

Was there a Silk Road?

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Abstract

Is the 'Silk Road' a meaningful term?¹ Is it being used simply to provide a historical legitimacy for our preoccupation with the dichotomy of east and west, the rising power of India and China and the waning of Europe, and our ambivalence towards globalisation? If it ever had any descriptive or analytic force for scholarship, is this now lost and should we discard the term entirely in our scholarly discourse as misleading at best and leave it for the marketers to exploit as a symbol of luxury and exoticism? This article argues that although the term 'Silk Road' has become a widely used portmanteau term, with apt clarification it is still a meaningful term for scholarship.

Keywords

Silk Road, silk roads, Eurasian trade, China, Rome, Dunhuang

Although the term 'Silk Road' is now ubiquitous, it has an excellent scholarly pedigree. Its first published usage was by the eminent geographer Ferdinand von Richtofen (1833–1905) in 1877,² but it was not until the twentieth century that it gained wide currency. Albert Herrmann was the first to use it in a book title in 1910, widely read and cited by the leading scholars of this region.³ In 1928, E. H. Warmington wrote his examination of the classical sources on trade between Rome and India, he used the term 'silk-routes' to indicate both land and sea routes—as indeed had von Richtofen—without the need for any definition.⁴ But it was Hedin and his archaeological colleague, Folke Bergman (who accompanied Hedin on the Sino-Swedish Expedition of 1926–35), who seem to have been the ones to bring the term into more general use. Hedin

¹ I use a singular form here even though the singular form is misleading at best in suggesting a single route. However, it is now the most commonly used form of the term. Von Richtofen used both forms—see Waugh 2007a, p. 4. This paper is intended to raise questions about our use of this term and to provoke discussion, rather than to provide a definitive answer to the question posed here.

² Von Richtofen 1877, pp. 96–122.

³ Herrmann 1910. Cited, among many others, by Stein 1921, p. 1236.

⁴ Warmington 1928, first cited p. 22. For the sea routes see, for example, pp. 176–7.

made it the title of a book in 1936, translated into English in 1938,⁵ and then Bergman used it liberally in the first of seven volumes of the expedition report, published in 1939. He acknowledged the originator (von Richtofen had been Hedin's teacher): 'Baron von Richtofen, the famous German geographer, has coined the name Silk Road for these ancient caravan routes' and accepted the importance of the Chinese and the silk trade: 'The quest of the strange, coupled with mercantile interests, drew Chinese traders and adventurers out on the great routes westwards, and these now became "Silk Roads", as the main item exported by the Chinese was silk.'⁶ He also emphasised it as a link between Europe and China, unlike Richtofen who had concentrated on Central Asia: 'Ch'ang-an, the Han capital of China, may be regarded as the true starting point of the Silk Road, and its western terminus was probably Antioch in Syria. This means a distance of nearly 7,000 km.'⁷

Despite Bergman's assertion that the term had been 'widely used by West-erners',⁸ wide usage in print only became apparent in the west in the 1960s when the 'Silk Road' started to be used in popular works. In 1963, Luis Boulnois wrote *The Silk Road*, the first of an expanding genre of historical guides.⁹ Thereafter the use of this term grows steadily, and seeps out further into the non-scholarly arena. But Hedin's book *The Silk Road* was translated into Japanese as early as 1944 under the title *Kinu no michi* 絹の道 (Tokyo: Takayamashoin) and a translation of Herrmann's book appeared in the same year but using 古代絹街道 as the translation for the term (Tokyo: Kasumigasekishobon). In the early 1960s Hedin's book reappeared using the transliteration *Shiruku Rodo* (シルクロード), after which this became the dominant term in Japan for 'the Silk Road'. Later it increasingly appears in book and exhibition titles.¹⁰ In the 1970s the 'Silk Road' started to be used in China in a direct translation¹¹—絲綢之路 'Sichou zhi lu' and by the 1980s it was commonplace. The 1990s saw it become a brand for goods and services as diverse as bamboo flooring and pet aromatherapy in the west.¹² And the twenty-first century has seen journalists and international businessmen—from

⁵ Dutton 1938. See also Waugh 2007. See note 1 above for the resulting article on Richtofen and the Silk Road.

⁶ Bergman 1939, pp. 39–40.

⁷ Bergman 1939, p. 49.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Boulnois 1963.

