

THE NEW SILK ROADS

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Introduction

When *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* was published in 2015, it touched a nerve. As an author, naturally I hoped that people would read and enjoy what I had written; as an academic historian, though, I had long found out that things I wanted to work on frequently had limited appeal to others. Conversations about my research at drinks parties and dinners did not often last for long, and even with my colleagues, engagement was usually directly linked to periods or regions of mutual interest.

The success of *The Silk Roads* therefore took me by surprise. It turned out lots of people did want to learn more about the world, just as I had done when I was young. I was not the only one, after all, who wanted to learn about other peoples, cultures and regions that had enjoyed glorious times in the past that had been washed away by the insistent story of more recent histories. It quickly became apparent that moving the centre of focus away from the familiar story of Europe and the west to Asia and the east came as a breath of fresh air for many readers.

So too did looking at the role of the connections that have linked continents together for millennia. In the late nineteenth century, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen came up with a term to describe the networks of exchange linking Han–dynasty China with the world beyond. He called these connections *die Seidenstraßen* – or ‘the Silk Roads’ – a term that caught the imagination of scholars and the general public alike.¹

Richthofen’s concept of the Silk Roads was vague in terms of identifying a precise geographic scope of how goods, ideas and people moved between Asia and Europe and Africa, and explaining quite how the Pacific Ocean and South China Sea were connected with the Mediterranean and, ultimately, the Atlantic. In fact, the looseness of what is meant by the Silk

Roads can also be helpful – not least because they were not ‘roads’ in the modern meaning of the word or because they obscure the difference between long- and short-distance trade, or even because many other goods and commodities besides silk were also traded and in some cases in greater volume than expensive textiles.

In fact, the Silk Roads serves as a term that describes the ways in which people, cultures and continents were woven together – and in doing so help us better understand the way that religions and languages spread in the past, while showing how ideas about food, fashion and art disseminated, competed and borrowed from each other. The Silk Roads help make clear the centrality of the control of resources and of long-distance trade, and therefore explain the contexts and motivations for expeditions across deserts and oceans that helped fashion the rise of empires. The Silk Roads show how technological innovation was stimulated across thousands of miles, and how violence and disease often followed the same patterns of destruction. The Silk Roads allow us to understand the past not as a series of periods and regions that are isolated and distinct, but to see the rhythms of history in which the world has been connected for millennia as being part of a bigger, inclusive global past.

If I had written *The Silk Roads* twenty-five years ago, it would have been equally topical. In the early 1990s, the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed, prompting major upheaval not only in Russia but in all the fifteen constituent republics that subsequently became independent. The early 1990s too marked the First Gulf War that was so closely linked to the subsequent intervention in Iraq at the start of the twenty-first century. It was a time of profound change in China, where a series of reforms was about to propel the country’s emergence not as a regional but a global superpower. Winds of change were also blowing in Turkey, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and across the Middle East then – because that is what always happens along the Silk Roads, the networks that are the world’s central nervous system.

A few weeks after my book was published in the summer of

2015, I had lunch with a friend in London who was one of the first to read it. 'I found it strangely comforting,' he said. 'It made me realise that change is normal, that big shifts in the global centre of power are quite common, and that this chaotic and unfamiliar world is perhaps not so strange and unusual after all.'

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Even in the few short years since *The Silk Roads* was published, much has changed. From my perspective as a historian there have been a series of advances in how we can understand the past that are immensely exciting. Scholars working in different fields, on different periods and regions have produced work that is as innovative as it is compelling. Archaeologists using satellite imagery and spatial analysis have identified irrigation systems made up of cisterns, canals and dams dating to the fourth century ad that explain how crops were grown in inhospitable conditions in north-western China at a time when exchanges with the world beyond were beginning to rise.²

