

BEYOND
JAPAN

Beyond Japan Transcript

[Series 2, Episode 28: On the Silk Road\(s\) with Professor Susan Whitfield](#)

Edited by [Oliver Moxham](#), Host and Producer (18/5/2022)

ON THE SILK ROAD(S)
WITH PROF SUSAN WHITFIELD



OM: Oliver Moxham

SW: Professor Susan Whitfield

OM: Hello and welcome to *Beyond Japan*, an interdisciplinary podcast that looks at the broad reach of Japanese Studies from within and beyond Japan. This podcast is brought to you by the [Centre for Japanese Studies](#) at the [Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures](#) in collaboration with the [University of East Anglia](#). I'm your host, Oliver Moxham, Research Project Coordinator at the Sainsbury Institute and [researcher of language and Japanese war heritage](#).

This week we are joined by [Susan Whitfield](#), Professor in Silk Road Studies at the Sainsbury Institute, to gain a new perspective on the mass of historic maritime and land-based routes known as the [Silk Roads](#). Susan gives us a taste of the material and cultural impact of the enormous trade network stretching to the ends of Europe, Africa and Asia from the 2nd Century BCE, as well as highlighting the role of Japan and China in establishing the network as [World Heritage](#).

We hope you enjoy the show.

OM: Good morning, Susan, thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

SW: Good morning.

OM: So, first of all, we like to know a bit more about you. Can you tell us about your area of expertise and how your interests have brought you there?

SW: Yes. Well, I started my scholarly life, in fact, as a historian of medieval China, but very soon in my studies I realized I could not understand the many cultures of China at that time – I mean the medieval period – without understanding their wider links, that is, through the so-called Silk Roads to the rest of the Afro-Eurasian world.

Around that time, when I was doing my PhD, I also started work at the British Library, where I worked on medieval manuscripts from Central Asia. They were in Chinese, Tibetan, but another 20 other languages, and they exemplified the cultural diversity of this region bordering the kingdoms and empires of China.

I then helped found and directed a project with over 30 collaborating museums and libraries worldwide, all of which held collections of Central Asian manuscripts and artefacts. We worked together to make catalogues and images of these manuscripts and artefacts freely available online, and they're still up there, but through this work, I got to work with excellent and knowledgeable colleagues worldwide and with thousands upon thousands of archaeological artefacts from the Silk Road. This only really furthered my interest and desire to bring an understanding of this material to a wider audience, hence my various books and exhibitions.

I left the British Library in 2016 a few years ago but was delighted to start work with colleagues at UEA (University of East Anglia) on the project 'Nara to Norwich', which we'll talk about later, showing how these interactions impacted even those cultures at the edges of Eurasia. So, here I am today.

OM: Great, and in your research have you travelled on the Silk Road sections?

SW: Oh, lots and lots and lots. Not as much as I would like and, of course, travel is becoming more difficult now, but I've been to most parts of the Silk Road. I've worked a lot in the Tarim Basin and what is now North-western China, although I won't go back there at present because of the political situation. I've been to the Iranian and the West Asian section and all the Central Asian stans. Yes, I've travelled a lot, I love travel.

Also, I think if you're working on an area, it's very difficult to understand it fully without travel. Of course, travel is a luxury, but — just one small example. In one of my early books, I wrote about a battle that took place between the Tibetans and Chinese in the

late 8th century in Central Asia in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan, and I wrote about this battle and what happened, and I looked at maps and I looked at Google Earth, and I talked about how the Tibetans fled: it was the first battle in many that the Chinese Army actually won. Then a few years later, I had the opportunity to go there, and I walked on foot the same direction—the route that the Tibetan armies had taken when they moved from the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan down into what is now Pakistan, and it was utterly different from how it had been in my imagination on Google Maps and everything, just the scale and lots of detail, and you really get so much better an understanding when you travel to a place.

OM: Definitely. So, in your article, ['The Expanding Silk Road: UNESCO and the Belt and Road Initiative'](#) (2020), you start off by describing the Silk Road as "not only silk and not only a road", referencing the vast history of diverse trade and destinations the term covers. Can you briefly summarize the Silk Road for us and tell us how we ended up with such a narrow term?

SW: Yes, in that article I mentioned that, actually, in 1951, Nehru, then the Prime Minister of India, argued to UNESCO against the dichotomy, or binary, of dividing the world into east and west, and I fully endorse this and have written on it several times. Sadly, it's an easy and lazy binary to fall into, and you get the Eurocentric and the Sinocentric views of the world, and this course misses out great parts of Eurasia.