¹⁰ In 1963 the Japanese composer Ikuma Dan wrote a suite for orchestra called *Shiruku rodo*. I am indebted to Imre Galambos for this information.

¹¹ The first dated publication I can find is Xinjiang Museum 1972.

¹² Silkroad® Bamboo Flooring: <http://www.silkroadflooring.com/>; Silk Road Oils, Inc.; <http://www.aromadog.com/>—aromatherapy for dogs; SilkRoad technology Inc.

Lithuanian lorry drivers to management solutions—realise its power as a brand.¹³ It is perhaps relevant to note here that it is also becoming more widely associated with international medical research and the pharmaceutical trade.¹⁴

Having been adopted by marketers it is not surprising that its scholarly usefulness is now being questioned. At the same time, others are taking advantage of the formula to propose catchy new names—Cotton Route, Spice Route, Tea Route, Amber Route and, as appropriated in a paper in this collection, Musk Route.

There is no doubt that the Silk Road is a romantic oversimplification of what was a complex economic system involving a network of trade routes, but we should be careful before dismissing the concept just because a catchy name is being exploited by the marketing sector. If we are to reclaim this term, however, we need to define it more clearly. I would argue that there are several issues that need to be clarified in our current scholarly use of the term.

Geographical Limits: East and West or the lands between?

There are two interrelated geographical questions to consider: firstly, the extent of the trade routes to include under the ‘Silk Road’ rubric and, second, which routes are to be included within the designated limits?

There has been an ongoing tension between scholars on the first issue. For some, the Silk Road is distinguished from other trade routes before and after by the existence of sustained trade, much of it in silk, between the two ends of the route—China and Rome. This is also the common assumption behind the demotic use of the term.¹⁵ The term emerged from a combination of evidence from western classical sources, especially the overland journey of the Phoenician merchant Maes Titianus, filtered through Marinus of Tyre and Ptolemy,¹⁶ added to the more recent geographical analysis of Central Asia by von Richtofen.¹⁷ Some leading scholars focus on this later, more limited, geographical

¹³ In the twenty-first century, it is starting to be incorporated into business jargon, see, for example, <http://tieboston.blogspot.com/2007/06/new-silk-road.html>.

¹⁴ Chien, Chien and Salk 2004.

¹⁵ My discussion here largely deals with western sources. This is simply because I am considering a term ‘Silk Road’ which originated in these sources. It would be interesting to take this story further and look at the use of the concept once it was adopted in Asia, especially in Japan, China and Korea, but that must be for another paper.

¹⁶ Cary 1956.

¹⁷ Waugh 2007. Waugh usefully considers von Richtofen’s discussion of the ‘Silk Roads’ in some detail.

area.¹⁸ Africa is rarely part of either discussion nowadays, except sometimes when the scholars involved are concentrating on the maritime routes—an issue considered below.

Interest in Central Asia's history was kindled in the nineteenth century because of political and economic attention on the region, namely the 'Great Game'.¹⁹ Over a century later, the case can also be made that modern politics and economics have been a catalyst for growing interest in the concept of a 'Silk Road', but the story is complex, composed of interestingly entangled strands. One of these is the struggle of the countries of Central Asia, and those who hope to benefit, to reassert themselves, not as world powers but as strategic regional powers vital to control of the world's oil supplies of the future. Another is the rising power of China. The business and economic communities of Europe, focused on the need to compete with China, have started to explore the opportunities afforded by an eastern expansion of a capitalist Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall.²⁰ This includes proposals, for example, for a new transport network linking Europe, through the Baltic States, to the countries of Central Asia.²¹ This was an important route in pre-modern times.²²

But while the countries of Central Asia—and Russia—struggle to find a new world role, China has succeeded in being accepted as a global force, both economically and politically. China's own presentation of itself as 'different'

¹⁸ For example, Etienne de la Vaissière, author of the *Sogdian Traders* (de la Vaissiere 2005). In a recent communication with the author he commented: 'The main points to give an actual scientific meaning to "silk road" are Central Asia and India. Rome and even more Africa are only small offshoots of the main trade between China and India.'

¹⁹ Of course, Central Asia is a term with a similarly contentious connotations and its definition is still a subject of debate. For a brief discussion of this see Whitfield 2008a.

