European and Italian trades on the Silk Road: a reassessment

Salvatore Ciriacono

University of Padua, Italy

The principal aim of my essay is looking at the presence and the role of the European and particularly Italian merchants on the so called "Silk Road" during the 17th and 18th century. We have to remember that this expression was introduced by the German geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen, a topic that is receiving a growing attention from the contemporary historians. Indeed this focus is connected to the attention that is given by contemporary economic/political actors to the fortune of the Chinese economy. It is not an accident that Chinese advance is seen by many as the cause of the declining role of Western economies inside the world market.

Keywords: trades; Chinese Silk Road; commercial exchange; political affairs; Asian markets; Russian expansion; development; Chinese-Russian rapport; East-West economy connections; Italian artisans in India.

Introduction

The expression "Silk Road" surely doesn't help to better analyse the Asian reality in the past, and in fact, is much more complex, if we want to look at the central Asian markets. As has been observed in the past there was certainly an "east-west trade, a long distance concerning luxuries, irregular and largely irrelevant to nomadism". At the same time this trade was affected by the necessity to introduce some form of taxation by the empires where it was developed. Indeed, von Richthofen and the large western historiography of the 19th-20th centuries were mainly focused on these luxury trades and less on the issue of taxation and control of the central Asian realities. There was also, alongside the "east-west trade", a "north-south trade", a more regular trade concerning nomadic societies, which had real impact on their necessities. The fact is that the control of these large areas, in the two perspectives, "east-west" and "north-south", and the exploitation of their resources, became the play of different actors, first of all the Chinese Empire. Not irrelevant in any case became the role of the Russian Empire and of the European Trade Companies.

Discussions

Certainly during this period, the 17th and 18th centuries, the Italians were slowly disappearing in front of other merchants, better organized and protected by the Trade Companies and the national monopolies. It is true that Tuscany and Genoa tried to establish similar organization but certainly these regional states didn't have the same success of the VOC, or the Portuguese, the Spanish, the English, the French and also the Sweden and the Danes Companies. At the centres of this research there is also a comparison between the fortune of the ancient Silk Road and the New Maritime Road that by the most recent historiography is considered have been much more profitable and the central axis of the rapports between the East Asia and the West.

It is for sure that on this question the Italians who to some extent operated in favour of the West the Silk Route – from Marco Polo to other merchants, helped in any case by the numerous missionaries as Giovanni Pian del Carpine, Odorico da Pordenone, John da Montecorvino who tried to convert the Asian populations – seemed to have been the first looser as the consequence of the open of the new Maritime Route, having been almost absent in this traffic, a vacuum as it is pointed both by the general historiography and by the silence of the sources.

But if the Italians were directly concerned by the direct comparison between the Silk Route and the Maritime Route, more nuances have to be introduced if we want to consider the presence of the other multiple actors and the political-economic instances playing inside central Asia. Certainly we do not deny the fundamental success of the maritime traffic in front the traditional Silk Road. We try nevertheless to stress the fact that first, the Silk Road still did play a certain role; second, what is was running inside central Asia did certainly explain what would happen during the nineteenth
century among the most important political and economic actors, between the Western and the Oriental countries.

In any case so instructive and inspiring are these conclusions, they are not clarifying and certainly are not able to quantify the impact of the European trade on Asian affairs, considering first of all the lack and poverty of local sources, the primitive way in exchanging many Asia products, commercialized sometimes through the simple truck-system, on the basis of a tributary system among many areas controlled by the Chinese authorities, a complicate fiscal system that collected the taxes from the nomadic populations inside central Asia, the contraband that still existed between the different nations interested in the Asian trade, the growing conflicts between the emerging nations and the numerous merchants operating inside the central Asia: the Russians, the English, the Afghani, the Indians. All these aspects seem to conclude that to try to quantify in a precise way the role of the western interest inside Asia seems to remain a kind of wishful thinking. As Jack Goldstone had to stress - about the issue of the role of the American silver and the supposed impact of its diminished arrives on the political affairs of China, and particularly during the crisis of the Ming dynasty in 17th century - this aspect (the role of the silver) was at the end an irrelevant variable. Much more influence could have on the internal affairs of China the control of the borders, the role of the agriculture, the famine, the dynamic conflict among the Chinese rulers. Indeed, the total volume of the same European trade was never more than just over 1 percent of China’s economy, and was generally 0.2-0.3 percent. The complete cessation of such trade (the arrive of the silver) would hardly have been noticeable in the over-all economy.