Data from commercial and spy satellites, as well as from drones used in military surveillance in Afghanistan, has been tapped into by researchers working as part of the Afghan Heritage Mapping Partnership. This has resulted in the building up of a detailed picture of an infrastructure of caravanserais, water channels and residential complexes that once housed travellers in the centre of Asia, which helps transform how we understand the way in which the Silk Roads of the past were connected.³ The fact that much of this work has been done remotely also shows how the way in which research is done in the early twenty-first century is itself evolving.⁴

Advances in scientific methodology have also shed new light on the relationship between nomads and those living in cities in the pre-modern era in the heart of Asia. Analysis of carbon and nitrogen isotopes on seventy-four human remains from fourteen burial grounds in Central Asia help reveal the distinct dietary habits of those who lived in settled as opposed to nomadic communities – while also suggesting that nomads enjoyed a

wider variety of foodstuffs than those who lived in villages, towns and cities. This in turn raises important questions about the role played by mobile populations in introducing new trends and spreading cultural change across hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles.⁵

Genetic and ethno-linguistic evidence has meanwhile been used to show how the spread of walnut forests and the evolution of language overlapped across large parts of Asia. Fossilised remnants of desiccated walnut seeds suggest that walnut trees were deliberately planted as long-term agricultural investments by traders and those travelling along the Silk Roads – in turn opening up ways better to understand the relationship between the natural world and the impact of rising levels of exchange locally, regionally and beyond. As well as everything else, the Silk Roads acted as ‘gene corridors’ for humans and for flora and fauna alike.⁶

Then there is new research that links the origins of Yiddish with commercial exchange across Asia and claims that its evolution was connected to measures designed to protect the security of transactions by devising a language that could only be understood by a select few.⁷ This has obvious resonance in the world of the twenty-first century, where crypto-currencies and blockchain technology seek to solve the problem of how to enable traders to complete transactions securely. Or there is the startling evidence from new-generation ice-core technology that can be used to shed fresh light on the devastating impact of the Black Death by showing the extent of the collapse in metal production in the mid-fourteenth century.⁸

Documents declassified in 2017 recording meetings held between the British minister in Washington in 1952, Sir Christopher Steel, and the assistant secretary of state Henry Byroade to discuss a coup to depose the prime minister of Iran help us gain a clearer understanding of how the ill-fated plans took shape.⁹ The release of previously secret US nuclear strike plans from the early part of the Cold War likewise help reveal important insights into American military and strategic planning – and contemporary assessments of how best to neutralise the Soviet Union in the event of war.¹⁰

These are just a small number of examples to show how historians continue to use different techniques to refine and improve their understanding of the past. This is what makes history such an invigorating and exciting subject: there is a thrill in being prompted to think about things in a different way, and also discover connections that link peoples, regions, ideas and themes together. The excitement of understanding how new discoveries, new tools and new techniques help illuminate the past is what made writing *The Silk Roads* such a joy in the first place.

This book is a sibling to the earlier one. Given how the world has changed in the last few years, I originally wanted to add a chapter to sharpen the conclusion and bring it up to date. I wanted to explain that however traumatic or comical political life appears to be in the age of Brexit, European politics or Trump, it is the countries of the Silk Roads that really matter in the twenty-first century. I wanted to show that the decisions being made in today's world that really matter are not being made in Paris, London, Berlin or Rome – as they were a hundred years ago – but in Beijing and Moscow, in Tehran and Riyadh, in Delhi and Islamabad, in Kabul and in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, in Ankara, Damascus and Jerusalem. I wanted to remind the reader that the world's past has been shaped by what happens along the Silk Roads. And I wanted to underline that so too will its future.

As I started to write, I realised that I wanted to say more than an epilogue could (and probably should) try to say. Rather, I thought that it was important to provide a detailed snapshot of contemporary affairs, but through a wide lens in the hope of providing context for what is going on around the world, and also to highlight some of the themes on which all our lives and livelihood depend. The Silk Roads lie at the heart of this picture – so central, in fact, that it is not possible to make sense of what today and tomorrow have in store without taking the region lying between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Pacific into account. This book is therefore intended to bring the story up to date and to interpret what has happened in the last few years at a time of profound transformation.

