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Introduction

A Song of Diplomacy on the Silk Road

IN MEDIEVAL DUNHUANG, New Year's Eve was usually cold and rowdy. At dusk, in a widely practiced ritual of exorcism, dozens of teenage boys would dress up as Buddhist, Daoist, and Zoroastrian deities, and local gods—the ghostbuster Zhongkui, the Nine-Tailed Fox, or the "Poisonous Dragon of the Golden Mountain." Their leader might wear a bronze mask and a leopard-skin robe draped over his body, painted red with cinnabar. With chants like "I am Zhongkui the god!" he would lead this motley procession of deities, beating drums and singing songs, and marching through the streets of the city. These noisy gods would try to expel the many spirits that had been haunting the streets, farms, pastures, and homes of Dunhuang during the previous year. People of all ranks, from commoners to the governor and his family, would witness or even join the carnival as the boys danced from the city gates to their houses and government offices.[1] It would have been difficult to sleep on these festive nights.

Many centuries later, we can almost experience what it felt like to be present during these raucous festivities, because many of the songs that would have been heard on the streets of Dunhuang were recorded in manuscripts that were stored in a small cave southeast of the city and sealed for nine centuries. The rediscovery of these manuscripts in 1900 allowed the buried voices to be heard once again: the boy-exorcists sang for a prosperous new year, with "cows and sheep filling the pastures; wheat and barley piling like hills"; they also prayed that their families would be fortunate and healthy in the new year and behave in a manner appropriate to their social status. Although our contemporary end-of-year rituals are boisterous in rather different ways, we can relate to these sentiments. But in other songs, we find a perspective more

distinctive to medieval Dunhuang. One in particular includes the following stanzas:

> The ten thousand commoners sing songs with full bellies like drums,
> [living in] a time like that under [the sage kings] Shun and Yao.
> Do not worry about the eastern road being blocked.
> In the spring, the heavenly envoys will arrive,
> and they will contribute large *jin*-silks with coiled dragons,
> and different kinds of damask, gauze, plain silk, colored silk.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> To the west all the way until Khotan
> the road is smoother than those covered in cotton cloth.
> [The Khotanese] will offer precious artifacts and white jade,
> as well as a thousand rolls of cotton, damask, and miscellaneous fabrics.
> All within the border [of Dunhuang] chant the song of happiness
> and enjoy a long life like Ancestor Peng![2]

Here, the crowd in Dunhuang wished for a world of happiness and long life, where kings ruled in the manner of ancient sages such as Yao and Shun and commoners prospered like "Ancestor Peng," who famously lived for eight hundred years. In the context of this song, these better times will not come about through the establishment of any new social institution, the realization of any moral or religious obligations, or the dissemination of any school of thought. Instead, the key to this ideal world is the network of roads that connect Dunhuang to its neighbors, conveying a perpetual influx of diplomatic travelers, such as the "heavenly envoys," and luxury goods into Dunhuang. Singers of this song reassured their audience that the road leading eastward to North China would remain open, allowing Chinese envoys to bring silk the following spring. Meanwhile, the road to the west to Khotan would be smoother than cotton cloth, and Khotanese envoys would offer jade as tribute. Put another way, to these singers, the operation of diplomacy was crucial to the happiness of the Dunhuang people.

In our time, diplomatic matters are generally far removed from the minds of New Year's revelers while they wait for the clock to strike midnight. Why were they so critical to the hopes and wishes of the people living in medieval Dunhuang? What social, cultural, and economic circumstances gave rise to the ecstatic vision presented in these lyrics? Looking beyond Dunhuang, what

does this ceremonial song reveal about the history of long-distance travel and connection in medieval Eurasia more broadly?

This book is an investigation into the world envisioned within this song. Key to that world are the actions of diplomatic travelers, the very people that the singers eagerly anticipated. By following the emergence, activities, and impact of these travelers, we can begin to understand the world the Dunhuang singers wished for at the dawn of a New Year.

From the Age of Empire to the Age of Kings

The oasis city of Dunhuang sits at the intersection of three main roads in the eastern half of the Eurasian continent (see map i.1). These roads lead to East Asia by way of the Hexi Corridor, to North Asia via the valleys in the Tianshan mountains, and to Central Asia through the oases and deserts north of the Tibetan Plateau. Because of its strategic location, Dunhuang was embroiled in the political drama of the broader Eastern Eurasian world from the moment that it first entered recorded history with the Han emperor Wudi (156–87 BCE) wrangling control of the region from the Xiongnu Empire. This dynamic of survival at the margins of empires persisted into the medieval period, as Eastern Eurasia was dominated, starting in the late sixth century, by three empires: the Tibetan, the Tang, and the Turco-Uyghur.

