Da Qin need not automatically designate peoples from the Roman world. The existence of a reasonably developed silk industry in India in the early historic period should at least give us pause about whether the claim made in the *Weilüe* necessarily reflects accurate Chinese knowledge of Roman practices regarding silk processing.⁸⁰ With regards to the range of items listed as products of Da Qin, most of these, as noted, clearly derive from regions such as East Africa (ivory, rhinoceros horn); Southern Arabia (frankincense and myrrh); the Persian Gulf region (pearls); India (*dhūna*, rock crystal, pearls, ivory, carnelian);

and Southeast Asia (sea turtle shells).⁸¹ Rather than attempt to claim that all of these items were reprocessed and reexported from the Roman Empire, it seems more plausible to suggest that they were conflated with Da Qin, as a powerful semiutopian kingdom in the distant West, and that these authors were simply not in a position to clearly distinguish the origins of these products.⁸² This confusion and lack of clarity about the origin of particular imported products is not an unusual phenomenon. For example, there was a persistent and erroneous belief repeated in Graeco-Roman literature that cinnamon, cassia and nard came from Arabia.⁸³ It may also be possible to draw certain parallels with the list of products from Da Qin given in the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* with Buddhist ideas that made their way into China. In Mahayana Buddhism there is the concept of the 'Seven Treasures'. In the *Great Event* (an important Mahayana text) these seven consist of crystal or quartz, pearl, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, red coral and agate or coral (later texts substituted rubies or diamonds). These items became features of Buddhist heavens and also came to constitute elements of the immortal trees of Daoist paradises.⁸⁴ All of these items are listed in the *Weilüe* with the exception of lapis lazuli, but these could be understood as being subsumed within the various semiprecious gems category.⁸⁵ This appears similarly to be the case with the slightly less extensive list in the *Hou Hanshu*, which actually mentions blueish-green (*qingbi* 青碧) gems, quite possibly referring to lapis lazuli.⁸⁶ While Da Qin was understood as a terrestrial empire, the fact that it was in the Far West near the location where paradise was situated (at least in certain religious-philosophical creeds like variants of Buddhism and Daoism) may explain why these products were associated with this empire. This suggestion is, of course, speculative.⁸⁷

Da Qin as a nebulous concept?

Given the contested debate in modern scholarship regarding exactly what Da Qin refers to, and the fact that many mythic-religious concepts are associated with it, we should consider questioning whether our Chinese authors had a precise, consistent and coherent sense of this land. In consequence this has obvious implications for the way in which we understand the reference to merchants from Da Qin frequently sailing to Vietnam, mentioned in the *Liangshu*. The notion that a term that designates an ‘other’ ethnic-cultural group might be vague, imprecise and fluid (i.e. open to being understood differently from context to context) should not be surprising. This type of problem has a number of historical parallels. For example, the term Yavana, in origin, appears to have been used in parts of India to designate Greek speaking peoples (it is generally assumed that the Persian term for Ionians, Yauna, was transmuted into the Prakrit Yona, and Sanskrit Yavana). However, by the early to midcenturies of the first millennium CE it appears to have become much broader in meaning (not necessarily just designating Greek speakers), and could be understood in different terms (as appears to be the case in the Sangam literature of the Tamil cultures, as well as in inscriptional evidence from the Deccan and the island of Socotra).⁸⁸ Similarly the Graeco-Roman designation of the Aethiopians, a people that are broadly associated with northeast Africa, could, depending on the period and context, be associated with the Meroitic kingdom, or, by the third century CE (if not earlier), with the Axumite kingdom. Similarly some classical authors conflate India and Ethiopia and, at least by the Late Antique period, the term India (sometimes distinguished between India Major and India Minor) could include regions like East Africa.⁸⁹ This potential ambiguity should be borne in mind when considering the description of Da Qin and its people in the textual source material.

We also need to be cognizant of the fact that Chinese historical texts, as has been discussed, usually followed their predecessors when describing foreign countries and situations. Indeed, it is of interest that texts dating several centuries after the initial composition of the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* appear to transpose a number of ideas connected to Da Qin with Fulin 拂菻 (the latter usually being interpreted as referring to Byzantium).⁹⁰ Meaning some of the descriptions and designations repeated in later texts may represent fossilised ideas, which can become distorted in the process of conflation of earlier (sometimes more accurate) predecessors.⁹¹ This adds a further layer of complication when thinking about ‘knowledge transfer’, and how much can genuinely be taken as reports that resulted from trade contacts.