In the same time the relative closure of China, and also of the Tokugawa Japan, can explain why the Westerners were more and more interested in Asian affairs, profiting of the peaceful politics of these countries (the role of the armament and of the violence is a central point in the interpretation of the “superiority” of the West). Further we cannot forget that Asian continent had been for centuries a strong attraction for the less (technologically for sure) advanced European countries. The reason why the fleets of the eunuch admiral Zheng didn't continue their exploration of the African and Arabian coast (in the first decades of 15th century) does remain another controversial point, even though the interpretation of an impelling Chinese policy directed to managing internal affairs is correctly sustainable.

So the vision of the decline of Asian countries certainly has gone in the same direction with the vision of the conquering maritime connections against the decline of the Silk Road. Indeed we do not contest the fact that the Dutch and English fleets - and progressively at a minor role the Spanish and Portuguese ones - were certainly playing a great deal in the maritime trade contributing as macroeconomic effect on the balance moving to the West. Thus a never forgotten interpretation has connected the decline of the Silk Road just because after the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty this route became less and less sure and pushed the trade affairs in the general of the maritime connections. The other reality in our perspective is that the Italian merchants were not able to operate inside major institutions as the Trade Companies and consequently were constraint to bind themselves to the Portuguese and Spanish trade organizations or to single merchants. Thus many affairs remains to clarify especially the question of the limited presence of the Italian merchants (or better of the ”Italian" minorities as Armenians, Greeks, Jews) on the Asian continent or if they really were able to resist at this dramatically turning point: questions to be tested by the future research.

In any case it was undeniable that even during the 17th century Italy and particularly Venice did remain the central destination of many Asian products as it was for example the Iranian silk, a sector that remained fundamental among the luxury Asian products and the rapport Asia-Europe: important players on this affair had been the Armenians and the fortune of New Julfa created by the Safavides during the Seventeenth just to increase the silk export from Iran to the European markets (in great expansion on the time).

We have also to consider that in every Middle East area we can detect particular strategy. Ottoman Empire was among other competitors strongly connected to Indian markets to which was sending horses, grains, cotton and was importing jewellery, spices, fine silks. Sunnite religion of the Ottomans was an important factor on the rivalry and contrast with the Safavide Iran. From the other side Iran did develop its own cultural and economic strategy that could look at another direction as it is reflected by the diplomatic rapport of the Iranians with the Siam. Nevertheless the fall of the Safavide dynasty at the end of the Seventeenth century and the growing role of the Dutch and English navy were not irrelevant factor on the growing importance of the maritime route and in the same time the existence of the never forgotten central Asian markets.

What was running out in Central Asia after the decline of the Chingis Kahn empire, the Yuan dynasty which governed China and the role of the Timurides is not a secondary aspect. After these periods new players appeared on the scene: the Russians, the English, the numerous Asian states, independent or economic connected to China, the large nomadic population, the same Moghuls in India. The first consideration to do is that the most traders were limited in transporting their wares from one place to another being not able to accomplish the entire route from East to West. Further a road that was strongly influenced by climatic change as commented by Jan Blanchard. The interest and the empirical evidence of this approach are founded on the circumstance that rain falls “and abated temperatures resulted in more verdant grass growth moving progressively southward of the great silk road”. Two trade directions took
advantage from this climate change: one in the direction of the northern shores of the Black Sea at Kaffa in the Crimea and the other on the Sea of Azov, mostly by Western merchants and carried their wares, through Istanbul into the Black Sea and then passed on through Kaffa to Trebizond and Persia beyond. The other one was in the direction of the Indian markets through the central Asian Khanates – Kokhand, Buhkara and Khiva – which acted as way stations for merchants passing along the Great Silk Road”. In this sense the traditional demand/offers of products exchanged through the “great silk road” had to know a new life.