The power of these empires fluctuated over time: The First Turkic Empire (552–630) achieved regional supremacy in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and subjected the first Tang emperor to political vassalage.[3] In the 620s, the Tang Empire (618–907) gained the upper hand, achieving military supremacy and consolidating its rule in the region. The Tang all but eradicated the Turkic Empire as a political power in the mid-seventh century, but the Turkic elites' dissatisfaction with the Tang mounted until they reclaimed their status and established the Second Turkic Empire (681–742).[4] This new state was less powerful than its earlier incarnation and lasted only a few decades before it was overthrown by an alliance of Tang and nomadic groups. One group of these nomadic rebels, the Uyghurs, succeeded the Turks as rulers of the steppe; their empire (744–840) maintained friendly relations with the Tang, whose empire was greatly weakened by the An Lushan Rebellion (755–63).

Just as the First Turkic Empire was disintegrating, Songtsen Gampo (?–650) expanded the domain of the Yarlung dynasty to cover the entire Tibetan Plateau. He established formal diplomatic relations with the Tang in 634 and consolidated this relationship in 641 by marrying Princess

MAP 1.1 Dunhuang and Eastern Eurasia

Wencheng (623–80). Under the next several *btsan-po* (Tibetan for "emperor"), the Tibetan Empire (618–842) grew to be a formidable military force and expanded its influence far into modern Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Nanzhao in southwestern China.[5]

The oasis region in the Central Asian deserts between Dunhuang and Kashgar—an area central to the events discussed in this book—was located among these three imperial powers, making it the coveted prize of this medieval "Great Game."[6] All three empires attempted, at times successfully, to conquer this region.[7] Beginning in the middle of the sixth century, it was ruled by the First Turkic Empire. The Tang, however, expanded westward into the Hexi Corridor (including Dunhuang) in 619, and then Turfan in 640. In 648, they established "four garrisons to pacify the west" (*anxi sizhen*) in four Central Asian oasis-towns: Kucha, Khotan, Shule (modern Kashgar), and Suyab (Ak-Beshim, near Tokmok in what is now Kyrgyzstan). Then, in 662, Tibetan forces began their incursion into the region. The oases changed hands between Tibetan and Tang forces several times until 692, when Empress Wu (624–705) recaptured them from the Tibetans and stationed thirty thousand troops at the four garrisons.[8]

The significant military presence in the region secured Tang rule until the An Lushan Rebellion in the mid-eighth century. After the retreat of the Tang forces, the Tibetan Empire regained control of the area, imposing a similar military occupation and conquering Dunhuang in 781.[9] At the same time, the Uyghur Empire invaded, challenging Tibetan forces on the northern frontier. In the 790s and 800s, the Uyghurs successfully captured such important oasis kingdoms as Beshbalik, Kucha, and Turfan from the Tibetans.[10] During the first half of the ninth century, the region between Dunhuang and Kashgar was divided between these two powers, with the Uyghur Empire ruling its northern half and the Tibetan Empire ruling the south.

Then, in the middle of the ninth century, all three imperial powers simultaneously went into decline. The assassination of the last *btsan-po*, Langdarma (799–841), in 841 initiated a long process of disintegration within the Tibetan Empire. Seven years later, in 848, the Kyrgyz drove the Uyghur Empire out of the steppe, leading to the dispersal of Uyghurs across Central Asia. With the rebellion of Huang Chao, lasting from 874 to 884, the Tang dynasty was decisively wounded. Its eventual overthrow would come two decades later.

While we cannot determine whether there was an overarching cause of the near-simultaneous demise of all three empires, we can say unequivocally that the result was the intense territorial division of Eastern Eurasia. Many

smaller states arose in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, including the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" in China, the Guge kingdom in western Tibet, the independent oasis states along the Hexi Corridor from Liangzhou to Dunhuang, and such Central Asian states as Khotan and Turfan. Although many kings of these states clung to imperial titles and rhetoric (the king of Dunhuang, for instance, called himself "emperor" for a few years after the fall of the Tang), none were territorially expansionist in the way that rulers of the three old empires had been.[11] In the ruins of these empires, then, we can witness the emergence of a new epoch of political fragmentation—an age of many kings.