²⁰ One example for this is the conference organised by Oesterreichische Nationalbank (OeNB) in 2002 in Vienna, titled: 'East-West Conference' and which dealt with the economics of Eastern and Western Europe (Barisitz 2003). This use of 'east-west' to reference two parts of Europe is potentially confusing, as the east-west rubric is common in Silk Road discussions (see below).

²¹ Promoted by Lithuanian and part-financed by the European Union, see <http://www.east-westtc.org> (last accessed 16 February 2008).

²² As discussed, for example, by de Rachewiltz: 'in 1238 the attack by Mongol armies on Russian cities threatened the commercial enterprises of Novogorod in the Baltic and North Sea. German merchants, who every year went to Great Yarmouth on the east coast of England to buy herrings to take to Baltic ports, did not make their journey that year and, as a result, England had a glut of fish which made history. This interconnectedness of Eurasia was remarked on first by the 18th-century British historian, Edward Gibbon, who was amused by the fact that an order of the Mongol emperor living in the Far East should have lowered the price of herrings on the English market.' (Rachewiltz 1971: 80).

from Europe,²³ has led to a widespread adoption worldwide of the Silk Road as representing a pre-modern meeting of opposing cultures of ‘East’ and ‘West’.²⁴ This dichotomous simplification has also seeped into the scholarly arena with any number of conferences and books adopting the rubric — and its assumptions.²⁵ Ironically then, just as scholars such as de la Vaissière are retrieving the historical voice of forgotten Central Asian cultures and their modern political successors are finding a new voice the obsession with China is distracting attention from them and impeding the development of a more nuanced understanding of pre-modern Eurasian history.

With notable exceptions, many scholars are being led by a Chinese agenda. Chinese historiography dominates an understanding of Central Asia, especially of China’s relations with what is now Xinjiang. There is a wealth of documentary and archaeological evidence, but most histories of the ancient kingdoms of Xinjiang give the Chinese viewpoint.²⁶ This is only reinforced by a new breed of global historians in Europe and the USA. Desperate to shed any remaining taint of Eurocentrism they too often adopt the Chinese viewpoint as an alternative, without applying to it the same rigorous criticism they use for rejecting Eurocentrism.²⁷ Finally, Africa continues to be the poor cousin politically and economically.²⁸ Scholarship, and the popular view, generally ignore the role of Africa in Eurasian trade. The historical role of Africa is, on the other hand, well-established in western classical sources and was recognised by earlier scholars such as Warmington.

²³ For example, in the debate on human rights.

²⁴ I argue about the dangers of dichotomies for historical scholarship elsewhere. See Whitfield 2008 and 2008a.

²⁵ For example, ‘Gender 2007: East meets West’ (UK Postgraduate and Academic Conference in Women’s/Gender Studies July 3–5 2007, University of York, UK). The East-West rubric is not new in scholarship. As early as 1939 an ‘East-West Philosophers’ Conference was organised at the University of Hawaii and the East-West Centre was established there in 1960. But these initiatives had a different focus from the Silk Road, namely links between the US and the countries of the Pacific Rim. The same pitfalls of this dichotomous approach, however, are seen emerging in these fora. Riepe, for example, noted in his report of the Fourth East-West Conference, that a speaker in that conference ‘summed up the oriental way thus: “They don’t analyze too clearly’ [laughter]” (Riepe 1965, p. 450).

²⁶ For example, Chinese dynasties are used to date Dunhuang histories by most scholars, despite a well-recognized alternative which acknowledges local rulers and the periods of rule by Tibetans, Tanguts and others.

²⁷ See Whitfield 2008a for a discussion of this. On the positive side, there are now Chinese scholars working closely with international colleagues on areas such as the Sogdians or, as shown in this collection by Chen Ming’s paper, on broader Silk Road concerns.

²⁸ There is another interesting strand to follow here, namely the growing role of China investment in Africa.

Given these complications, if we are to use the term ‘Silk Road’, I would argue we need to start with a broad and inclusive definition, which considers all the routes, economies, markets, peoples and politics throughout Central Asia and those to and from India and Africa, along with the economies and markets of Europe and China. This is not only to avoid being led by political agendas, but also to take into account the thesis that trade in any one product, such as silk, did not happen in isolation but was built on a foundation of trade in other luxuries and commodities, not all of it long distance and much of it already well-established.²⁹ It would be misleading also to assume that all silk from China was for a Roman market. Even after the establishment of local silk industries along the land route from Khotan, through Sogdia, into Byzantium and, finally, into Italy, there continued to be a market for Chinese silk from Central Asia westwards. Indeed, the local industries sometimes used Chinese silk thread as their raw material.