The Silk Road, when it started to become fashionable, was, I hoped, a concept which really had the potential to be more inclusive, as its initial focus was as much on Central and West Asia as on China or Europe – in fact, Europe is pretty much peripheral to the Silk Road – and I believe it still has this potential, even though many interpret it in a binary fashion, a link between east and west.

OM: I see. Isn't it an irony how the term Silk Road can be seen as limited now when it was coined to replace the even more narrow-minded east-west mentality?

SW: I think it just shows how people fall into lazy dichotomies, lazy binaries. It's easier for them to think in those terms of east and west and how much political and other

narratives such as China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), for example, push that narrative. So, it is ironic, but I think we can fight against that.

There are lots of scholars doing work on the Silk Road, and I think there's more awareness now of the lands of the Silk Road, of the importance of Persia, for example, or Central Asia, than there might have been among general populace in the past.

OM: I see. So, with over 40 countries along the Silk Roads today, UNESCO began the [UNESCO Silk Roads program](#) to understand "the ways in which cultures have mutually influenced each other." However, your article argues that the UNESCO designation was strongly influenced by individual countries, namely Japan and the People's Republic of China. Could you explain the interest these two countries have in the Silk Roads? How does investing in a series of historical trade routes further their political agendas today?

SW: Well, I think first we say that the history of all international organizations such as UNESCO shows influence at varying times by a few countries. Also, as many scholars have pointed out, culture has been widely seen in the 20th century and the 21st century as a useful tool to further nationalist agendas and to help with the cementing of identities of countries, of emerging nations, if you like, or to paper over the histories of empires. But in this case, I think that Japan's early influence, as I say in my paper, was helpful.

They really argued for the complexity of the interactions across Eurasia. They weren't promoting at all a binary viewpoint. They were following on with Nehru's dictate against the binary viewpoint. Up until 1971, in fact, the PRC – People's Republic of China – was not the representative on UNESCO, that was held by Taiwan. It wasn't really until after 1978 and the end of the Cultural Revolution that the PRC really started to play an active role. So, Japan's role in these early years in the '50s, 60s and 70s was important in arguing for, if you like, the complexity of the Silk Roads. They pointed out that it was not a single land route through Central Asia, as it was often misleadingly described, but that they were a network of both land and sea routes, and that these land routes included routes across the Steppe, which were often disregarded.

They also argued very strongly for the importance of Central Asia and against what they called in the 1950s in a publication the “overweening influence” of China. They thus tried to really expand the debate beyond the simplified binary, and I think their legacy survives in many ways.

Of course, the Silk Road also served their agenda in showing the importance of their own links with South and Central Asia through the transmission of Buddhism into Japan, and this again provided an alternative narrative to one in which China was the main influence on Japanese medieval civilization. As I said, the PRC only became active in UNESCO in the late 1970s. Of course, they were concerned to go back to pushing a more simplified narrative of China being the instigator and continuing leader of the Silk Road, which they promoted as very much an east-to-west route of trade and influence. The Silk Road concept was therefore useful to them for providing this narrative that they had previously led the world in trade and culture and influence – the rest of the Afro-Eurasian world – and thus, of course, to pave a path to a future where they would take this role again and the Belt Road Initiative is a result of this agenda. So, I'd say that we're seeing very different agendas, led by Japan first in the '50s, '60s, [and] '70s arguing for complexity, and then the People's Republic of China becoming more influential on UNESCO in the '80s up to the present, in fact being the major funder now and pushing for a very different agenda.

OM: So, given this mutual interest in promoting the Silk Roads, has this provided a point of collaboration or contention between Japan and China?

SW: Both, I would say. Initially the PRC and Japan worked together, for example, on the UNESCO Silk Road agenda. For example, the national TV companies of each country collaborated on a multipart documentary on the Silk Roads, which brought this idea to a much wider audience. It was very influential and popular and has been remade and expanded several times, but as the PRC has sought to take ownership, if you like, of the concept of the Silk Road, it's inevitably led against this overweening influence that Japan had sought to counter, and thus to contention. Nevertheless, I'd say there's been very important cultural collaborations, not least in the archaeology of Silk Road kingdoms in the Tarim Basin in Central Asia, now part of the PRC, and in numerous Silk Road exhibitions and conferences led and hosted by both countries.

Although Nara is still on the Silk Road map for UNESCO, Xi'an (Chang'an) in China, capital of many of the countries and empires of China, is taken by many as the start of the Silk Road, again showing the Sinocentric bias creeping back in. There has been, over the past decades, considerable behind-the-scenes tension and lobbying to try to get Nara as the Eastern point of the Silk Road rather than Chang'an.

OM: So, tell us a bit more about the Belt and Road Initiative, China's attempt to link up the Eurasian-African land mass via China through enormous investments in transport infrastructure. Is it something closely tied to the historical trade routes of the Silk Roads, or is it an entirely new entity beyond compare?