It is to this period, when Dunhuang was a de facto independent state (848–1036), that the song about diplomacy, silk, and jade, with which we began, belongs.[12] The "heavenly envoys" from the east, of which it speaks, came from either one of the Five Dynasties (907–60) in North China or the early Song state (960–1127), while the envoys from the west came from the newly independent Central Asian kingdom of Khotan, located at the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert.[13] The existence of these long-distance connections running from North China through Dunhuang to Central Asia contradicts how some scholars have previously assessed this age of political fragmentation in Eastern Eurasia. The historian Morris Rossabi, for instance, comments that "starting around 845, the [Tang] court, as well as rebels, targeted and attacked Buddhism and other foreign religions. Most foreigners reacted by avoiding China, leading to four centuries of limited intercultural contact along the Silk Roads."[14] Others have written, in similar terms, about how political disunity hindered long-distance connection during this time.[15] The idea that the decline of the Tang brought about centuries of reduced trans-Eurasian connection is widely shared, especially in the field of global history. According to this view, long-distance, intercultural contact was either lost entirely or severely reduced in the absence of large, unified empires, and it would not fully recover until the rise of the Mongol empire in the thirteenth century.[16]

If long-distance trans-Eurasian travel was indeed as rare at this time as many believe, why would the people of Dunhuang sing about their connections with North China and Central Asia? One possibility is that these references to foreign envoys and luxury goods convey an unrealistic and idealized set of hopes, much like the lyric about Ancestor Peng's octocentennial lifespan. Or, does this exorcist song performed in Dunhuang disclose a highly interconnected world, the existence of which has gone largely unnoticed by historians?

A Bottom-Up History of Diplomacy

These questions would be impossible to answer—indeed, impossible to raise—if not for an accidental discovery made in 1900. On a hot summer night, a Daoist monk named Wang Yuanlu (1851–1931) was cleaning the sand from the front of the complex of caves known as "The Grottoes of Unparalleled Height" (Mogao ku), located southwest of the city of Dunhuang. These caves housed Buddhist statues and mural paintings created from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries. By the late nineteenth century, however, this former center of Buddhism had lost its luster, and few visitors came to see its medieval caves anymore. Perhaps its lone resident at the time, Wang wished to rebuild parts of the cave complex as a Daoist "Palace of Celestial Purity." On this particular evening, as he channeled running water before the entrance to one of the caves, an opening suddenly appeared in the wall, "giving out a flickering light."[17] Intrigued by the light, Wang dug through the opening, inside which he found a small hidden chamber of about thirteen square meters.[18] As scholars would eventually realize, this chamber had been sealed in the early eleventh century and remained undisturbed for almost nine hundred years. It contained sixty thousand manuscripts.

The large number of secular documents found in this cave makes it possible to reconstruct, in microscopic detail, the social lives of residents in Dunhuang, including the experiences of travelers who passed through this hub of exchange in the Eurasian heartland. In a remarkable study, Sam van Schaik and Imre Galambos have used a single Sino-Tibetan manuscript to show how a traveling monk navigated his life on the road.[19] In this book, I follow their example and expand the lens outward to the entire Dunhuang corpus.[20] Many hundreds of unique long-distance journeys are recorded in the Dunhuang archive in different formats: contracts show how travelers financed their journeys; royal edicts include the information that they communicated; maps and road guides reveal how they navigated the difficult terrain of Central Eurasia; personal correspondence and notebooks offer a window into their minds and sentiments while on the road; petitions demonstrate their need for assistance in times of distress; messages of greeting and gratitude bear witness to the relationships that they enjoyed with their hosts. Their stories attest to the persistence of long-distance travel in the "age of kings," between roughly 850 and 1000.

As the New Year's Eve song would suggest, the overwhelming majority of long-distance travelers described in the Dunhuang documents undertook their journeys for diplomatic purposes. The centrality of diplomacy to these

documents is unmistakable: an official report details the gifts delivered and received by Dunhuang envoys after they went to the Tang capital; a wine expenditure record from the Dunhuang government describes the reception of Turfan envoys at arrival and departure; two lists of places a group of Khotanese envoys would visit are scribbled on a notebook; a set of poems by a Chinese envoy laments the damage of guesthouses on the Silk Road. Time and again, travelers describe themselves, and are described by others, as envoys, dispatched on their long journeys on behalf of the state. Each year, dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of foreign envoys came to Dunhuang, and dozens of Dunhuang envoys were dispatched to neighboring states. In comparison, commercial travelers are almost entirely absent in the Dunhuang documents.[21] The examples I collect in this book show that the images presented in the New Year's song are not the fanciful concoction of a dreaming poet. Instead, they reflect the actual experience of the people of Dunhuang in the context of the city's relations with its neighbors in the ninth and tenth centuries.

