

Reexploring the Silk Roads: Ancient Interactions and New Collaboration

The ancient Silk Roads have been a topic of intense scholarly debate in Chinese academia in recent decades. The study of Silk Roads has been further boosted by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by the Chinese government in 2013. Chinese archaeologists were encouraged to conduct joint excavations in other BRI countries with the aim of exploring the connections between ancient China and the outside world. Many more exhibitions in Chinese museums started to display cultural relics loaned from foreign institutions and to highlight ancient interactions through both overland and sea routes. The current research on the ancient Silk Roads benefits from these new international collaborations and has accordingly achieved a more global perspective.

Within this background, the five scholars in this edition, either archaeologists or curators, bring insights into the finds from sites along the Silk Roads, examining them as material evidence of ancient Sino-foreign interactions.

Liangren Zhang and Ali A. Vahdati introduce the discoveries, including mud-brick dwellings and imitations of Chinese blue-and-white ware yielded by the Tepe Naderi project, a collaborative excavation led by archaeologists from China and Iran.

Based on first-hand material, Yu Ding examines the chronology and scale of Chinese Longquan celadon exported to Kenya from the 13th to 15th centuries, as well as the impetus behind the trade in Longquan ware.

Yue Wang investigates the formation and spread of Kushan art through cultural exchanges along the Silk Roads, emphasizing the styles and carving techniques of various statues and objects.

Finally, focusing on the transmission of glass objects and craftsmanship, Chunlei Qin analyzes the development of glass artistry and trade between China and other ancient civilizations.

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The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai is currently working on a BRI-related research project, which includes examining some of the archaeological initiatives discussed in this issue as well as the creation of a comprehensive database in collaboration with researchers from the University of Virginia.



Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information about the contexts of the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

The Tepe Naderi Project

Liangren Zhang and Ali A. Vahdati

Tepe Naderi is located in Northern Khorasan Province, on a section of a major route from Central Iran to Central Asia. It is an imposing site, the second largest tepe (mound) in the upper Atrak valley, and is very rich in history. In the late 19th century, King Nasir al-din Shah (1831-1896) of the Qajar Dynasty came to visit the old citadel of Shirvan (modern Tepe Naderi) during his pilgrimage to Mashhad. According to E'temād-al-Saltana, who accompanied the Shah on his second royal tour of Khorasan, the tepe had a castle on

the top and a fortified wall, with a large moat (5-7m wide) around it. The fortified wall had two entrance gates and 40 towers along its perimeter, but only one tower is partially left standing today; the castle on the top has totally vanished. The dates of the tepe and the wall, however, remain a mystery.

The field project at Tepe Naderi was initiated in 2015, when Nanjing University and the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism of Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding. The general background to this project is China's "One Belt One Road" Initiative, of which Iran is an important partner. In response to this initiative, Chinese financial investment in Iran grew steadily. Scholarly exchanges in the academic and educational spheres are an integral part of this initiative, but initially no progress was made with respect to the archaeology of Iran. The field project at Tepe Naderi was therefore launched to fill this intellectual vacancy, with much aid from seasoned American scholars, including Prof. Daniel T. Potts of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.



Fig. 1: Mud-brick walls of the Bronze Age at Tepe Naderi. (Photo by Liangren Zhang, 2018)



Fig. 2: Ground penetrating radar survey at Tepe Naderi. (Photo by Ziqi Guo, 2018)

The concept of the Silk Road is too familiar to readers to require any explanation. What is important is that it has been a dynamic road network connecting East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, Russia, and Europe, and that Iran has played a particularly significant role in its history. This is no coincidence because Iran is located right at the crux of the road network; in addition, the peoples of Iran have been very active in spreading goods, technologies, and religions across the Eurasian landmass. In particular, contact between China and Iran has been very close, as is eloquently borne out by the *Sino-Iranica* of Berthold Laufer and *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* of Edward Shafter.

This project raises a number of research questions. One regards the origin of the

tepe, a very common form of settlement in Iran and the Near East, Central Asia, and South Asia in general. The interesting thing about the tepe is that ancient people added layers of mud-brick dwellings upon one another's ruins, such that the tepe kept growing for hundreds or thousands of years [Fig. 1]. However, doing so meant that they had to level the ruins to make the ground for the floors and walls of new dwellings. In China, ancient peoples sometimes did this as well, but only a few times, so that a site might have, for example, five or six layers of occupation lasting 200-300 years. Why did ancient peoples go to the trouble of building their dwellings upon earlier ruins rather than on fresh ground? One hypothesis is that they did so to avoid floods. In much of Iran, rainfall is rather meager and the