Conclusion

In reviewing early Chinese narratives about Da Qin in texts like the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu*, it appears that a lot of the claims are quite fantastical and utopian in tone. This is not to say that the genuine transmission (received either directly or via intermediaries) of information (however garbled) about the distant west never took place. However, many of the claims appear to fit into Chinese mythological, religious, philosophical, numerological and geographical conceptions of the world. It is also worth emphasising the point that the term Da Qin was probably quite vague in conception, and that the fossilisation of particular claims (and their subsequent transferal to descriptions of Fulin) as a result of the compiling by later authors adds a further complicated dimension to our assessment of the origins of these narratives.

These factors have undeniable implications when it comes to assessing the usefulness of these texts for understanding facets of wider Indian Ocean trade in the first millennium CE. The conflation, particularly in the *Weilüe*, of many products from the west with Da Qin obviously

suggests we cannot use this information as a clear-cut list of ‘Roman exports’ noted by the Chinese. More tentatively it could at least be used in a looser sense to vaguely tell us about the types of products making their way to China via seaborne and overland trade networks, but even here caution is required since it is not clear whether the compilers envisage all of these items as imports to China or merely items to be found in Da Qin.⁹² Furthermore, I would argue in light of the issues outlined in this chapter surrounding Chinese conceptions of Da Qin that the claim in the *Liangshu* (referring to the period of the third century CE) about merchants from Da Qin frequently coming to the coast of what is present-day Vietnam should not simply be taken at face value – it does not represent an unproblematic attestation of third-century Roman trading activity with the Far East.

Ultimately, it is not my intention to claim that these early Chinese texts have no use in the study of Indian Ocean and South China Sea networks of exchange (commercial and cultural) of the early mid-first millennium CE. However, I hope to have demonstrated that these reports need to be treated with a great deal of circumspection.

¹ *Liangshu* 54.798. Compiled by Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557–637) – an official of the Sui and later Tang dynasty.

² Preceding the reference to the frequent travels by merchants from Da Qin to what is now present-day Vietnam is a brief recounting of an earlier embassy from Da Qin that arrived in China in 166 CE; the fact that it precedes this statement adds a further degree of ambiguity. Does the claim allude to the very end of the second century as well as the early-third century CE? It should be noted that the term Roman merchants is used here as a convenient shorthand for various peoples of differing cultural and linguistic background (who seems to have frequently employed Greek as a lingua franca) who were subjects/citizens of the Roman state.

³ Most scholars regard the third century CE to be a period of low-level direct participation by merchants from the Roman Empire, with events such as the Antonine plague (from 165 CE) and subsequent social, economic and political problems in the Roman Empire seeming to exacerbate this decline (a modest downturn may have already sent in from the early mid-second century CE). For a summary of this issue see Matthew Adam Cobb, ‘The Chronology of Roman Trade in the Indian Ocean from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015, 58(3): 362–418. The tax rate on Indian Ocean imports was lowered from 25% to 12.5% at some point during the Severan period (193–235 CE – the *octava* was clearly in place by 227 CE – *Codex Justinianus* 4.65.7), which seems to both reflect a lower level of trade in this period and perhaps an attempt by the Roman state to restimulate it – Andrew Wilson, ‘Red Sea Trade and the State’, in Federico De Romanis and Marco Maiuro (eds), *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 13–32; Steven E. Sidebotham, Review of *Across the Ocean*, by Federico de Romanis and Marco Maiuro, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 2015, 29: 915–919.

⁴ *Periplus* 56.

⁵ Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records*, Leipzig & Munich: Georg Hirth, 1885.

⁶ See Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas Reflected in the Ta-ch'in Accounts', *MTB*, 15: 25–72; Shiratori Kurakichi, 'The Geography of the Western Region Studied on the Basis of the Ta-ch'in Accounts', *MTB*, 15: 73–163. By contrast, Leslie and Gardiner, while accepting there are some imaginative elements in the text, critique Shiratori and argue that while exaggerated these texts were 'aiming at a real country, however dimly seen'. In particular, arguing that the earlier texts the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* are the most convincing – Donald Daniel Leslie and Kenneth Herbert James Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, Rome: Bardi, 1996, p. xxv.