This book is a social history of the lives of these diplomatic travelers. By tracing their steps, observing their actions, and assessing their impact, the book investigates the organization and mechanisms of Eastern Eurasian international relations in the age of kings. Unlike earlier works of diplomatic history, I am not primarily concerned with military strategies and decision-making in court.[22] Instead, my interest lies with more mundane matters: What did the envoys eat and drink? Where did they stay? How did they organize the logistics of transporting goods across the difficult terrain of Eastern Eurasia? How did they communicate, both orally and in writing, with people who spoke a different language? What diplomatic protocols did they follow? These matters open onto a set of larger questions about the political dimensions of this time. What motivated kings to engage in diplomacy? Was diplomacy critical to their idea of kingship, and if so, why? What motivated envoys to participate in diplomacy? The documents discovered in the Dunhuang cave provide the answers to these questions, and many others.

It might be tempting to see these envoys as operating in a "tributary system," a set of diplomatic practices and rhetoric that recognize the superiority of the Chinese emperor in his dealings with neighboring vassal states.[23] This would not be entirely wrong, because the hierarchies typical of such a system are everywhere visible in their lives on the road. But the bottom-up view taken by this book reveals the messy and contradictory way that this "tributary system" actually played out on the ground, and thus challenges the official accounts in sources produced in Chinese courts. One example appears in the

New Year's song with which we began. Here, on the one hand, envoys from North China are described as "heavenly envoys," which seems to suggest their state's elevated status in comparison to Dunhuang. But, on the other hand, the lyrics characterize these Chinese envoys as "contributing" (*jinfeng*) gifts, a close synonym of the more familiar verb *gong* ("to pay tribute"), which implies inferior status of the person performing the action. The assumed hierarchy in the tributary system begins to dissolve when we see "heavenly envoys" from the Chinese emperor "paying tribute" to the lord of the small oasis kingdom of Dunhuang.

Attending to such contradictions allows me to dissect this system and examine its inner workings. As we follow the movement of envoys along the road and their interactions with different states, the Tang and the Song, the two major Chinese empires at the time, move to the margins of our field of vision. Looking closely at the kings of smaller states, we see that they sometimes accommodated the tributary system when dealing with the states based in North China. But, just as often, they rejected the hierarchies that it implied and actually regarded themselves as superior. Certain cases—such as when the Chinese-speaking rulers of Dunhuang acknowledged the superiority of the Iranian-speaking kings of Khotan and addressed them as "emperor" (*huangdi*)—completely subvert our conventional understandings of the tributary system. Meanwhile, envoys had their own economic and religious motives that sometimes caused them to disagree with, or even disparage, the kings who dispatched them. Furthermore, all of these actions taken by kings and envoys can be observed not only in Chinese sources but also in documents written in Khotanese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Sogdian. Taken together, these sources reveal the interaction between a North China–dominated tributary system and an equally well-established, though much less well-known, Inner Asian tradition of diplomacy. Although widely assumed to have occurred, this process has never before been examined in detail owing to a lack of available sources.[24] The world of diplomacy viewed from this peripheral, envoy-centered, and multilingual perspective differs drastically from the tributary system that appears throughout sources from the Chinese court.

Another Silk Road

In addition to diplomacy, this book is also about the Silk Road, a mythical term that is almost universally invoked but rarely defined with precision. A product of the nineteenth century, the concept was introduced by the German

geologist and geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), who drew scholarly attention to the long-neglected Central Asian interior just as Prussian industrialists were drawing up plans for a trans-Eurasian railroad.[25] Richthofen relied on ancient geography: from the works of Marinus of Tyre (ca. 70–130) and Ptolemy (ca. 100–170), and from the Chinese annals of Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE) and Ban Gu (32–92), he advanced the idea that luxury goods like silk might have traveled from workshops in Han-dynasty China to the markets of the Roman Empire via a single route, the "Silk Road."[26]