We also need to consider the role of powers other than Rome and China in this trade. Empires such as the Parthians and the Kushans, but also local kingdoms, such as the Khotanese and the Sogdians, also had an important role. The Kushans, for example, controlled the landlocked mountainous heart of Central Asia, the area which had proved a barrier to sustained trade before this period. The rise of the Kushans therefore has to be considered alongside that of the Chinese Han empire and its expansion westwards when looking at the development of a Silk Road. The Kushans also controlled the routes south to India and the sea ports. This brings us to the second geographical issue: which routes should we include under the ‘Silk Road’ rubric?

Desert, Steppe or Sea?

There is now a clear dichotomy in the scholarship of the Silk Road between land and sea routes in which two—mainly distinct—sets of scholars hold distinct conferences and publications.³⁰ The use of the term ‘road’ might have been partly responsible for this, focusing attention on the physical routes rather than the driving force which was responsible for them—the trade.

²⁹ As Casson notes: ‘The *Periplus*, on careful analysis, reveals several lines of trade over and above the well-known movements of Eastern luxuries to the ports of Egypt. That was, to be sure, the most important and received the most attention. But alongside it we can clearly distinguish a trade in commodities from India to the coast of Persia, Arabia, and Africa...’ (Casson 1989, p. 21).

³⁰ See, for example, the Appendix to Elisseeff 2000 which lists conferences organised under the UNESCO Silk Road Expeditions.

Hence the debate has been as much on geography and political history as on economics. This, I believe, is a fundamental problem with our current discourse on the Silk Road. In our attempt to define ‘routes’ geographically we are neglecting the key evidence which should be leading our discussion, not following in its wake, namely the economics which underpinned the routes. It might be helpful to look at the modern situation to understand the dynamics of the pre-modern Silk Road, specifically the impetus of oil.

If sustained trade along land routes across Eastern Central Asia and the Pamir is an essential component of the Silk Road, then is it relevant to talk about sea routes? Scholars who focus on the triangle of trade between Sogdia, China and India would argue that it is not and if this narrower geographical definition is accepted, then sea routes do, indeed, become secondary to the discussion. But the broader definition, which sees the key to the Silk Road being the extension of existing routes to India and Central Asia into China, depends on the sea routes as much as on the land ones.³¹ This is also the case if we consider the Silk Road as an economic rather than a geographical entity. Across Eurasia, sea and land routes were interlinked and need to be considered in tandem rather than in isolation. If Africa is included in the ‘Silk Road’ rubric, then the sea routes become even more important.³²

We know of attempts by Rome to forge routes that avoided Parthian control, because of the steep duties imposed by the Parthians. But this alone suggests that these other land routes continued to operate. Alternative routes included both a southern land route and sea routes. And at some point, the sea routes reached ports and the goods then had to be distributed by land. Conversely, most goods from China and Central Asia had to rely on the land routes, at least in part, to reach sea ports. Lapis, for example, is mined deep inland and either had an overland journey to the sea ports of northern India and thence could have travelled by sea east or west, or it could have joined the east-west land routes directly.³³ Jade from Khotan would have almost certainly travelled overland to China. And in the early history of the Silk Road, most of the trade between China and India/Central Asia travelled by the Taklamakan land route.³⁴ As discussed in a paper here, musk extracted from the mountains

³¹ Silk was a major trade product acquired by maritime merchants in India, as indicated in the *Periplus*. As Casson notes, it ‘was one of the very few products that could be acquired in all four of the major exporting regions of India.’ (Casson 1989, p. 26).

³² Kobishchanow 1965.

³³ Lapis found its way to Mesopotamia by the sea routes in the third millennium BCE.

³⁴ As noted by Li Suimei, ‘in Qin and Han times, because vessels were small and could only sail close to the coast, the farthest they reached was the east coast of the India Peninsula.’ (Li Suimei 1996, p. 39).

of Tibet also had a long land journey. Even if, as some suggest, the sea routes were increasingly used for silk from China itself,³⁵ given the existence from the middle and end of the first millennium CE of silk producing centres on land routes outside China, it is probable that silk from these centres continued to travel by land.