⁷ Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, London: Continuum, 2010, pp. 21, 107.

⁸ Nigel H. H. Sitwell, *Outside the Empire: The World the Romans Knew*, London: Paladin, 1984, p. 176; Li Feng, *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 280; Lucas Christopoulos, 'Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China (240 BC–1398 AD)', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 2012 230: 1–88, pp. 45–46. See also Leslie and Gardiner, *ibid.*, pp. 24–26.

⁹ That the reports in the *Liangshu* are not always the product of critical scrutiny and careful filtering of information is perhaps a generous way of characterising this text. For example, Shiratori Kurakichi notes how a spurious account by a charlatan (effecting the role of a Buddhist monk) claiming to have visited the fantasy land of Fu-Sang 扶桑 in the eastern ocean was accepted into the text (as in other dynastic annals) – Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas', p. 47.

¹⁰ The surviving portions of the *Weilüe* come from a later fifth-century commentary by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 – Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. 5, 20.

¹¹ Later travellers and geographers 'add little to the descriptions' in the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu*. Another text, the *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀, was compiled in the fourth century, but it is generally not regarded as an independent source, and at best, in rare cases can supplement the other two texts – *ibid.*, pp. 11, 21–22, 41, 57. Hence, the focus on the former two texts in this chapter.

¹² Michael Loewe, 'Knowledge of Other Cultures in China's Early Empires', in K. A. Raaflaub and Richard J. A. Talbert (eds), *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 75; Krisztina Hoppál, 'The Roman Empire According to the Ancient Chinese Sources', *Acta Ant. Hung.*, 2011, 51: 263–305, p. 269.

¹³ Whether the 'Western Regions' ('Xiyu Zhuan') section of the *Hou Hanshu* (ch. 88) drew upon the 'Xirong Zhuan' of the *Weilüe* is a contested issue – Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. 20–21; Yu Taishan, 'China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 2013, 242: 1–268, pp. 15–18. Yu Huan, the compiler of the *Weilüe* is not explicit about his sources of information – Hoppál, *ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁴ Leslie and Gardiner, *ibid.*, p. 21. They also suggest that both the *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu* may derive information from the nonextant *Dongguan Hanji* (p. 65).

¹⁵ On Zhang Qian and the *Shiji* of Sima Qian see Siep Stuurman, 'Herodotus and Sima Qian: History and the Anthropological Turn in Ancient Greece and Han China', *Journal of World History*, 2008, 19(1): 1–40.

¹⁶ Loewe, 'Knowledge of Other Cultures', pp. 75–77, 83.

¹⁷ This has certainly been the case in classical scholarship with regards to the Greek/Roman and Barbarian dichotomy. Although more recently there has been a trend towards nuancing the issue of the construction of identities through ethnography. On this debate see Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner (eds), *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013; Joseph Skinner, *The Invention of Greek Ethnography: From Homer to Herodotus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. In relation to Chinese ethnographic notions see Stuurman, *Herodotus and Sima Qian*.

¹⁸ On this see Yu Taishan, 'China and the Ancient Mediterranean World', pp. 1–3. See also Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. xxi–xxiv, who forcefully critique Hirth's earlier assumption that Da Qin only referred to the 'Roman Orient'.

¹⁹ Edwin G. Pulleyblank, 'The Roman Empire as Known to China', Review of *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, by Leslie and Gardiner, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1999, 119(1): 71–79, p. 77; Leslie and Gardiner, *ibid.*, pp. xviii, 4; Lin Ying, 'Ruler of the Treasure Country: The Image of the Roman Empire in Chinese Society from the First to the Fourth Century AD', *Latomus*, 2004, 63(2): 327–339; p. 327; Hoppál, 'Roman Empire', p. 270. The two texts which first mention Da Qin are the *Hou Hanshu* and *Weilüe* – Yu Taishan, *ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁰ Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas', p. 36.

