

H.J. Kim, S.N.C. Lieu, and R. McLaughlin, *Rome and China: Points of Contacts*.
Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. P.134. ISBN 97811138241275 \$160.00

The interest in Silk Routes and Eurasia in academia seems to be a rejuvenated one in scholarship as there have been ample publications since the celebrated work represented by Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: The New History of the World* in 2015. If one asks what elevates *Rome and China: points of contacts* for a review above the dozens of other works, my answer can be encapsulated in one phrase: "its novelty". Indeed, the work authored by Hyun Jin Kim, Samuel N.C. Lieu and Raoul McLaughlin is a stimulating work for the reader to glimpse at the interconnectivity between two great powers in antiquity, namely Rome and China. As acknowledged by Hyun Jin Kim in his concise introduction, the very objective of the edited volume reaches beyond the parameters of the scholarship in the past by adopting a wider Eurasian perspective. (p.1).

The first chapter begins by providing an abridged account of the topographical and trade contact between imperial Rome and Han China. The chapter tries to examine the challenges that encompassed the physical distance between China and Rome as the real setback between the two empires. The general content in the chapter is akin to a more descriptive analysis trying to provide more historical and chronological details about the dynasties, kingdoms, and provinces that impeded Rome and China from connecting with each other, but it further reveals the several attempts made by the Han dynasty in making contacts with the Roman empire, which were mostly sabotaged due to the military engagements that China faced from other rivals' powers in Central Asia. One of the most important findings that emanates from the first chapter is its special emphasis on how human contacts impacted the building of a relationship between two empires. In particular, the chapter describes how Han authorities learnt about the sophistication of Rome through their contacts with Iranian and Indian merchants which paved the path for the Chinese to develop their curiosity about Rome. Rome's maritime link with India dates back to the epoch of Augustus, and the coins excavated by maritime archaeologists recently prove that there was a considerable Roman presence in the Indian Ocean, even if the Indian mainland never fell under the orbit of Rome. However, regardless of all these elaborations, the first chapter suffers from one major pitfall as it fails to observe how any possible link could have emerged between Roman and Chinese merchants. The works of South Asian scholars such as D.P.M Weerakoody and Osmund Bopearacachi suggest that the Romans and Chinese maintained certain commercial relationships as traders from both states visited Sri Lanka known as *Taprobane* by the Romans in the Anuradhapura period. Authors seem to have not given any attention to those two non-Western scholars, who came up with crucially important findings.

Kim's astute analysis in the second chapter regarding the expansion of the Xiongnu Huns as a mighty tribe is vitally relevant in understanding how it became a threat to both Romans and Hans. The rise of the Huns was a real geopolitical calamity for both

empires, which altered their domination over Eurasia through a series of onslaughts. The second chapter aptly describes the geopolitical outcomes that erupted from the Hun invasions by installing their quasi-feudal system, firstly in the Germanic tribes and then in the Roman provinces, which ultimately laid the foundations of the new political order of the European Middle Ages.

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to describe the next chapter as the pivotal moment in the whole volume, since it properly elucidates the diplomatic and commercial encounters through the silk routes for the attainment of commercial profits. The chapter gives equal importance to both Chinese and Byzantine sources in presenting the heroic adventures and bizarre moments in the silk routes. Furthermore, in going beyond the fascinating episodes by tracing more complex historical incidents such as the emergence of the Gokturk Khanate and the cunning diplomacy practised by the Sasanians in Persia, the authors make a more intellectually persuasive argument. In particular, the authors depict the rise of Gokturks as an unparalleled development in world history, as it created a unified and coherent political system for the Eurasian steppe from the frontiers of China: this novel political unification gave birth to a new Eurasian network to link the economies of China as a connecting point. Besides the Eurasian connecting point, the chapter includes another analysis on the state of the Indian Ocean network that provided a strong connecting juncture for the Romans and Chinese on the eve of late antiquity. The case of Sri Lanka has been well captured by the authors as a midpoint meeting place and central market for Indian Ocean commerce. The chapter draws on the Byzantine merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Christian Topography*, which suggests that the island nation was frequently visited by Roman, Chinese, and Persian ships.

The last chapter of this compelling work is devoted to exploring the links developed by the Nestorian Christians and Manichaeans as a solid connecting point between the two empires. The authors acknowledge the legacy left by both religious movements as enduring ones that lasted beyond all the attempts of the Tang and Song dynasties and would persist in China as minority religions. The cardinal question that this book presents to its readers is whether Sino-Roman relations survived in the annals of human history, and the obvious answer that this work shows is that all the official contacts initiated by the Roman imperial government and Han China were transitory and finally faded into oblivion. Notwithstanding that official contacts largely ended up in failure, the sustained contacts based on the Eurasian mainland paved the path for significant geopolitical changes. For instance, this work takes the influx of Eurasian Huns on the northern borders of the Roman empire as a turning point in European history as it detached Western Europe from the Mediterranean-based Roman rule. In my view, the biggest contribution made by this work, *Rome and China: Points of Contacts*, lies in its careful analysis focused on those sustained contacts that lasted between two ancient world powers for the entirety of Eurasia. In his concluding remarks, Kim raises some challenging questions on the entangled, obscured contacts that existed between Rome and China, namely as pertinent ones to be re-examined in the modern Western

approach to China, and ones which might offer valuable lessons for the subject going forward.

PUNSARA AMARASINGHE

INSTITUTE OF LAW, POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT, *SCUOLA SUPERIORE SANT'ANNA*, PISA, ITALY

punsara.amarasinghe@santannapisa.it