It is similarly misleading—for the same reasons—to consider steppe and desert routes in isolation. Warmington talks of the ‘opening of a new silk-route round the north of the Caspian’³⁶ and there is other evidence of trade following ancient nomad migration routes on the steppe. We should also probably consider the land and sea routes from China through South Asia and Tibet to south-east Asia and see if they were also used for trade in silk. It might be that we later reject many of these routes as significant in the long-distance trade, even if important for local trade, but we need to carry out an economic analysis, as well as a review of the historical and archaeological evidence, before their rejection.³⁷

When did it start and was silk the key?

These two issues cannot be considered separately and neither are they independent of the economic or geographical considerations. We know of long-distance trade from the second millennium BCE such as, for example, the trade in lapis from the mountains of present-day eastern Afghanistan to Egypt.³⁸ Given the existence of this Afro-Eurasian trade by land and sea from the second and first millennium BCE, then we need to be clear about whether the situation changed sufficiently when silk became a major trading item to warrant the use of a specific term to describe trade thereafter. Is it meaningful to isolate this period and this commodity?

The obvious development that seemed only to occur at the end of the first millennium BCE was sustained trade across the Central Asia mountain massif and through the Taklamakan routes, linking China with pre-existing Indo-

³⁵ ‘The overland east-west trade and travel rarely prospered through the lands that came to be dominated by Turkic peoples. Distances were too great, slave-snatching brigands too prevalent and rival khanates waged too much war against each other.’ Pope 2005.

³⁶ Warmington 1928, pp. 175–6. See also note 22 above.

³⁷ All these routes are included in the UNESCO Silk Roads rubric. See Elisseeff 2000, Appendix.

³⁸ The sea routes were equally ancient. Nilofer Shaikh suggests that there was contact by sea between India and the Persian Gulf as early as the third millennium BCE (Shaikh 2000). Sun Guangqi argues that there is evidence that Chinese had sailing ships in the first millennium BCE (Sun 2000, p. 290).

Afro-Eurasian trade networks. It is a reasonable starting hypothesis that the development of reliable markets for high profit goods not readily available in closer markets was a necessary catalyst for this change. Silk was a portable luxury, only available from China, at one end of the Silk Road, and there was a growing market first in Central Asia and across Eurasia and into the Roman Europe, at the other end. Classical and Chinese historical sources and archaeological evidence supports the hypothesis that silk was a major trading product.³⁹ The hypothesis needs further testing and we also need to look at the role of the sea trade during this period and how the volume of its trade compared to that carried on land routes.⁴⁰ This was the focus of von Richtofen's original discussion, although he did not exclude the sea routes.

Silk was only one among several trade goods, as seen in a list given in *Periplus Maris Erythraei*: 'From India: native spices and drugs and aromatics (costus, bdellium, lykion, nard, malabathron, pepper), gems (turquoise, lapis lazuli, onyx, diamonds, sapphires, "transparent gems"), textiles (cotton cloth and garments as well as silk products from China), ivory, pearls, and tortoise shell.'⁴¹ But, as this passage suggests, silk was the key export from China.

Chinese sources give us lists of goods travelling east, among them jade, lapis and other precious stones, textiles, including cotton and carpets, pigments, foodstuffs and medicines.⁴² The archaeological and artistic evidence fleshes out the picture, for example in the use of cobalt blue glaze from the eighth century, a glaze which originated in the near east, and in glass as well as Sasanian metal-wares.

It is arguable that, without the expensive and portable commodity of silk, there would have been insufficient profits to be made from other Chinese exports for the long-distance land routes to Central Asia and beyond to be sustainable. This needs proving, but can stand as another hypothesis to direct future scholarship.

³⁹ 'As the first century progressed, Rome's commerce in silk continued to increase. According to Mela, all men knew the Seres through their commerce and we have evidence of silk-dealers in Berytos, Naples, Tibet, and Rome.' (Warmington 1928, p. 177).