²¹ Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, p. 159 (Petra); Homer H. Dubs, 'A Roman City in Ancient China', *Greece & Rome*, 1956, 4(2): 139–148, p. 140 (Alexandria); Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. xviii–xxvi, 253–254 (Seleucid Empire); Pulleyblank, *ibid.*, pp. 73–77 (Hyrcania).

²² Christopoulos, 'Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China', p. 41. Leslie and Gardiner, *ibid.*, p. xviii, note the possibility that Haixi originally denoted the Mediterranean, but subsequently was understood to refer to the southern (i.e. Indian Ocean) region.

²³ John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Route during the Later Han Dynasty 1st to 2nd Centuries CE*, Vols. I and II, Charleston: BookSurge Publishing, 2015, p. xxi.

²⁴ *Periplus* 64; Claudius Ptolemy *Geography* 2.1, 3.1–4. For a discussion of the geographic location of these peoples/places see W. J. van der Meulen, 'Ptolemy's Geography of Mainland Southeast Asia and Borneo', *Indonesia*, 1975, 19: 1–32.

²⁵ More broadly for this debate see Jean-Noël Robert, *De Rome à la Chine. Sur les routes de soie au temps des Césars*, Lincoln: Les Belles Lettres, 1997, pp. 67–96, 135; D. P. M. Weerakkody, *Taprobanē: Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to Greeks and Romans*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, p. 73. Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 13, believe that by time of Pliny (or at least Claudius Ptolemy) the Seres (and the land of Thin) could be associated with China. However, Hildebrandt is certainly right to note that such ethnological and geographical parameters are too limiting, and that the Seres could be any unknown peoples linked to the silk trade – Berit Hildebrandt, 'Silk Production and Trade in the Roman Empire', in Berit Hildebrandt, with Carole Gillis (eds), *Silk: Trade and Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxbow, 2017, p. 34. Moreover, I would add any identification was too vague to be fixed and specific in any case.

²⁶ Florus 4.2; *SHA Aurelian* 61.

²⁷ *Hou Hanshu* 88.10. A later Daoist text (*Taiqing jinye shendan jing* 太清金液神丹經) presents Da Qin in even more utopian terms, reporting that someone from China was accidentally blown off course for 60 days ending up in the land of Da Qin. Pretending to be an ambassador from Funan, he was taken to see the king of Da Qin, was given a bunch of gifts and subsequently took four years to reach Funan on his return journey. See Yu Taishan, 'China and the Ancient Mediterranean World', p. 195.

²⁸ *Hou Hanshu* 88.12.

²⁹ For a summary of scholars see Matthew Adam Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, p. 121, n. 139.

³⁰ *Yiwen leiju* 76.

³¹ *Nanfang caomu zhuang* 9.

³² McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, p. 139.

³³ On the possibility that the *Yiwen leiju* and *Nanfang caomu zhuang* are alluding to the same incident see Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 160.

³⁴ For discussion of the silk route see Craig Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia: The First Silk Road Era, 100 BCE–250 CE*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; David F. Graf, 'The Silk Road between Syria and China', in Andrew Wilson and Alan Bowman (eds), *Trade, Commerce and the State in the Roman World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 443–529.

³⁵ For a wider discussion of this trade activity see Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia*, Oxford: OUP India, 1994; Federico De Romanis, *Cassia, cinnamomo, ossidiana: uomini e merci tra Oceano indiano e Mediterraneo*, Rome: L'Erma Di Bretschneider, 1996; Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2008; Eivind Heldaas Seland, 'Archaeology of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean, 300 BC–AD 700', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 2014, 22: 367–402; Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, London: University of California Press, 2011; Tom Hoogervorst, *Southeast Asia in the Ancient Indian Ocean World*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013, pp. 13–15; Sing Chew, 'The Southeast Asian Connection in the First Eurasian World Economy, 200 BCE–CE 500', in Michael Pearson (ed.), *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 27–54. For an examination of not only economic but also cultural and intellectual interconnections in the ancient Indian Ocean see Matthew Adam Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts*, London: Routledge, 2019.

³⁶ Philippe Beaujard, 'The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems before the Sixteenth Century', *Journal of World History*, 2005, 16(4): 411–465, p. 413.