Since Richthofen, scholars have expanded the use of this term. It is now common to increase the lifespan of the Silk Road beyond the Han-Roman period to other premodern eras, such as the Tang-Abbasid period and the Mongol Empire.[27] Some have further extended it both backward and forward in time, covering the prehistoric as well as the modern era.[28] Others have widened it geographically to encompass not only latitudinal, transcivilization routes but also longitudinal, transclimatic routes.[29] The recent advent of the term "maritime Silk Road" has further broadened the term to include the entire Afro-Eurasian world.[30] For some historians, the term "Silk Road" has come to serve as a metonym for "global," despite its longstanding association with the region of Central Eurasia in particular.[31]

At the same time, metaphorical uses of the "Silk Road" remove the term from history and tether it to certain qualities and tropes, as in novels and travelogues that rely on its exotic appeal.[32] The name of cellist Yo-Yo Ma's "Silk Road Ensemble" alludes to the amicable coexistence presumably practiced by different neighboring cultures.[33] China's ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" of infrastructure development in nearly seventy countries, on the other hand, conjures the trans-Eurasian economic prosperity that the Silk Road seemingly once made possible.[34]

Given its origin in nineteenth-century imperial politics and the casual ways in which writers of different stripes use it, scholars have grown skeptical that "the Silk Road" is a productive term to use when referring to premodern Eurasian connections.[35] Many reject it altogether as an anachronism. One historian argues that Richthofen's original concept is a fantasy unsupported by "a single ancient historical record."[36] Another suggests that it "is a purely modern intellectual construct, one that would have been utterly unfamiliar and likely incomprehensible to those historical agents it purports to describe."[37] Even those who continue to refer to a "Silk Road" appear to do so only reluctantly, cautioning their readers that its literal components ("silk" and "road") do not constitute the full dimensions of premodern trans-Eurasian cultural

exchange.[38] It seems that the more popular the idea of the "Silk Road" becomes, the less confident scholars are that it can usefully describe premodern transregional connections.

And yet, the song heard in medieval Dunhuang on New Year's Eve poses a challenge to such skepticism. By tying luxury goods—both silk and other textiles—directly to an "eastern road" to North China and a road leading west to Khotan, it seems to approximate Richthofen's historical thesis. To those who sang it, the network of roads that brought luxury goods like silk into Dunhuang was not a myth but a structuring fact of everyday life. People in Dunhuang, of course, did not exactly call the roads that connected them with their neighbors the "Silk Road." Nevertheless, had they been asked about it, they likely would have found the phrase entirely intelligible, even meaningful.

My investigation in this book shows that both elements of this concept—the "silk" and the "road"—are key to understanding the transregional connections found in the Dunhuang documents. "Silk Road" is not just a convenient shorthand with which we are saddled, but a historically accurate term that we should embrace. Silk, along with other precious textiles such as cotton, is representative of the things that traveled with Eurasian envoys in this period. These envoys carried and exchanged high-value, low-weight goods such as jade, medicines, and aromatics, rather than grain, livestock, and other items for everyday use. But silk and textiles were more central to diplomatic exchange than any other luxury goods. The quantity of silk that traveled was enormous—in large part, because of its versatility: silk was used to create clothing, decorations, paintings, book covers, and other luxurious objects, and, crucially, it served as a medium of exchange.[39] It is not an exaggeration to say that silk and other luxury textiles were *the* most important items that these travelers carried with them.

As the New Year's song makes clear, the people of Dunhuang, from kings and officials to monks and commoners, were keenly aware of the fact that they lived along roads that connected places hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometers away. These roads brought them political intelligence, news of their families, luxury goods, and foreign guests. Kings and officials relied on the roads to sustain their legitimacy, while commoners depended on them for material necessities. Dunhuang and its neighboring states often swore in diplomatic treaties to protect "the road that made us a family."[40] It was clear to the people of the Eurasian heartland that a network of transregional roads bound them together, and that keeping these roads open was critical to their collective political survival and economic well-being.