Since 2015, the world has changed dramatically. Life was becoming more difficult and more challenging for the west, I wrote at that time. It certainly seems that way following the Brexit vote and the uncertainty that surrounds the future of the European Union, which I discuss here. The United States too is on a new trajectory following the election of Donald Trump – one that is confusing to monitor and to assess. The problem is not so much the president's Twitter feed, which is a source of much mirth for commentators, but trying to understand if the White House wants to retreat from or reshape global affairs – and why. This too is discussed in this book.

Then there is Russia, where a new chapter of relations with the west has opened, despite the continued leadership of President Putin and an inner circle that has led the country for two decades. Military intervention in Ukraine, alleged interference in elections in the US and the UK and accusations of the attempted assassination of a former intelligence officer have led to the worst moment in Russia's relations with the west since the fall of the Berlin Wall – and, as we shall see, have laid the basis for a reconfiguration of Moscow to the south and to the east.

In the heart of the world, the continued problems in Afghanistan, the breakdown of Syria as a result of years of civil war and the tortuous process of rebuilding Iraq fill few with confidence, despite the considerable financial, military and strategic expense that has gone into trying to improve the situation in each one. Antagonisms between Iran and Saudi Arabia and between India and Pakistan are rarely dampened down, with frequent angry recriminations threatening to develop into something more serious than words.

Times have been difficult in Turkey too, where a faltering economy and mass protests gave way to an attempted coup in 2016, when a faction in the armed forces tried to seize control. In the aftermath, tens of thousands of people were arrested and perhaps as many as 150,000 dismissed from their jobs because of their supposed links with the alleged mastermind, Fethullah Gülen. These include senior members of the judiciary, academics, teachers, police and journalists – as well

as members of the military.¹¹ Pressure on prison space has become so acute as a result that in December 2017, the government announced that it would build an additional 228 prisons in the next five years – almost doubling the number of prison facilities in the country.¹²

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And yet, all across Asia, these are also hopeful times. There is a strong sense of states trying to work more closely together and to elide their interests while putting differences behind them. As we shall see, a host of initiatives, organisations and forums have been established in recent years that aim to encourage collaboration, cooperation and discussion, and which provide a common narrative of solidarity and shared future.

This has been noted and acted on by those whose financial success depends on them identifying and setting trends. In 2015, for example, Nike introduced a new design to its range of trainers. The basketball player Kobe Bryant's experiences travelling in Italy and China established, 'connections to both the European and Asian continents', according to Nike, and the sports manufacturer's designers to think about 'the legendary Silk Road, the inspiration for the new KOBE X Silk shoe'.¹³

An ideal companion to these trainers is the Poivre Samarcande eau de toilette by Hermès, with its 'peppery, musky, slightly smoky scent of cut wood', where 'the soul of the old oak, mixed with pepper, lives on in this fragrance'. This too was inspired by the Silk Roads: 'the name Samarcande,' revealed master parfumeur Jean-Claude Ellena, 'is a homage to the city through which spice caravans once passed on their way from East to West.'¹⁴

Someone who was even quicker off the mark than Nike and Hermès to identify the potential of the Silk Roads was none other than Donald J. Trump, forty-fifth president of the United States, who in 2007 trademarked the Trump brand in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Armenia with the intention of producing name-brand vodka. He did the same in 2012, seeking to trademark his name for

hotels and real estate in all the countries lying across the spine of the Silk Roads – including Iran, a country he has tried to isolate since taking office in 2017. Trump also had dealings in Georgia, where plans were hatched to develop ‘glitzy casinos’, with the appropriately named Silk Road Group, which has subsequently become the focus of considerable media scrutiny.¹⁵