³⁷ Notionally the breadth of the Indian Ocean could be traversed in its southern region – peoples from Austronesia used winds and currents to reach Madagascar – Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 9. Much later the Dutch sailed some 4,416 nautical miles from the Cape to reach Southeast Asia – Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 131. However, the notion that regular trade networks (as opposed to periodic migrations) between Southeast Asia and Eastern Africa existed in the early centuries of the first millennium CE remains controversial. Miller argued that Pliny’s account of raft-men was evidence for a regular ‘cinnamon trade route’ connecting Southeast Asia and East Africa – James I. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire 29 B.C. to A.D. 641*, London: Clarendon Press, 1969. This idea, however, has since been heavily critiqued by Manfred G. Raschke, ‘New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East’, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 1978, 9(2): 604–1378, pp. 652–654. Although more recently Lytle has attempted to modify Millar’s argument, suggesting that cinnamon and cassia was brought (perhaps directly) from Southeast Asia to Somalia or Southern Arabia (not Madagascar and Rhapta) – Ephraim Lytle, ‘Early Greek and Latin Sources on the Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa’, in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Early Exchange between Africa and the Wider Indian Ocean World*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 113–134.

³⁸ Reference in the *Periplus* (36, 60) to the very large Indian vessels known as *kolandiophonta* operating in the Bay of Bengal testify to the existence of Indian and Southeast Asian trade links. The *Hanshu* 漢書 (‘Book of Han’ – first century CE) describes maritime links between Guangzhou and Malay Peninsula, including the exchange of gold and silks for pearls and glass – Lin Ying, ‘Ruler of the Treasure Country’, p. 329. On the role of the Straits of Malacca, Malay Peninsula and Sumatra as intermediary points where merchants met to exchange goods see Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, London: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 14.

³⁹ Even travelling to the Ganges region of northeast India appears to have been uncommon for Roman merchants, at least initially. Strabo (15.1.4) notes that only a small number of merchants had reached the Ganges, although by the Flavian period Pliny (*NH* 6.24.82) does give an estimate for the amount of time it took for ‘Roman’ vessels to sail from Sri Lanka to the Ganges (7 days compared to a journey of 20 days made by local reed boats). On the limited Roman material found in this region see Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade*, p. 173.

⁴⁰ The *Han Shu* (28B, 1671) does refer to some ships travelling from Xuwen and Hepu (Guangxi and Guangdong) to Huangzhi (perhaps near modern Chennai) in the time of Wudi (r. 141–187 BCE). This took place in a series of stages. For the outbound journey there was a 5-month sea journey, 4-month sea journey, a 20-day sea journey, followed by a 10-day land journey and 2 further months at sea (i.e. one whole year for an outbound journey) – Loewe, ‘Knowledge of Other Cultures’, pp. 81–82. On the wind and current patterns impacting on the Malay Peninsula (both to the west – Bay of Bengal – and to the east – South China Sea) see Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h, *The Malay Peninsula: Crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road (100 BC–1300 AD)*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 17–21.

⁴¹ For this evidence see George F. Hourani (revised and expanded by J. Carswell), *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, expanded edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995; Dionisius A. Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: The People of the Dhow*, London: Routledge, 2005; Touraj Daryaee, ‘The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity’, *Journal of World History*, 2003, 14(1): 1–16.

⁴² See, for example, Michael Flecker, ‘A Ninth-Century AD Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia: First Evidence for Direct Trade with China’, *World Archaeology*, 2001, 32(3): 335–354; Michael Flecker, ‘The Origin of the Tang Shipwreck: A Look at Its Archaeology’, in Alan Chong and Stephen A. Murphy (eds), *The Tang Shipwreck: Art and Exchange in the 9th Century*, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2017, pp. 22–39; Jessica Hallett, ‘Pearl Cups Like the Moon: The Abbasid Reception of Chinese Ceramics and the Belitung Shipwreck’, in Venetia Porter and Mariam Rosser-Owen (eds), *Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p. 350.

⁴³ For an overview of the controversies see Meg Lambert, ‘Belitung Shipwreck’, *Trafficking Culture: Researching the Global Traffic in Looted Cultural Objects*, 2012, <https://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/belitung-shipwreck/> (accessed on 11 January 2019).

⁴⁴ Ray (1994) cited by Hoogervorst, *Southeast Asia*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Periplus* 20.7.14–15. For a summary of the debate over issues such as the background of the author, and the dating and nature of the text see Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade*, pp. 22–24.

