The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road. By Xin Wen. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xi + 389. $ 39.95.

"King's Roads" have existed all over the world during different epochs. Think of the Achaemenid Royal Road, praised by Herodotus, on which royal messengers were able to travel in record time from Sardis in Anatolia to Susa in Elam, and onward to Ecbatana and Persepolis in the Iranian highlands; or of the King's Highway (*via regia*) that connected Heliopolis in Egypt with the Euphrates valley via Aqaba on the Red Sea and Damascus in Syria during Ptolemaic and Roman times. California has its *camino real*, as do many other territories once governed by the Spanish in both the New World and the Old. A street in present-day West Hollywood is named "Kings Road" (no apostrophe), as are no doubt many others in English-speaking countries. In China, the expression "Way of Kings" (*wangdao* 王道) has long served as a standard metaphor for "benevolent rule," pioneered in about the fifth century B.C.E. in the "Hongfan" 洪範 (now a chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書)[1] and appropriated by the late Léon Vandermeersch for the title of an influential book that mostly deals with even earlier periods.[2] In German, *Königsweg* is used metaphorically for the most direct or elegant way to reach a one's goal. But none of these mental associations is directly relevant when it comes to understanding the title of the unusually engaging book under review.

For his title, Xin Wen 文欣 recurs to the colophon appended to a copy of the *Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra* (*Dafangdeng daji jing* 大方等大集經) found in the "Library Cave" (Cave 17) at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu) 敦煌莫高窟, which contains the phrase "[May]

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[1] *Shangshu*, "Hongfan" (*Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經註疏, 12.78 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981], v. 1: 190). The *locus classicus*, a rhymed passage, is worth quoting: "Without deflection, without unevenness, / Pursue the Royal righteousness; / Without any selfish likings, / Pursue the Royal way; / Without any selfish dislikings, / Pursue the Royal path; / Without deflection, without partiality, / Broad and long is the Royal path. / Without partiality, without deflection, / The Royal path is level and easy; / Without perversity, without one-sidedness, / The Royal path is right and straight. / Seeing this perfect excellence, / Turn to this perfect excellence" 無偏無陂，遵王之義；無有作好，遵王之道；無有作惡，尊王之路。無偏無黨，王道蕩蕩；無黨無偏，王道平平；無反無側，王道正直。會其有極，歸其有極 (translation by James Legge, *The Shoo King, or The Book of Historical Documents* [*The Chinese Classics*, v. 3; London: Trubner, 1865], pp. 331–32).

[2] Léon Vandermeersch, *Wangdao ou La voie royale: Recherches sur l'esprit des institutions de la Chine archaïque*, 2 vols. (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1977; 1980).

the king's road continue to be open and the enemies and bandits disappear" (p. 281).[3] In this context, the expression "king's road" (*wanglu* 王路) refers to an important portion of the Transasiatic network of roadways that geographers and historians since the nineteenth century have referred to as the "Silk Road."[4] Although Wen does not advocate abandoning the use of the problematic term "Silk Road," as some scholars have recently done,[5] he believes "king's road" to be a better characterization of the part of that network he is concerned with—the East-West routes from the Yellow River Basin through the Hexi Corridor 河西走廊 and onward to Turfan 吐魯番 and along the edge of the Taklamakan Desert—during the specific time period, *ca*. 850–1000, treated in his book. Unlike, for instance, the Achaemenid Royal Road, this "king's road" was not maintained by a central authority, but it was controlled and, at least to some extent, kept safe by various local rulers along the way. These rulers themselves would travel on it only on exceptional occasions for state visits, sometimes linked to dynastic intermarriage; most of the time, the road served to maintain the regular official exchange of information and gifts between their courts.

In the diplomatic correspondence from the Dunhuang "Library Cave," Wen has found this network of connecting thoroughfares evocatively characterized as "the road that made us a family" (pp. 11, 269, 273).[6] "Us" here refers to the inhabitants of the various political entities along the road. Wen demonstrates that the road played a dominant role in their consciousness, and that its functioning was essential to the political viability and the economic prosperity of their respective countries. On the "King's Road," "a network of envoys crisscrossed Eastern Eurasia with evident frequency" (p. 12). It is these envoys who are the main protagonists of Wen's captivating narrative. Wen plumbs relevant sources for concrete indications on who benefited from this road, how people travelled, what was transacted, and how communication worked.

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[3] Contrary to his usual practice, Wen does not provide the original Chinese text for this locus; he mentions (p. 340, n. 72) that there are two copies, P.3935 and BD 14925, and adds that "this text dates to a much earlier period." It remains unclear whether "this text" means the colophon or the *Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra* itself. In the former case, the usage of the term "king's road" in the book might constitute an anachronism.