How might this study change the way we understand the Silk Road? Aside from validating the term's utility, the most important revision may have to do with *who* set the travelers in motion along it, and for what reasons. Throughout its existence, the Silk Road has been a concept primarily associated with merchants.[41] Even though scholars point out the cultural, religious, and diplomatic dimensions of the Silk Road, many believe that it was fundamentally a commercial network.[42] Because of the close association between merchants and the Silk Road, the breakdown of the Sogdian merchant network in the late eighth and ninth centuries that followed the Arabic conquest of Sogdiana is often regarded as the end of the Silk Road's golden age.[43]

This book uncovers another Silk Road that formed in the wake of the imperial decline and the retreat of the Sogdians. I show that, in the late ninth and tenth centuries, states between Kaifeng and Kashgar attempted, but ultimately refrained from, territorial expansion, and recognized, if sometimes begrudgingly, the existence of their neighbors on a shared road. The many long-distance journeys chronicled in this book demonstrate that political fragmentation did not simply hinder connections on the Silk Road. If anything, the existence of a large number of independent states further incentivized diplomatic travel, as each state needed to acquire diplomatic information and validate its own status through the exchange of gifts, investiture from a more powerful state, or the tribute from a smaller state. This collection of smaller states was capable of generating and maintaining the physical infrastructure and the systems of knowledge that allowed the Silk Road to flourish. The history of the post-Sogdian Silk Road is not one of precipitous decline. Rather, it involves a long process of remaking by kings and their envoys. By the early tenth century, a network of envoys crisscrossed Eastern Eurasia with evident frequency and regularity along what I call the "King's Road," marking a new phase in the history of the Silk Road.[44]

The Structure of the Book

To describe the "King's Road," the three parts of the book are structured around the three aspects of a diplomatic journey on the Silk Road:

1. Who became diplomatic travelers?
2. How did they travel?
3. What was the world that the travelers created like?

Part I, "Travelers," consisting of three chapters, offers a profile of the diplomatic travelers found in the Dunhuang documents. Chapter 1, "An Archive for an Age of Kings," provides the context for the rest of the book in two ways. It introduces the Dunhuang manuscript collection and the social and political world of this collection and the travelers it recorded. I first survey the content of the Dunhuang manuscripts, analyze its use for understanding long-distance travel, and assess its inherent limits and biases. Since most of the travelers I discuss were active between 850 and 1000, I then offer a political history of Eastern Eurasia by following the record of a diplomatic traveler. I argue that, even though this era was one of political fragmentation, the history of Dunhuang and the making of the Dunhuang manuscripts were both deeply rooted in a network of diplomatic connection that reached from the Tang and Song capitals in the east to Khotan and Kashgar in the west. Chapter 2, "People," shows that, instead of a small coterie of trained bureaucrats, envoys traveling through Dunhuang included Buddhist monks and laypeople, kings and slaves, men and women, and people of diverse (Han Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian, Uyghur, and Khotanese) cultural backgrounds. When on the road, these individuals banded into diplomatic missions, often with envoys from other states, thus creating a complicated social world of diplomatic travelers. While there is no accounting of how many people in Dunhuang traveled as envoys, evidence suggests that serving as an envoy of the state was a common profession, practiced with routinized regularity and involving a significant percentage of the population in Dunhuang. Chapter 3, "Things," turns to the nonhuman members of the diplomatic missions. I divide these "things" into five categories: food, clothes, texts, animals, and luxury items, and discuss the relationships they formed with their human companions. These things differed in their functionality, weight, and expected travel time (food items were often consumed after a few days on the road, while luxury items regularly traveled for longer, and lived longer, than envoys themselves), forming a transient companionship that human travelers had to negotiate with care. While envoys directed things to travel with them, particularly potent things, like a large and precious piece of jade, also drove envoys into action. This chapter positions the human-thing symbiosis, rather than envoys alone, as the protagonists of the Silk Road.

Part II, "Traveling," consisting of four chapters, dissects the diplomatic traveler's life on the road. Chapter 4, "Facing the Road," argues that the roads that diplomatic travelers encountered were neither well-maintained highways nor