⁴⁶ Federico De Romanis, ‘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*, Vol. II, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 97–110.

⁴⁷ Eivind Heldass Seland, *Ports and Political Power in the Periplus: Complex Societies and Maritime Trade on the Indian Ocean in the First Century AD*, Oxford: BAR, 2010, p. 15; De Romanis, *ibid.*, pp. 101–03; Claudius Ptolemy *Geography* 1.9.

⁴⁸ *Periplus* 16.

⁴⁹ *Hou Hanshu* 88.11; *Weilüe* 11. Roman notions of the Seres are likewise quite fantastical and, at times, utopian. For example, it is claimed that they are fantastically long-lived (up to 200 years), just, unwarlike and shy about engaging with foreign peoples – Pomponius Mela *Chorography* 1.11, 3.60; Pliny *NH* 6.24.88.

⁵⁰ Yu Taishan, ‘China and the Ancient Mediterranean World’, pp. 29–30; Hoppál, ‘Roman Empire’, p. 284.

⁵¹ Xi Wangmu is frequently associated with the distant West in Chinese texts like the *Ganquan fu* 甘泉賦 and *Mutianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 – Yu Taishan, *ibid.*, p. 47. A deity highly popular in Han times, she presided over the *yin* realm of the West – Paul S. Ropp, *China in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 33. The ‘Weak Water’ is water that is so weak not even a feather could float on it – Lin Ying, ‘Ruler of the Treasure Country’, p. 338.

⁵² The Far West was associated with being the abode of the immortals – if a traveller was able to gain access to the near impenetrable fortress of the Queen Mother of the West they would receive the elixir of immortality – Loewe, ‘Knowledge of Other Cultures’, p. 85; Yu Taishan, *ibid.*, p. 30. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties period the Xi Wangmu was ‘elevated to the position of highest goddess in the Shangqing tradition of Daoism.’ – Mark E. Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 194. In Pure Land Buddhism the lay person could appeal to Amitabha Buddha (the Buddha of infinite light) to (eventually) be reborn into the Pure Land of the Western Paradise where Amitabha reigned – Ropp, *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵³ *Weilüe* 10, 22; *Hou Hanshu* 88.12.

⁵⁴ *Hou Hanshu* 88.12.

⁵⁵ Lin Ying, ‘Ruler of the Treasure Country’, p. 338.

⁵⁶ *Hou Hanshu* 88.11.

⁵⁷ On the influence of Confucian principles on these ideas see Shiratori Kurakichi, ‘Chinese Ideas’, pp. 50–52. The means by which the legitimacy of a ruler’s power might be expressed underwent a series of complex developments throughout Chinese history. By the time of the Eastern (Later) Han and Northern and Southern Dynasties, a series of developments had taken place. It was not simply a case of the ‘Mandate’ coming directly from heaven (a mandate that was changeable), but omens needed to be recognised and interpreted (by diviners and experts). The ruler did not transcend everything (and hence control it), but was defined as being the centre of a web of relations between Heaven, Earth, the people and the ancestors. For a more sophisticated discussion of court legitimisation see Howard L. Goodman, *Ts’ao P’i Transcendent: The Political Culture of Dynasty-Founding in China at the End of the Han*, Richmond, Surrey: Routledge, 1998, pp. 15–44; Ropp, *China in World History*, p. 30; and Michael Puett, ‘Ghosts, Gods and the Coming Apocalypse: Empire and Religion in Early China and Ancient Rome’, in Walter Scheidel (ed.), *State Power in Ancient China & Rome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 230–259. On the development by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 175–105 BCE) of the concept of the emperor as Son of Heaven and an intermediary between Heaven and Earth (merging aspects of *yin-yang* theory, Five Phase theory, Taoism and Legalism, within a Confucian framework) see John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 66–67, and more generally on ‘correlative cosmology’ (the mutual influence of correspondences between man, earth and heaven), pp. 64–66.

