Presentation of Book

Central Asia and the Silk Road – Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia
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CA – Elements of physical geography
Some traits of pre-modern Central Asia (CA) and the Silk Road (SR)
Borders and location of CA – the heart of the Eurasian double-continent

CA: 4 zones of economic geography: steppe belt, deserts, oasis belt, mountains

Map 2: Central Asia – Elements of physical geography

Some natural resources of the region: chernozem, pasturelands, fertile oases, oil, gas, metals

Central Asia (CA)

- The C Asian steppe belt: The cradle of horseback nomadism, far-reaching mobility, and military prowess
- Eurasian steppe civilization: seamlessly linking CA and Eastern Europe
- CA as a unique terrain of sedentary-nomadic interaction and of related economic and political dualism
- Technologically based nomadic military superiority over settled civilizations lasted almost 2½ millennia: up to the 18th century
  - with incisive consequences
- No other global region can call as many major civilizations its neighbors
- No other global region can boast of as complex a political history as CA
The Silk Road (SR)

- Nomadic powers tended to be materially interested in the good functioning of international trade networks.
- The (traditional) Silk Road (SR) was a network of overland trade routes running through CA that provided commercial and cultural exchange between Europe, CA, India and China (Ferdinand v. Richthofen, 1877).
- The SR is estimated to have existed for almost two millennia – up the 19th century.
- The SR enjoyed at least three heydays:
  - Han Dynasty – Roman Empire (ca. 100 BCE – 200 CE)
  - Tang Dynasty – Caliphate (ca. 675-875 CE)
  - Mongol Empire (ca. 1245-1345)
- As its name indicates, silk was very popular as SR merchandise; it often even served as a de-facto means of payment.
- From the late 16th century, silver also attained importance as a medium of exchange.
First heyday of the Silk Road

Map 7: First heyday of the Great Silk Road connecting Roman and Han Empires (ca. 100 BCE - 100 CE)

Second heyday of Silk Road

Map 9: Second heyday of the Great Silk Road under the Turkish steppe empires, the Tang Dynasty and the Caliphate (ca. 575 – 850)

Third heyday of Silk Road

Map 11: Third heyday of Silk Road and political integration of trade network under Mongol rule

Important products traded on the SR

- Exorbitant transport costs meant that only goods with very high value-to-weight ratios would be carried over long distances for profit.
- Over the centuries, regional markets for lower-cost bulkier goods also expanded.
- Example: 16th to 18th centuries
  - Relatively highly developed sedentary economies:
    - China: tea, silk and silk textiles, porcelain (china), lacquerware
    - India: cotton and textiles, silk, indigo, precious stones
    - Western Europe: silver, fine cloth, apparel, manufactured products
  - “Emerging markets”
    - Persia: silk and silk textiles, carpets/rugs, cotton, horses
    - Russland: furs, leather, wool products, metal utensils, wood
  - C Asian sedentary economies:
    - Uzbek Khanates: cotton, Bukharan lambskins, slaves
    - Chagatay Khanate: jade, musk, wool, textiles, dried grapes
  - C Asian nomadic economies:
    - Dzungar Empire (without Tarim Basin): horses, sheep, camels
    - Kazakh Khanate: sheep, horses, camels, leather, slaves
    - Turkmens: horses (notably Akhal-Teke breed), sheep, carpets, slaves
“Mercantilist renaissance” of overland trade

Map 13: Central Asia at the time of interregional mercantilist renaissance of Silk Road trade (late 16th/early 17th century)

Factors that contributed to ups and downs (heydays and declines) of the SR

### Heydays
- Simultaneous political stabilization
- Successful economic reforms
- SR infrastructure investments
- Political = economic integration (of large parts) of SR
- Tendencies toward religious unification
- Spillovers of Western silver flows from America to Eurasia (late 16\textsuperscript{th} century)
- Networks of enterprising merchants

### Downturns
- Political instability/de-stabilization, turmoil, warfare
- Unraveling or lack of economic reforms
- Vicious circle between political instability and loss of SR revenues
- Diseases/pandemics spread by the SR, notably the “Black Death”
- Slow loss of importance of SR through increasing Western maritime competition circumventing CA (from 16\textsuperscript{th} century)
- Emergence of Siberian Route (Russia), equally bypassing the SR
The era of the steppe empires was not over before the 18th century

China remains largest economic power of the Silk Road (the world) until the early 19th century.

Some further aspects

• **CA’s political and partly economic centrality** in Eurasia up to the 15th century, followed by lengthy decline

• Some of the renowned C Asian traders and their networks: from the Sogdians, via the Uighurs, to the Bukharans

• Nomadic imperial “Law and Order” was not generally accompanied by “Rule of Law”, which rendered long-term investment difficult

• **C Asian versus European medieval experiences**: differential exposure to invasions, no urban bourgeoisie on the SR

• Stylized cycles of C Asian monetary reforms, inflation and currency crises

• **The Middle Kingdom remained** the economically predominant and most resourceful power along the Silk Road
The SR and CA are finally “overrun” by modernity (second half of 19th century)

Some New Silk Road projects (One Belt, One Road), spatial overview

Source: Authors’ compilation, technical cartographic expertise of Florian Partl.
Many thanks