merely unidentifiable, shifting paths. Depending on the existence of postal systems, military establishments, and sources of water, one can broadly distinguish four types of stops that lent different degrees of navigability to the roads they served. Without comprehensive maps, medieval travelers nonetheless navigated these often-challenging roads through geographical treatises, lists of place names, place-centered poems, and travelogues, as well as with the assistance of local guides and host states. In this way, travelers were able to connect fragments of information about diverse areas into an intelligible whole. Chapter 5, "Praising the Host," lays out a program of common practices during envoys' encounters with foreign states in medieval Eastern Eurasia. Envoys met and dined with their hosts, performed official duties, and conducted personal affairs; they did these things in the suburbs, by the city gate, at the polo field, and in palaces. In the process, they often formed a reciprocal relation with their host state. The host state was responsible for their accommodation and honorable treatment as guests; the envoys in turn were expected to praise the host for their generosity and spread their "good name." Envoys failing to properly conform to this program were reprimanded or even treated as "bandits." Kings and emperors, and occasionally queens, of host states desired the good name that they could acquire through their generous treatment of envoys, thus perpetuating further diplomatic exchange. Chapter 6, "Exchanging Gifts," continues this line of investigation and shows the central importance of gift exchange for diplomatic travelers. Gifts accompanied every aspect of the life on the road, from gifts sent along with letters to those exchanged in meetings, and those left after departure. Like cash for a modern traveler, gifts served as the medium that smoothed interpersonal and interstate negotiations and made long-distance travel possible. The exchange of gifts differed from commercial exchanges in that, instead of attempting to gain profit, the parties involved often tried to outspend, and thus to out-gift, one another. This chapter shows how this dynamic of competitive gifting organized not only the relations between kings, but also the daily life of diplomatic travelers on the road. Chapter 7, "Switching Languages," turns to the question of linguistic negotiation. By analyzing envoy reports, diplomatic letters, and bilingual phrasebooks, this chapter argues that multilingualism on the Silk Road existed, not only because some travelers spoke more than one language, but also through the multilingual diplomatic missions that consisted of monolingual travelers who spoke different languages. Regardless of the language(s) they spoke, the diplomatic travelers shifted their ways of communicating through translations of official documents, interpretations of key conversations, and exchanges on

mundane topics on the road. In all of these cases, shifts occurred not only among different languages, but also between different registers—imperial, bureaucratic, or colloquial—of the same language.

Part III, "The King's Road," in three chapters, assesses the economic, political, and cultural consequences of this network of diplomatic travelers in Eastern Eurasia. Chapter 8, "The Economics of Diplomacy," examines the ways that transregional travel invigorated the local economy in Dunhuang. Using pretravel contracts, stipulations of the Society for Long-Distance Travel, and private and official records of gift redistribution after the return of the travelers, I show that diplomatic travel was an essential part of the Dunhuang economy. Travelers took great financial risks in borrowing camels and silk to fund their trips; such risks were worth taking because the travelers were often able to acquire large numbers of gifts and goods to sell from their journeys. Residents who did not travel themselves pooled resources to support other residents as envoys and were rewarded accordingly after the trips had concluded. In this way, diplomatic travel injected luxury goods into an agrarian economy and offered residents economic opportunities otherwise unavailable in the arid heartland of Eurasia. Chapter 9, "The Kingly Exchange," considers the kings of Eastern Eurasia whose desires animated this network. I show that these kings made personal gains through gift exchanges and used these exotic and rare gifts, in particular jade and silk, to decorate their bodies. Through the exchange of diplomatic travelers, these kings also kept abreast of the news about other kings and states, and learned about the manner of rulership in other states. It was in this context of intense exchange among the Eurasian courts that we find extraordinary expressions of kingly power, such as the Dunhuang kings' claim to be "emperors" and the Khotanese kings' claims to be "kings of kings of China." This chapter argues that it was this pursuit of kingly glory, expressed in the acquisition of exotic goods, cultural capital, and political information, that motivated the kings of medieval Eastern Eurasia to participate in the diplomatic network described in this book. Chapter 10, "The Politics of the Road," turns to regional politics in and around Dunhuang. By analyzing the letters exchanged between sovereigns of Dunhuang, Turfan, Ganzhou, and Khotan, I show the central role a shared "road" played in the diplomatic rhetoric and practice among states around Dunhuang. Not only did diplomatic treaties use the idea of a shared road as the rationale for negotiation, rulers and commoners in Dunhuang also regularly prayed for peace on the road in devotional texts. On certain occasions, states even went to war over the blockage of roads or the disruption of travel. Despite their sometimes

adversarial relations, sovereigns of these Central Eurasian states were keenly aware of their states being "on the road," and reached a political consensus about the need to keep these roads open.

This book represents an attempt to reconstruct the world of diplomatic travelers in medieval Eastern Eurasia between 850 and 1000. In the conclusion, I reflect on how knowledge about this world changes the way we tell the history of the Silk Road and of diplomacy in China and the Eastern Eurasian world.

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