The Silk Roads are ubiquitous across Asia. There are, of course, the endless tourist companies that offer to reveal the glories of a mysterious past of the countries lying in the heart of the world that has been lost in the mists of time. But there are also many more up-to-date manifestations that show the power of the networks of the present and future as well as of the past. The Mega Silk Way shopping mall in Astana, Kazakhstan, provides one example, while the glossy *SilkRoad* inflight magazine aboard Cathay Pacific flights provides another. At Dubai airport, travellers are greeted by adverts for Standard Chartered Bank that declare: ‘One Belt. One Road. One Bank connects your business across Africa, Asia and Middle East.’ Or there is gas-rich Turkmenistan nestled to the east of the Caspian Sea, where an official national slogan has been adopted for 2018: ‘Turkmenistan – the Heart of the Great Silk Road.’¹⁶

One reason for the optimism across the heart of Asia is the immense natural resources of the region. For example, BP estimates that the Middle East, Russia and Central Asia account for almost 70 per cent of global total proven oil reserves, and nearly 65 per cent of proven natural gas reserves – a figure that does not include Turkmenistan, whose gas fields include Galkynysh, the second largest in the world.¹⁷

Or there is the agricultural wealth of the region that lies between the Mediterranean and the Pacific, where countries like Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, India, Pakistan and China account for more than half of all global wheat production – and, when added to countries of South East and East Asia like Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, account for nearly 85 per cent of global rice production.¹⁸

Then there are elements like silicon, which plays an

important role in microelectronics and in the production of semiconductors, where Russia and China alone account for three-quarters of global production; or there are rare earths, like yttrium, dysprosium and terbium that are essential for everything from super-magnets to batteries, from actuators to laptops – of which China alone accounted for more than 80 per cent of global production in 2016.¹⁹ While futurologists and networking pioneers often talk about how the exciting world of artificial intelligence, Big Earth Data and machine learning promise to change the way we live, work and think, few ever ask where the materials on which the digital new world come from – or what happens if supply either dries up or is used as a commercial or a political weapon by those who have a near-monopoly on global supply.

Other riches also abound that offer rewards to those who control them. These include heroin, which for more than a decade has been a vital financial resource for the Taliban in Afghanistan, who according to the United Nations long ago ‘started to extract from the drug economy resources for arms, logistics, and militia pay’.²⁰ By 2015, a UN envoy reported, there were ‘roughly 500,000 acres, or about 780 square miles, devoted to growing the opium poppy’. To put that in perspective, he added, ‘that’s equivalent to more than 400,000 US football fields – including the end zones’.²¹ A hefty increase in the opium poppy cultivation in 2017 led to 800,000 acres producing opium – and a record harvest that accounts for 80 per cent of a global market that has a total value of more than \$30 billion.²²

Resources have always played a central role in shaping the world. The ability of states to provide food, water and energy for their citizens is obvious and important, as is providing protection from external threats. This makes control of the Silk Roads more important than ever, but also goes some way to explaining the pressure on human rights, press freedom and freedom of speech across all of Asia – something that has been noted recently by Andrew Gilmour, UN assistant secretary-general for human rights. ‘Some governments feel threatened by any dissent,’ he said, and label human rights concerns as

‘illegal outside interference’ in their internal affairs; or as an attempt to overthrow regimes; or to try to impose alien ‘western’ values. Decisions about whose voice should and whose should not be heard are closely linked to the consolidation and retention of power in a changing world and with fears about the consequences if alternative views are allowed to be expressed.²³

We are living in the Asian century already, a time when the movement of global gross domestic product (GDP) from the developed economies of the west to those of the east is taking place on an astonishing scale – and at astonishing speed. Some projections anticipate that by 2050 the per capita income in Asia could rise sixfold in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, making 3 billion additional Asians affluent by current standards. By nearly doubling its share of global GDP to 52 per cent, as one recent report put it, ‘Asia would regain the dominant economic position it held some 300 years ago, before the Industrial Revolution.’²⁴ The transference of global economic power to Asia ‘may occur somewhat more quickly or slowly’, agreed another report, ‘but the general direction of change and the historic nature of this shift is clear’ – concluding similarly that we are living through a reversion to how the world looked before the rise of the west.²⁵

The acute awareness of a new world being knitted together has helped prompt plans for the future that will capitalise on and accelerate the changing patterns of economic and political power. Chief among these is the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, President Xi’s signature economic and foreign policy, which uses the ancient Silk Roads – and their success – as a matrix for Chinese long-term plans for the future. Since the project was announced in 2013, nearly \$1 trillion has been promised to infrastructure investments, mainly in the form of loans, to around 1,000 projects.