The new comers as Russians or English should also cross the interests of the numerous populations and tribes inside Central Asia, depended at their turn from the traditional Celestial Empire supremacy and before this from the Dzungar dynasty who governed from 1670 to 1754/8. It seems that during the phases of this climatic amelioration, stressed by Blanchard, the area at the eastern end of the “silk road” in the Tarim basin, enjoyed also of a favourable commercial regime in the seventeenth century. Cities as Karashar, Kucha, Aksu, Ush, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan and Turfan could profit of “a trading network that linked China, the Middle East, India, Transoxania, Russia and Siberia”. A favourable fiscal system, founded on a low tax-rate, including that on foreign trade, was introduced by Dzungar dynasty and would be confirmed by the Chinese authorities after the fall of the former dynasty. An aspect of great importance, that of taxation – the first aim of each national state – was then followed by the Chinese authorities themselves in their expansion toward the Western, as it was underlined by Perdue.

From the opposite side of this large area, the Russian expansion from the 16th century onward towards East, was clear in supporting this policy. From one side the Route North-South became progressively fundamental after the conquest of Kazan and the foundation of Astrakhan on the Caspian Lake in the 16th century, connecting the southern market within the northern and Archangel particularly, a port that opened the commerce of Russia to the Western Europe and particularly to the Low Countries. Even the colonization around the Aral lake during the 16th century was a clear aspect of this interest for central Asia and the final control by Russia during the 19th century of states as the Uzbekistan, the Kazakhstan, the Kirghizistan etc. It was Peter the Great who had profit from the fall of the Safavide dynasty after the invasion of the Afghanis to enter in the fundamental trade of the silk and tried even to control the entire Iranian economy. Certainly the expansion of the Russia in the central Asia took advantage of the growing importance of the Asian Khanates – Kokhand, Buhkara and Khivan – and of the division and tribal dimension of these nomadic populations. The role of the Bukharans became particularly strategic when they could carried to Kashgar (independent from Chinese empire that conquered the Sinkiang only in 1758) Russian wares “which were cloths, fine coral, pearls, cochineal, cloth of gold, velvet, silver and gold wire, German otter-skins, marten-skins, copper, sugar, hides, large mirrors, wheel rims, needles, glass-wares and Russian nankeens. They exported (from Kashgar in 1820 a great quantity of what was said to be very bad tea compared to the traditional Chinese. Exports from Kashgar at that time also included porcelain plates, Chinese silk stuffs, a little raw silk, rhubarb and Chinese silver money”. It is true that now the principal Chinese export as tea had to compete with the green tea from India monopolised by the English. At their turn “Kokhand merchants brought to Bukhara fine white cotton sheets to be dyed, silk stuffs, which were more durable than those of the Bukharans, and about 500 pud (ca. eight tons) of raw silk of inferior quality to that of Bukhara. Tashkent sent to Bukhara much the same merchandise but in lesser quantity”. 

Certainly sericulture and manufactory were largely developing inside this area, being at the centre and realigned on the “great silk road”, looking westward as Kashmir, Afghanistan and Persia and connecting these regions to China. If understandable appeared the Russian interest for this strategical area along the 18th century and for Buhkara, no less clear were in the same time those of the English Trade Company which was looking – with clear strategical consequences in the future – in the direction of India. Buhkara would accounted a large population (after some sources in the middle of 19th century ca. 2,000,000 habitants) with many Jews, strictly connected with the Russian fairs of Nijni and Novgorod. Astrakhan seemed to have been equally important: the city was estimated in the 1740th having had a little more than 100,000 habitants. No doubt about the commercial importance of this city, at the crossroad of Eurasian trade. The North-South ways from Russia along the Volga crossed the merchandise arriving from the ‘Silk Road’ and directed to the ports of Caspian Sea and Persia beyond. A trade which engaged Armenians, Indians, Persians and different Tatar groups. Like Astrakhan on the Caspian, Kaffa did remain an important port on the Black Sea even after the fortune of the Genoa and Venetian period, a transition that should merit more attention. Strong walls and ditches surrounded the town that accounted some 80,000 habitants including some 5,000-6,000 Raya Greeks, Armenians, Catholics and Jews”.

For some historians it was Orenburg to be the strategical hub of the inner Asian trade, even surpassing Astrakhan, thanks to varied articles, partly luxury items from the Far East partly traditional ones as horses, camels, pelts, utensils. This trade was largely managed by central Asians and Tatars from Kazan and Orenburg to the detriment of Russian merchants themselves, who were dependent – as well the other European merchants inside the Asian markets – on interpreters, guides, natives of those areas.