[4] Note that 王之路 also appears in the passage from the "Hongfan" cited in n. 1.

[5] For a cogent critique, see Sitta von Reden, "Beyond the Silk Road: Toward Alternative Models of Transimperial Exchange," in Sitta von Reden, ed., *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies, Volume 3: Frontier-Zone Processes and Transimperial Exchange* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), pp. 7–41.

[6] Such a formulation appears in three documents: P.2992V-1, a letter by the Dunhuang ruler Cao Yuande to the Uyghur ministers in Ganzhou; P.2155v, a letter by Cao Yuanzhong of Dunhuang to the Uyghur khan; and P.3931-16, a letter from a governor of Lingzhou to the Uyghur khan (for the Chinese texts, see p. 339, nn. 52–54).

Throughout the book, one is particularly impressed with the author's sensitivity to his sources. These include, in the first place, the Dunhuang manuscripts, with which he is profoundly acquainted. In addition, he adduces contemporaneous manuscript sources excavated in Turfan and elsewhere in Central Asia; the full range of transmitted Chinese historical texts from the period; as well as some historical writings from the Islamic world. Wen provides his own translations of cited sources from a range of primary languages—Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Khotanese (the original texts are excerpted in the endnotes of the book)—in addition to citing secondary scholarship in half a dozen Asian and European languages. He also engages to a considerable degree with non-written sources, such as pictorial renderings and archaeological finds. His analytical arguments are compellingly developed out of his source materials, rather than being derived from externally imposed theoretical constructs. Packed with fascinating information that is otherwise difficult to come by, the book offers a comprehensive reinterpretation of political and economic dynamics in Eastern Eurasia during a crucial and arguably understudied part of medieval history. As such, it constitutes an important and highly original contribution to the growing body of historical literature on premodern Central Asia.

The time frame is clearly delineated. Different from the bulk of "Silk Road"–related scholarship and popular writings, Wen leaves aside what is conventionally regarded as the heyday of transcontinental caravan trade between the first century B.C.E. and the mid-eighth century C.E.[7] Instead, he focuses on the period for which the documentary sources from Dunhuang flow most amply: the 150 years or so preceding the closing of the "Library Cave" in the early eleventh century. In the standard Chinese dynastic chronology, this corresponds to the last half-century of the Tang, the chaotic Five Dynasties period (907–960), and the initial decades of the Northern Song (960–1127), as well as, not to forget, the first century of the Liao (916–1125). In a regional context, the beginning of this time span is marked by two almost simultaneous events to the north and south of the road: the fall of the Old Uyghur empire in what is now Outer Mongolia to the Kyrgyz in 840 and the disintegration of the great Tibetan empire after 842. The end of the book's coverage coincides with the beginnings of Islamization in the Tarim Basin to the west and the rise of the Tangut Xixia 西夏 empire (1038–1227) to the east.

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[7] Convenient chronological cornerstones are the Han occupation of the Hexi Corridor in 121 B.C.E. and the Abbasid victory over the Tang army at the Battle of the Talas River in 751 C.E., followed shortly afterward by the destabilization of the Tang empire by the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757) in 755 C.E. and a century of Tibetan hegemony over the Hexi Corridor and the Tarim Basin.

During this period, Dunhuang (Shazhou 沙州) was a de facto independent state, known as the Guiyi Military Circuit 歸義軍 (a term Wen largely avoids), which was ruled by a succession of military governors from the Zhang 張 (848–914) and Cao 曹 (914–1038) families. Except for a short interval in 910–914, when the last Zhang governor overreached by proclaiming himself emperor of a new state called Jinshan 金山, these local rulers accepted the pro forma suzerainty of the successive imperial dynasties in the Chinese heartland. But they were geographically separated from the latter. For a time, Dunhuang had been in control of much of the Hexi Corridor to the east, and of the Turfan and Hami 哈密 oases to the north, but its territorial reach was greatly curtailed as powerful Uyghur khanates, emerging from the vestiges of the Old Uyghur empire, established themselves in Turfan (Qōčō / Gaochang 高昌) in 843 and at Zhangye 張掖 (Ganzhou 甘州) on the Hexi Corridor in 894. Besides, at different times, Tibetan tribes, the Tangut (Dangxiang 黨項) forerunners of the Xixia, and other groups, variously asserted their control over portions of the route between Dunhuang and the Tang / Five Dynasties / Song outposts on the Yellow River. Communication with the imperial centres in North China thus involved travels through long stretches of alien territory, necessitating complex negotiations along the way.