⁴⁰ Li Suimei suggests, after a survey of current research, that long distance sea trade from China was started by the Qin but that it was in the Three Kingdoms period onwards that vessels reached as far as the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This was about the same time as the Axumite fleet started trading from the Red Sea to India. Chinese vessels could have reached Africa and Europe by the Tang. Sun Guangqi largely concurs with this (Sun 2000). See also note 31 above.

⁴¹ Casson 1996, p. 17.

⁴² See Schafer 1963 for details on the multiplicity of goods imported into China during the Tang period.

Another key piece of evidence yet to be fully explored is the growth of the Taklamakan kingdoms around the same period. Although people lived in these oases from earliest times, as evidenced by the finds of mummies and other archaeological remains,⁴³ it is not until the early centuries of the first millennium CE that we get evidence of the existence of complex political entities, such as the kingdoms of Kroraina and Khotan. It might be argued that since much of this evidence comes from Chinese sources and since the Chinese only started gathering reliable first-hand evidence from these areas from the second century BCE, this is not compelling.⁴⁴ But this is to ignore the archaeological record, which likewise shows evidence of a population growth at this time, including the development of extensive irrigation systems to support a larger area of agriculture production. The impetus which led to this growth needs to be explored further.

‘A Romantic Deception’?

So is the ‘Silk Route’ a ‘Romantic Deception’, as claimed by Hugh Pope?⁴⁵ His argument was based on identifying the silk route as a land route only and was largely applied to the period when Turks dominated the central routes. Neither of these points, given the clarifications above, is sufficient to challenge the concept of a ‘Silk Road’.

Was there actually any trade on the Silk Route? Valerie Hansen, about to publish a book on Silk Road history, suggested in a refreshingly sceptical note in a recent conference paper that she had found very little evidence of trade goods on the eastern Silk Road at towns such as Dunhuang. Scepticism is useful, but I would argue that trade in high-value commodities remains the best explanation for the existence of large amounts of disposable income, which were necessary to fund such endeavours as the Mogao Caves. Dunhuang was not a large town and the basic livelihood for its long-term residents was agriculture, unlikely to have resulted in more than a subsistence income for the farmers. There was no known industry on a large-scale nor any local mineral wealth. Yet the caves and locally produced paintings on silk and manuscripts on paper were expensive to produce and the colophons and inscriptions show that local people and rulers were among their major patrons.

⁴³ See, for example, Wieczorek 2007.

⁴⁴ The *Travels of King Mu* of the Western Zhou suggest some knowledge of the land to China’s west before this. It is not clear when Khotanese jade started to be imported into China. Likewise, early sites show evidence of links with China (see Wieczorek 2007).

⁴⁵ Pope 2007.

Mogao and other cave temples in the region also provide more tangible evidence of the trade, in the minerals used in the paintings and in the manuscripts, many of which mention merchants. Even if many of the goods brought by merchants did not remain in Dunhuang, they almost certainly changed hands there creating wealth locally. Wealth would also have been created by the services needed to accommodate, feed and entertain passing merchants.

Conclusion

Where does this brief survey leave us? ‘The Silk Road’ has become a widely used portmanteau term and a marketing brand. But with clarification, I have attempted to show, it can be a meaningful term for scholarship. Perhaps we should revert to Warmington’s use of ‘silk routes’ without capitalisation to avoid the sense of branding but I do not think we can confidently say that there was *not* a Silk Road. At this very preliminary stage of our knowledge of Afro-Eurasian trade, I would argue we do not need to be creating other misleading terms nor to reject a convenient and well-recognised term, but concentrate instead on understanding the trade routes better. Once we have a more detailed analysis of their economies, histories and geographies we will be able to see if it is really useful to scholarship to isolate certain routes and commodities in this manner.⁴⁶ It might be that the term ‘Silk Road’ is then more narrowly defined or even becomes obsolete, but we are still a long way from that stage in our scholarship.

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⁴⁶ Pelham Gore of Lancaster University frames the issue in an elegant fashion: ‘The name ‘Silk Road’ may be useful, however, to enable us to simplify the whole extremely complicated process to a level where it is manageable. It enables us to focus on a finite set of topics and issues, rather than becoming lost in an infinite intellectual mist. Perhaps scholars in a few centuries will refer to the trans-Pacific ‘Silicon (sea) Lane’: we may not see it like that now but it might simplify their thinking about the global movements of now important commodities and the economic and power shifts that go with them.’ (private communication with the author).

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