Some believe that the amount of money that will be ploughed into China’s neighbours and countries that are part of the ‘Belt and Road’ over sea and land will eventually multiply several times over, to create an interlinked world of train lines, highways, deep-water ports and airports that will enable trade

links to grow ever stronger and faster.

There are other challenges facing China too, not least what one leading economist has called a 'baby bust' that comes from a population that is getting older and not replacing itself.²⁶ Then there are the difficulties posed by the credit bubble, which is so large that the International Monetary Fund issued a warning in 2017 that debt levels were not so much a concern as 'dangerous'.²⁷

But then there are other ways, too, of understanding what is going on in the world of today – and that of tomorrow. At the start of the twentieth century, Rudyard Kipling helped popularise the idea of a 'Great Game', where the British and Russian empires competed politically, diplomatically and militarily for position and dominance in the heart of Asia. Today, there is a series of 'Great Games' taking place, over competition for influence, for energy and natural resources, for food, water and clean air, for strategic position, even for data. The outcomes will have a profound effect on the world we live in in decades to come.

This book follows on from where *The Silk Roads* ended. The Silk Roads, I wrote in 2015, are rising. They have continued to do so. It is worth following carefully how and why this will affect us all.

The Roads to the East

Twenty-five years ago, when I was about to leave university, the world seemed a different place. The Cold War was over, leading to hopes for peace and prosperity. ‘The heroic deeds of Boris Yeltsin and the Russian people’ had steered Russia onto a course of reform and democracy, said President Bill Clinton at a meeting with the Russian president in Vancouver in 1993. The prospect of a ‘newly productive and prosperous Russia’ was good for everyone, he noted.¹

Hopeful times lay ahead too in South Africa, where fraught negotiations to end apartheid had advanced sufficiently for the Nobel committee to award the Peace Prize for 1993 to F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela for their ‘their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa’.² The award of the prestigious prize was a moment of hope for South Africa, for Africa and for the world – even if it later emerged that many of Mandela’s closest confidants urged him not to accept the prize if it meant having to share it with a man they referred to as ‘his oppressor’. Mandela insisted, however, that forgiveness was a vital part of reconciliation.³

Things looked promising in the Korean peninsula, where, in an echo of the discussions that took place in 2018, an outline agreement was reached between the US and North Korea to great fanfare about the peaceful reunification of Korea and about a pathway for denuclearisation that was welcomed as a significant step forward for non-proliferation and also for a safer region and for a safer world.⁴

In 1993, an important agreement was also reached between China and India that established the framework for dealing with disputed border issues that had been a source of rivalry and bitterness for three decades – while both sides also agreed to reduce troop levels along the frontier and work together towards a conclusion that was mutually acceptable.⁵ This was

important for both countries at a time when economic expansion and liberalisation was at the forefront for their respective political leaders. In China, Deng Xiaoping had recently undertaken a tour of the southern provinces to press for faster reforms, and to deal with hardliners who opposed the liberalisation of markets that had seen the stock exchange open in communist China in Shanghai in 1990.⁶

South Korea's transformation was already well underway. In the 1960s, the country had been one of the poorest in the world, with no natural resources and an unpromising location at the eastern extremity of Asia. Its transformation into an economic superpower that is home to companies like Samsung, Hyundai Motor and Hanwha Corporation – each of which has more than \$100bn in assets – has led some commentators to talk of South Korea as 'the most successful country in the world'.⁷