It is with these travels that Wen's book is mainly concerned. Through the multifarious sources adduced, the reader is brought face to face with the representatives of the various kingdoms along the "King's Road" as they moved across treacherous terrain, forging relationships that, in Wen's opinion, were primarily of a socio-political and diplomatic nature. With an anthropological sensitivity to the nuances of human behaviour, Wen adroitly marshals his sources to bring out the importance of enduring traditional notions of honour and hospitality that undergirded the interactions among the participants, and which made their travels possible. Of course, material goods changed hands during those encounters. Yet even though hard-nosed economic interests were never completely absent, and the boundaries between gift exchange and trade were eminently fluid, such considerations tended to be of secondary importance—at least in the interactions for which there are written sources. Wen shows convincingly that the diplomacy documented in these sources was more than just camouflage for commercial activity.

Part I of the book is entitled "Travelers." It consists of three chapters. In Chapter 1, Wen outlines the political-historical background of his analysis, and he presents the Dunhuang materials as a "closed archive" of a monastic community embedded in a complex patchwork of connections to the surrounding secular world. Chapter 2 zeroes in on the people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds who travelled as envoys—Buddhist monks as well as laypeople, kings as well as slaves, men as well as women. In Chapter 3, the agency of the various material items that were involved in travels along the "King's Road"—food, clothes, texts, animals, and luxury items—is scrutinized.

Part II, "Traveling," comprises four chapters that describe the modalities of travel and the interactions between the envoys and their hosts. Chapter 4 characterizes the physical conditions of the roadways. Though usually not especially well-maintained, they were more than just shifting paths and were supported by an infrastructure of governmentally maintained postal stations and protected water sources. At every relay of a voyage, it was crucial to obtain up-to-the-minute information as to the conditions of the road ahead, for political, environmental, and climatic vicissitudes could necessitate taking alternative roads to get through to the next place. Chapter 5 outlines the ritualized sequence of steps that envoys had to follow in interacting with official hosts, and which seems to have been more or less the same for each of the kingdoms along the road. These crucially involved the display of ostentatious generosity on the part of the host and effusive expressions of praise and gratitude on the part of the guests. Chapter 6 focuses on the competitive exchange of gifts that undergirded these interactions. Wen points out convincingly that their primary goal was not to gain profit but to assert the honour and prestige of the giving party. In Chapter 7, Wen discusses the practical problems involved in communication among speakers of the many different languages along the "King's Road." He finds that multilingualism existed, but was not as widespread—or as vital to the success of a voyage—as one might imagine. Instead, he emphasizes the practical importance of pitching an envoy's discourse to the appropriate register within a given language.

The final three chapters of the book make up Part III, entitled "The King's Road." Chapter 8 discusses the economic impact of long-distance contacts on the ordinary citizens of Dunhuang. Wen shows that the influx of valuable exotic goods that reached the oasis as a consequence of the constant traffic of official envoys constituted an essential part of the local economy. Their acquisition could be a potent motive for local citizens to seek official appointment as envoys; as they had to finance their travels from their own resources, such travels entailed a considerable investment risk. Often family resources would be pooled to underwrite a trip, which, if successful, could elevate the participants' social standing very considerably above that of the ordinary peasant-commoner population of Dunhuang at the time. To make the contrast concretely manifest, Wen distils from the documents plausible (albeit approximate) figures for the monetary amounts of, on the one hand, local income and real-estate prices and, on the other hand, the profits to be obtained from foreign missions. Chapter 9, in considering the economic impact of the envoys' missions on the rulers, highlights the role of precious exotica in enhancing royal status and prestige as an important motivation for maintaining the network of diplomatic communication among the various peer regimes. In Chapter 10, Wen shows how the "road" as a concept played a role in diplomatic rhetoric, and he documents a lasting consensus among stakeholders on the importance of keeping it open.

Due to the nature of the sources at hand, the network of connections traced in this book is mainly centred upon Dunhuang, which was certainly an important node—though not necessarily the sole hub—in an interlinked network of political centres along the "King's Road." Dunhuang mainly interacted with Ganzhou to the east, Turfan to the north, and Khotan to the West, and it served as a way station for delegations from Turfan and Khotan travelling to the Chinese imperial courts. Khotan, which had been under Tibetan suzerainty from 792 to 851, was then in the final stage of its glorious history as an Iranian-speaking Buddhist kingdom at the interstice of the Indo-Iranian, Tibetan, and Chinese worlds. Other former oasis kingdoms that by this time had come under the domination of Turfan—Hami (Yizhou 伊州), Karashahr (Ārśi/Yanqi 焉耆), Kucha, Aksu (Bharuka 跋祿迦), and Kashgar (Shule 疏勒)—make only an occasional appearance; and the ancient kingdom of Loulan 樓蘭 (Kroraina/Shanshan 鄯善), located between Dunhuang and Khotan, had gone into eclipse since the seventh century, its population having relocated to Turfan.