⁵⁸ It may possibly parallel the claim made elsewhere in the *Hou Hanshu* that the western region (the territories controlled by China that comprised the eastern end of the Silk Road) consisted of 36 kingdoms, though this could be just pure coincidence rather than signifying anything more meaningful. Alternatively, some have suggested that this could have been a pseudo-number, which simply meant many or countless – Yang Lien-sheng, ‘Numbers and Units in Chinese Economic History’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1949, 12(1/2): 216–225, p. 218; Hoppál, ‘Roman Empire’, p. 280.

⁵⁹ Anne Kolb and Michael A. Speidel, ‘Perceptions from Beyond: Some Observations on Non-Roman Assessments of the Roman Empire from the Great Eastern Trade Routes’, *Journal of Ancient Civilizations*, 2015, 30: 117–149, pp. 138–139. See also Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 233.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome*, Vol. I, p. 270. However, no references to various *consilia* specifically indicate a membership of 36 members – Augustus’ *consilium principis* seems to have comprised about 20 men, though it was subsequently supplemented by members of the equestrian order. More peculiarly, Christopoulos, ‘Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China’, p. 46, speculates that the 36 leaders reflect a ‘Hellenistic type of political

kingship, indicating a form of *Koinon*, or general-councillor assembly'. However, the only evidence he cites in support of this claim is the mid-second century CE Lycian *Koinon* which consisted of 36 *strategoï*.

⁶² On the *consilium principis* see John Crook, *Consilium Principis, Imperial Councils and Counsellors from Augustus to Diocletian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.

⁶³ *Weilüe* 11; *Hou Hanshu* 88.11.

⁶⁴ While a number of scholars like Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 102, and Hill *Through the Jade Gate to Rome*, Vol. I, p. 269, accept the interpretation that the city is Rome, this is not a universally shared view. On the Imperial Domus see Shelley Hales, *The Roman House and Social Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 61–93.

⁶⁵ Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, p. 276.

⁶⁶ Hoppál, 'Roman Empire', pp. 276–281.

⁶⁷ For further critique of this theory see Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas', p. 53.

⁶⁸ Fairbank and Goldman, *China*, p. 64; Li Feng, *Early China*, p. 304; Yu Taishan, 'China and the Ancient Mediterranean World', p. 69. On the developing association of *qi* with the notion of *yin-yang* and *wu xing* during Qin and Han periods see Michael Nylan, 'Yin-yang, Five Phases, and *qi*', in Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (eds), *China's Early Empires: A Re-appraisal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁶⁹ Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas', pp. 55–59.

⁷⁰ On the significance of numerology see Fairbank and Goldman, *ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

⁷¹ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, p. 21. In this he follows Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. xviii, 218.

⁷² McLaughlin, *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁷³ For a discussion of products exported from the Roman Empire as part of the Indian Ocean trade see Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade*, pp. 216–271.

⁷⁴ On the export of red coral from the Roman Empire in the Indian Ocean trade see *Periplus* 28, 39, 49, 56; Pliny *NH* 32.11.21–23; Kautiliya *Arthashastra* 2.11.42; *Garuda Puranam* 68, 80; *Ratnapariksa* 250–52.

⁷⁵ Lin Ying, 'Ruler of the Treasure Country', p. 332, argues that there was quite a high demand for Storax in China from the first century CE. The later *Liangshu* (54) claims that the storax which derived from Da Qin represented the dregs obtained from its processing, and that the product changed hands several times before reaching China. It is also suggested that allusions to glassware in these texts reflect a genuine import of Roman glassware, p. 337.

⁷⁶ This idea has been popular in the last half-century, e.g. John Thorley, 'The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, Circa A.D. 90–130', *Greece & Rome*, 1971, 18(1), pp. 77–78; Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 227; Marco Galli, 'Beyond Frontiers: Ancient Rome and the Eurasian Trade Networks', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017, 8(1), p. 7

⁷⁷ Pliny *NH* 6.20.54; Lucian *Pharsalia* 10.169–71; *Hou Han Shu* 88 (painted with gold); *Weilüe* 12.

⁷⁸ Diocletian *Edict of Maximum Prices* 20.1–13, 23.1–2, 24.1–16.