SW: Yes, the latter, without a doubt. We must remember, the Silk Road is a concept we impose in the 20th and 21st century on the past to provide a framework in which to ask questions about the past. It didn't actually exist. It's just a modern-day concept to try to provide some order to our questioning of this period of history. Secondly, under what we include under this concept is a whole messy set of informal trade- pilgrimage-diplomatic routes and interactions not led by any one country, which were mutable over time, and were never controlled by any one country, never went in one single direction. They went North-South, East-West, West-East, South-North, and they went by land and sea. There was no "Silk Road".

BRI, by contrast, is an entirely new entity beyond compare, really. It exists as a policy by a single empire, by the PRC, to assert its own greater economic and political influence across Afro-Eurasia. It's only because the PRC has appropriated the term "Silk Road" to lend some historical legitimacy to its policy that we even think about comparing them. There is really little or no comparison.

OM: I see. So, this notion of the Silk Road, was it an idea of trying to get a sense of transnational cultures which is now being appropriated to justify territory claims, or was it always a matter of marking out who owns what part of land where?

SW: No, the original notion of the Silk Road, which was first talked about in the 20th century, was the result really of European interest in Central Asia, realization of the importance of the routes across Central Asia shown in classical maps, Ptolemy's map,

and then in other maps by other places. In fact, when Richtofen, a German geographer in the 1870s, took it up – it already was in usage to some extent – it was looking at how they could connect the Eurasian landmass from Europe across Eurasia in modern times. So, it was a geographical and historical concept also linked to and used a lot by archaeologists and historians to talk about links in the past. It was really only later that it became taken up as a political concept with an economic and political agenda.

OM: Referring back to UNESCO's initial goal of demonstrating mutual cultural influence on the Silk Roads, it seems to have incited a competition amongst countries to be the most influential. What other countries are competing for presence on the Silk Roads, and do you think the impact of the nomination has deviated from its original idealist notion?

SW: Yes, the UNESCO one certainly was in some extent idealist. As I just said, it's a concept really that emerged in scholarly writings and became increasingly used to provide this narrative showing a complex and interconnected medieval Afro-Eurasia. [However], as it became more entrenched in the popular imagination, thanks to the Sino-Japanese TV series and books and exhibitions, it then became a useful term to sell anything involved with links and interactions across Eurasia.

So, certainly it has deviated greatly, but I don't want to be too cynical here. After all, I've used the term shamelessly in books and exhibitions. I hope it has been useful. That's my own personal viewpoint in using it in moving scholarship and public understanding away from concentration on the local and from either a Eurocentric or Sinocentric viewpoint to looking at these wider historical links between cultures across Eurasia and of course, Africa, which was an integral part of the connected world.

As for countries bringing themselves into the Silk Road, well, of course that works in two ways. There's the economic, political imperative and the keenness to be on the trade routes across Eurasia and modern trade routes in the BRI, but from a scholarly point of view, there's been a realization that it's a way of expanding scholarly interest away, as said, from the local to the more regional or wider links. For example, there's many scholars [who have] been doing excellent work looking at the links between the Rus of Northern Europe and Central Asia, and then Scandinavia takes its place on the Silk

Road and the North to South, South to North river routes from Northern Europe down into Central Asia. So, there are various imperatives for why places want to become part of the Silk Road, and I think some of those still conform with the idealist notion of understanding a more interconnected world and recognizing that there are many influences on one's own culture from across Afro-Eurasia, and some of them are cynical and to do with trade and economics and other reasons.

So, it's both. It has deviated, that was inevitable, but I think something of the original idealistic notion is still there.

OM: You were talking about the Silk Roads from a nation-state perspective, looking at the grand political appropriation of the term I suppose, but I've read your book, [Silk Roads: Peoples, Cultures, Landscapes](#) (2019), with beautiful photography of scenes, the landscapes, people who have lived along the routes, people who are from nomadic backgrounds, from rather poor areas of the world, but through the intangible culture of craftsmanship and nomadism, they are instrumental to this historical concept. So, how far are they represented when we talk about the Silk Roads?

SW: Yes, that's an interesting one. As I mentioned earlier, when Japan first started talking about links across Eurasia, it included routes across the Steppe and the influence of the pastoralists – nomadic, semi-nomadic, some with urban centres, some with agriculture – in this and tried to stress their importance on the Silk Road. That's waxed and waned.