Unlike the "Silk Road" as commonly understood, the network documented by Wen's sources was, thus, not a Transasiatic one; it only encompassed parts of what Wen refers to as "Eastern Eurasia." During the period covered in this book, the Islamic conquests had effectively interrupted diplomatic connections to areas further to the West. As a consequence, the flow of trade goods between the former Tang Western Regions (*xiyu* 西域) and western Central Asia was also in all likelihood greatly reduced.

One must emphasize that the interaction network described by Wen was highly time-specific. Constellations changed drastically after the end of the book's coverage. Khotan was conquered in 1006 by the Qarakhanids, becoming one of the first parts of present-day Xinjiang to be Islamized. (It may well have been the fear of the eastward-advancing Qarakhanid armies that triggered the closing of the Dunhuang "Library Cave.") Ganzhou was overrun by the Xixia in 1028 and annexed in 1036; Dunhuang followed in 1038. Turfan remained beyond the reach of the Xixia, but it was eventually conquered by the Qarakitai (Western Liao 西遼) empire in 1134. The Qarakhanid khanate further to the west was also annihilated by the Qarakitai in 1134/37. A century later, the entire region was absorbed into the Mongol empire.

Reviewing a book of such first-rate quality, it is churlish to engage in nitpicking criticism. Still, certain problematic uses of terminology should be pointed out in passing. For instance, it is simply not true that Tang funerary figurines (*yong* 俑) were made of "porcelain" (p. 66).[8] Even though some of them contained kaolin—a key

[8] On occasion, the author refers to *yong* as "statuettes" (p. 78). Indeed, when one goes online, one will be told that "statuette" is a synonym for "figurine," but it is not. To my knowledge, only "figure" and "figurine" are ever used in the scholarly literature in connection with *yong*.

ingredient in porcelain—they consist of (glazed or unglazed) earthenware, fired at a much lower temperature—*ca*. 800–1000°C—than porcelain (1300–1400°C).[9] (To avoid the specificity of "earthenware" vs. "porcelain," one may use the overarching term "ceramic"; "terracotta" is also possible.[10]) The statement (pp. 70–71) that travellers were wearing "carpets" around their loins and slept on them at night rises eyebrows—the source text cited by Wen in this connection quite unambiguously refers to felt (*zhan* 氈) blankets.[11] A Buddhist priest's stole is no "scarf" (p. 160), and it is problematic to refer to the ordination of Buddhist monastics as "initiation" (p. 220).[12] And a poem inscribed on a portrait characterizing the sitter (*miaozhen zan* 邈真讚) is assuredly not an "elegy" (pp. 140, 264): "Encomium" (or, to be more exact, "rhymed [or verse] encomium") is a preferable translation.[13] Arguably, the blame for these and other inaccuracies and infelicities lies not with the author, but with the patently inadequate editorial services provided by Princeton University Press and, perhaps, with insufficiently careful advisement on the part of those who passed the work muster at the doctoral-dissertation stage.

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[9] Cf. Yang Hong, "The Secular Tradition: Burial Art and Spirit Paths; From the Han to the Qing," in *Chinese Sculpture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 128.

[10] One should perhaps point out that this finding regarding the material of which *yong* were made has nothing to do the longstanding debates about where to draw the difference between "stoneware" (firing temperature between 1100–1300°C) and "porcelain," and about when and where true porcelain began to be made (scholars now agree that it originated on the flanks of the Taihang Mountains during the mid-first millennium C.E., but was not produced at a large scale until the Song period). See Rose Kerr and Nigel Wood, with Ts'ai Mei-fen and Zhang Fukang, *Ceramic Technology* (Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. V:12, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 143–63 *et passim*.

[11] Zhou Qufei 周去非 (1134–1189), *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答, "Fuyongmen"服用門, entry *zhan* 氈 (*Baijia zhuzi* 百家諸子 online edition, section 116). Perhaps the author has misread *zhan* 氈, which can also be written 氊, as *tan* 毯, "carpet." One cannot help wondering to what extent information from the *Lingwai daida*, a text concerned with South China and areas beyond, can be relevant for the region here discussed.

[12] I thank Professor Jonathan Silk (personal communication, December 2024) for confirming my suspicion on these points.

[13] For this information, I am indebted to Professor Ronald Egan (personal communication, December 2024), who points to the usage of David Knechtges, tr., *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, vol. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Paul W. Kroll, ed., *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

Fortunately, it is easy to read past these minutiae. This is not only a fascinating book—the scholarship is nothing short of masterful. The book will both instruct and delight specialists across all historical disciplines.

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