⁷⁹ Berit Hildebrandt, 'Some Thoughts on the Unravelling of Chinese Silks in the Roman Empire: A Reassessment of Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 10.141–143', in Iris Tzachili and Eleni Zimi (eds), *Textiles and Dress in Greece and the Roman East: A Technological and Social Approach*, Athens: Ta Pragmata, 2012, pp. 107–113.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of Indian practice of working silk see Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, 'Textiles and Trade in South Asia during the Proto-Historic and Early Historic Period', in Berit Hildebrandt, with Carole Gillis (eds), *Silk: Trade and Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxbow, 2017, pp. 18–24. Hoppál, 'Roman Empire', pp. 286–287, speculates that the Parthians may have lied to the Chinese about the Romans having silk, but there is no real basis for this claim.

⁸¹ See Lionel Casson, [Introduction, Translation, and Commentary of] *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

⁸² On the possibility that the authors were simply enumerating the valuable products they associated with coming from the southern Ocean trade see Shiratori Kurakichi, 'Chinese Ideas', p. 63. See also Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. 200, 223.

⁸³ For example, Agatharchides 99b + c = (b) Diod. Sic. 3.46.1–5 = (c) Strabo 16.4.19; Dioscorides *MM* 1.12; Stat. *Sily.* 4.5.30–32; Arr. *Anab.* 7.20.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 159.

⁸⁵ *Weilüe* 12. *Ma-nao* 玛瑙 listed in this text may refer to agate or carnelian – Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, p. 211.

⁸⁶ *Hou Hanshu* 88.12. Among the suggestions for *qingbi* are azurite, lapis lazuli – Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome*, Vol. I, p. 290 and Vol. II, pp. 220–228 – or blue-green jasper – Édouard Chavannes, ‘Les pays d’Occident d’après le *Heou Han Chou*’, *T’oung pao*, 1907, 8, p. 182.

⁸⁷ On the engagement between Buddhist and Daoist ideas in the first millennium CE see Gil Raz, ‘Buddhism, Challenged, Adopted, and in Disguise: Daoist and Buddhist Interactions in Medieval China’, in Mu-chou Poo, H. A. Drake and Lisa Raphals (eds), *Old Society, New Belief: Religious Transformation of China and Rome, Ca. 1st–6th Centuries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 109–127.

⁸⁸ For a brief overview of this issue see Herman Tiekens, ‘The Yavanas’ Clothes in Old Tamil Literature’, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 2003, 46: 261–271; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade*, pp. 163–170.

⁸⁹ Philip Mayerson, ‘A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources’, *JAOS*, 1993, 113(2): 169–174. See also Schneider, who argues these ideas may originate much earlier – Pierre Schneider, *L’Éthiopie et L’Inde: Interférences et Confusions Aux Extrémités du Monde Antique (VIII^e Siècle Avant J.-C. – VI^e Siècle Après J.-C.)*, Rome: École française de Rome, 2004; Pierre Schneider, ‘The So-Called Confusion between India and Ethiopia: The Eastern and Southern Edges of the Inhabited World from the Greco-Roman Perspective’, in Serena Bianchetti, Michele R. Cataudella and Hans-Joachim Gehrke (eds), *Brill’s Companion to Ancient Geography: The Inhabited World in Greek and Roman Tradition*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 186, 191.

⁹⁰ Yu Taishan, ‘China and the Ancient Mediterranean World’, pp. 14, 19. We see the word Fulin (often connected to the Byzantine Empire) appear for the first time in the fourth century CE in the *Qiangliang* (‘*Annals of the Anterior Liang*’). In a Tang Dynasty text – the *Xintangshu* (chap. 221) – there is reference to Fulin being another name for Da Qin. On this see Christopoulos, ‘Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China’, pp. 67–76. The *Xintangshu* (eleventh century CE) shares quite a lot of details with the earlier *Weilüe* and *Hou Hanshu*, albeit with some elaboration of the various stories. Also the Tang period text, the *Tang huiyao*, describes Fulin (99, 2019) in terms that are quite similar to our earlier depictions of Da Qin, including references to messages who carried a bag when they followed the king, the removal of the king in the event of unfavourable natural portents and the claim that there are said to be 400 settlements (*Weilüe* 11; *Hou Hanshu* 88.13). On this see Loewe, ‘Knowledge of Other Cultures’, pp. 85–86.

⁹¹ On the problem of later Chinese historians indiscriminately mixing up material from their predecessors see Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, pp. xx, 6, 22.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 200.