No less fundamental key about the Chinese-Russian rapports was to consider Kiahto. Cotton was here as well in Buhkara the central item, imported from China as raw material. This export has to be considered as the fundamental aspect of what it will be the Industrialization of countries as China as well Russia, in the classic rapport between raw material and finished articles. In other words the interest of Russians for this fundamental raw material can explain the following expansion of the factory system in Russia before that in China. Certainly during the 18th century the countries were still concerned with exotic products - that characterized this kind of commerce (luxury versus mass products that emerged from the 19th and 20th centuries) - as was the Chinese tea exported via Kiahto to Russia. It seems that this kind of tea was of high quality, even higher than that exported to Western Europe (and the tea exported from Kashgar as mentioned before).
So it is for sure that the Silk Road did remain an important axe for these East-West connections, even though it is difficult to deny the importance of the maritime traffic and the penetration of the English interest and trade departing from the Southern Asia especially India. Not by accident in the first half of the 18th century a treaty was signed by the Russians and the English in order to share equal profit inside the central Asian trade and especially regarding Bukhara and Khiva. It seems also that for the entire 18th century Russia didn’t profit in Bukhara as the Britons did; even the commercial balance remained negative for Russia against China along this century, because the heavy taxation of the Russian products in direction of China. But during the 19th century the control of the markets inside central Asia by Russia would be ultimately accomplished and characterized the political history of the central Asia until the implosion of the USSR.

But what had been the role of the Italian merchants in these centuries? The scarce information that we have tell us of just a Russian envoy, Florio Beneveni, originally by Sicily, charged of a mission to Khiva in 1725, as it was reported in the journal that he wrote in Italian. His mission to Central Asia took place among the many Europeans surrounded by Peter the Great that in this time characterized by the expansion over the central Asian khanates. A Russian expansion that was not limited to Asia but was converted also in the direction of the Mediterranean.

So the role of the ports of Eastern Mediterranean is not to underestimated as well of the traditional terminals of the Asian caravans, first of all those connected to Aleppo. A destination that remained vital along the entire 18th century, continuing the port to be the final destination also of the German products transported by the Venetian navies as fustians, worked cottons and metal wares. From the other side Venice remained the final destination of the luxury products transported by the caravans from what we call now the Middle East (that was by the time Bagdad, Bassora, Babylon). Iran and India have to be considered in this general picture. The presence of the Venetian Republic inside the Indian peninsula was not irrelevant (think for instance at the role of the diamonds and the cutting technique controlled by the Venetian artisans). Or at the fact that already the Chinese products began to compete with some typical Venetian objects in the international market as the false corals. Certainly this commercial exchange between Venice and the Mediterranean ports (Alexandria and Aleppo) have to be considered inside the framework of the economic rapports of the Russian Bear with the other important Italian economies, for instance the Republic of Venice, the Tuscany Duchy and the other aristocratic Republic as Genoa (in fact more and more interested to the Atlantic economy, we have to stress). Thus we are obliged to consider not only the penetration of the Russian economy inside the central Asia but also its expansion in the Black Sea against the other European powers, what would become the origin of the “question of Orient”. In any case Istanbul and Izmir on the Turkish coast as well Alexandria on the Egyptian coast, connected through the Red Sea, have to be considered as the strategic terminal for the Asian trades. Through these ports the Northern European markets, as well Vienna and Leipzig, were connected to the Asian dimension.

After the collapse of the USRR the emergence of many central Asian states – first of all Kazakhstan but it is not the only one – and the exploitation of many minerals and fuel resources (gas, petrol) are giving to the continent an undeniable advantage with hard consequences to the West. Certainly the strategical reaction of the West and especially of US in this continent has not been adequate and even wrong. Peter Frankopan wrote about the “road to catastrophe” and “the road to tragedy”. It is interesting in any case to observe as the direction of the new “Silk Road” is following the same path of the ancient one, leaving outside as in the past only the desert areas. We could observe also that the new “Road” is following more the movement of products and fuel resources than the movement of discoveries and the know-how of products as silk, paper etc. as it has been in the past. How the Westerns should intervene in the future it is just a problem of the capacity to react and give a political-economic response in the large sense, considering nevertheless the limits of any reaction, as Fernand Braudel underlined and taught us.

References


Millward, J. Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864, Stanford, Stanford, University Press,1998.