In India, as elsewhere, there was a push for growth in the early 1990s – although few expected much from a small software company that struggled to list its stock in Mumbai in February 1993. Despite its size and potential, India was an economic minnow and the technology sector was tiny and untested. Those who were brave and bought shares in Infosys Technologies did well if they held on to their stock. The company reported an operating profit for the year ended 31 March 2018 of over \$2.6bn – on turnover of more than \$10bn.⁸ Shares were worth 4,000 times more than they had been twenty-five years earlier.⁹

The foundation of a new airline in a small Gulf State seemed like a long shot, too. Founded in November 1993, Qatar Airways began operating two months later in what many assumed would be a modest operation that handled a few local routes, for which demand would be minimal. Today, the airline has a fleet of over 200 aircraft, more than 40,000 staff and flies to over 150 destinations – winning armfuls of accolades that few would have thought possible two and a half decades ago.¹⁰ It is also the largest shareholder in International Airlines Group (the owner of British Airways, Iberia and Aer Lingus) – as well as holding a 10 per cent stake in Cathay Pacific.¹¹ In April

2018, it agreed to buy 25 per cent of the shares of Moscow's Vnukovo international airport – the third largest in Russia.¹²

Of course, good news did not abound everywhere in 1993, as a truck bomb at the World Trade Center in New York and a coordinated series of bombings in Mumbai that killed more than 250 people showed. Sarajevo, a city already famous for the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the road to war in 1914, was submitted to a siege by Bosnian Serb forces that lasted longer than the Battle of Stalingrad during the Second World War. Scenes of snipers shooting at civilians as they crossed the streets became commonplace, as did terrible images of the devastation caused by mortars being fired into the city from the neighbouring hills. The reappearance of concentration camps in Europe, and of genocide at Srebrenica and Gorazde in the mid-1990s provided a brutal reminder that even the most horrifying lessons from the past can be easily forgotten.

Some of the troubles of the early 1990s were more familiar. In Britain, for example, political discourse was shaped by poisonous debates about membership of the European Union and calls for a referendum. These almost brought down the government, and led to the prime minister, John Major, referring to members of his own cabinet as 'bastards'.¹³

*

These events are all in the recent past. And yet they now feel distant and seem to evoke a different age. I listened to an album called *Pablo Honey* by a promising new band called Radiohead as I prepared for my final exams in the summer of 1993. Little did I know that the most prophetic song of the year was not 'Creep' – which has gone on to have been streamed more than a quarter of a billion times on Spotify – but one that won at the Oscars that year. 'A whole new world,' Aladdin promised Jasmine, 'a new fantastic point of view.' Indeed, she agreed. 'A whole new world, a dazzling place I never knew.' A song based on a story from and set along the past of the Silk Roads foretold its future.

That whole new world can be seen nowhere more clearly than by comparing the game of football in England in 1993 and

today. A week before Finals started in Cambridge, I watched a replay of the FA Cup final between Arsenal and Sheffield Wednesday, which was almost as dull and dour as the drawn first match. Of the players who featured in the match (including substitutes), all but three came from the British Isles. Twenty-five years later, the final between Chelsea and Manchester United was an equally underwhelming occasion – but the composition of the teams was radically different: just six of the twenty-seven who played at Wembley were born in the United Kingdom or Ireland. The others came from all over the world, including Spain, France, Nigeria and Ecuador.

If that tells a story about the pace of globalisation in the course of a generation, then perhaps even more striking is the dramatic change in the ownership of English football clubs over the same period. Not long ago, the idea that leading teams would have foreign owners would have been dismissed as the stuff of fantasy – at a time when even a foreign accent in the boardroom would have had club directors spluttering into their tea and choking on their pork pies at half-time. But today, many of the most famous names in English and European football have owners from abroad. And many come from the lands of the Silk Roads.

In some ways, that is not surprising. After all, although the game was codified in London in 1863, football was not invented in England. According to FIFA, the international body that governs the sport, football is first attested in Han-dynasty China (206 bc–ad 220), where a game that involved players kicking a leather ball filled with feathers into a net held up by two bamboo rods was known as *cuju*.¹⁴

Even so, it is a long way to go from the origins of the game to noting that all the great teams from in and around Birmingham – including Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion, Birmingham City and Wolverhampton Wanderers – have been bought by Chinese owners since *The Silk Roads* was published in 2015. In 2017, meanwhile, two of the giants of Italian football that share the magnificent San Siro stadium – AC and Inter Milan – were also sold to Chinese buyers.