A lot of people obviously ignore them, but I think in scholarship there is general recognition of the importance of the links between what David Christian called 'Inner and Outer Eurasia', those Northern Steppe lands not supporting great areas of agriculture or great, urban conurbations and the empires to their south. In fact, there was a recent publication about how people in the Carpathian Basin on the edges of Europe come from inner Mongolia and result from migrations of peoples in inner Mongolia, of semi-nomadic peoples, pastoralist peoples in this period. So, I think even in simplified talks about the Silk Road they're often left off, [but] in the scholarship that's going on, and the understanding of this region, Afro-Eurasia, during this period, they're increasingly playing an important part.

[Here's] just one more example: there's been work showing the domestication of grains might have taken place in this area as well, so I think it is increasingly recognized and acknowledged as an important influence.

OM: Excellent. Finally, I would like to ask you about your latest research initiative, the ['Nara to Norwich' project](#). Having been based in this Eastern outpost of England for the last two years or so, it seems hard to imagine Norwich as a final stop on an Intercontinental route of material and cultural exchange. Could you flesh out the ties between Nara and Norwich a bit more?

SW: Yes, well, this isn't really my initiative, but it's one arising from discussions among scholars at SISJAC [the Sainsbury Institute] in Norwich and other colleagues at places worldwide. It's been a very fruitful and interesting discussion, and we're not really looking at Norwich as a stop on the Silk Roads – after all, Europe was very much at the periphery at this period – but this did not mean that people in Norwich and elsewhere in Britain didn't experience influences from a wider world which affected their lives.

So, for example, we see jewellery in burials here in Britain made of gold inlaid with garnets, and this is a style we can see across the Eurasian Steppe (I'm talking about the pastoralists of the Steppe) which extends into East Asia. So, we see, for example, a wonderful inlaid dagger sheath using the same techniques of inlaid gold work. The garnets as well that we see in much of the jewellery found here might come from South Asia, and some of the jewellery is in the form of a cross, a sign of the Christian faith which had travelled from West Asia. Thus, even though we're not saying that Norwich was a stop on the Silk Roads, we're showing that the interconnections of Afro-Eurasia at the time reached even far-flung Norwich, right on the edges, as you say, of Eurasia.

I should add, people often think that the modern world is the first time when the Afro-Eurasian world was connected and when people travelled long distances or knew anything about what was happening in the rest of the world. I think all the work on the Silk Road that we do and the finds from Britain show that this is far from the case. We have to challenge the idea that most people lived in isolation, unaware of the wider world, [and ask] "was this really the case?"

OM: I see. Fascinating. Well, thank you for answering all of my questions, Susan. Before you finish the episode, could you share with us what other projects you are currently working on?

SW: Thanks, it's been a pleasure, but yes, I have lots and lots of projects. The wonders of working on the Silk Road is that it's an excuse to work on anything, really, because it encompasses such a large geographical and historical period. One project I have, which is linked to the Nara to Norwich project involves looking at how Japan and Korea are seeking to find alternative Silk Road narratives to the PRC's (China's) domination of the debate with their BRI. So, how they are coming up with narratives which involve their direct links, for example, Korea to the Persian world through the Steppe, so that's quite interesting and pertinent.

I've been working for quite a long time on the horse on the Silk Road. People think of trade and they think of silk and other luxury items, but, in fact, the horse was a luxury trade item, as well as an item for warfare [and] military equipment. [It] appears [to be] very important for the economics of the Silk Road and also for the art of the Silk Road.

On the same lines, I'm looking at the progression of architecture of the Buddhist stupa from Gandhara cross Central Asia and then into China, Korea, and Japan.

One major multiyear work I'm doing is I'm going to write a history of Khotan. Khotan was an oasis kingdom in the Tarim Basin, what is now part of the People's Republic of China. It existed for over 1000 years, roughly the first millennium AD, and had its own language, arts, scholarship, and more, and we know its influence on some of the kingdoms of China at the time. Yet there's not a single monograph history on it, and I think it shows how areas can often become deserts in scholarship, black holes where nothing really comes out. I hope to remedy this and to make a readable history which will bring this kingdom into wider focus and encourage young scholars to work further on this region.

I have several other ideas in formation, but I'll save those for a later time. Thanks again.

OM: Fascinating. Lots to look forward to, then. Thank you, Susan, it's been a real pleasure.

SW: The same. Thank you.

OM: You can find a link to [Susan's research profile](#) in the description below. Don't forget to subscribe on JapanInNorwich.org or on your preferred podcast provider for updates on new episodes. Join us for our next episode with Dr Sonia Favi, researcher at the University of Turin, to discuss the history of imagined travel. Sonia's digital exhibition, 'Travels in Tokugawa Japan', explores how late-Edo period maps indulged the imagination of those unable to journey across the country, something all too familiar in the wake of COVID-19 travel restrictions.

We hope you will join us then. Thank you for listening.