Then there are the owners of England's – and Europe's –

Odeon, UCI, Carmike and Hoyts cinema chains in Europe, the US and Australia (with a total of more than 14,000 screens), as well as Sunseeker yachts and Infront Sports and Media – which holds the exclusive broadcast rights to sporting events that include the 2018 and 2022 football World Cup.

Naturally, while some of these businesses might qualify as hobbies and passions to be indulged, many represent serious as well as big-ticket investments. They are based on a great movement of global GDP over the last twenty-five years, with more than 800 million being lifted above the poverty line since the 1980s in China alone.¹⁸ While the setting of what constitutes ‘poverty’ is a matter of debate for development economists and others, there can be little doubt that the pace as well as the extent of China’s growth is astonishing. In 2001, China’s GDP was 39 per cent of that of the US (on a purchasing power parity); that rose to 62 per cent by 2008. By 2016, China’s GDP was 114 per cent that of the United States, measured on the same basis – and is likely to rise both further and sharply in the next five years.¹⁹

This change is not just transformational for China; it is transformational for the rest of the world. For example, in anticipation of the further rise of the Chinese middle class, one entrepreneur based in Beijing has bought 3,000 hectares of land in central France, with the aim of providing flour for a chain of more than a thousand *boulangeries* that he is planning to open across China. The expectation is that Chinese tastes will evolve from rice-based food – and that, when they do, ‘the potential is immense’, according to Hu Keqin, the owner in question.²⁰

If that brings concerns in France about rising prices for bread, as flour is exported rather than being used in local *boulangeries*, then the same can be said for the wine industry – where exports to China rose by 14 per cent in 2017 alone to nearly 220 million litres. French wine exports to China are expected to be worth more than \$20bn in five years’ time, something that is better news for wine growers in France than for wine drinkers.²¹

What also irks is not just that many of the most famous

and what drinks are available in the bar will also be influenced by the same factors. In 1990, the numbers of Chinese visitors to foreign countries were minimal, principally limited to state-related activities, spending around \$500 million abroad in total.²⁷ By 2017, that figure had risen by 500 times to more than \$250bn per year – roughly double what American travellers spend abroad annually.²⁸ These figures will rocket in the future, given that only around 5 per cent of Chinese citizens currently have passports. According to some estimates, 200 million Chinese will travel abroad in 2020, with research suggesting this will open up particularly rich opportunities in the gaming and cosmetics sectors, as well as boosting airlines flying to the right places, hotels that cater for Chinese tastes and online booking agents that arrange travel abroad – like Skyscanner, which was acquired by Chinese company Ctrip at the end of 2016 in a deal worth \$1.7bn.²⁹

The changing world also offers challenges – often in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. China's rise has presented extraordinary problems for donkeys and donkey breeders from Central Asia to West Africa. Donkey hides are an ingredient in *ejiao*, an alternative medicine popular in China that is purported to dull pain but also treat acne, prevent cancer and improve the libido. Demand for *ejiao* has led to a halving of the donkey population in China in the last twenty-five years and new sources of donkeys being identified elsewhere.³⁰ Rising demand has led to new sources of donkeys being identified elsewhere. Prices for donkeys have quadrupled in Tajikistan, and there have been sharp rises in Africa as well. This is not necessarily good news. Because donkeys are used as pack animals and play an important role in agricultural production and in bringing food to market, the sudden and sharp decrease in their numbers (and the rise in their price) has threatened to destabilise the agrarian economy in countries where the balance can often be precarious. For this reason, export bans of donkeys to China have been introduced in Niger, Burkina Faso and elsewhere in Africa.³¹ One effect of the rise of the Silk Roads has been the emergence of a black market in donkey hides.³²

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