

# The legacy of the Silk Road: to what extent can this be considered cultural or commercial?

By Claudia Caisley (Haberdashers' Girls' School)

## Abstract

Stretching over a distance of approximately 4000 miles, the term 'Silk Road' refers to a network of routes between East Asia and the West used by traders around 2000 years ago. Underpinned by the premise that rapidly increasing global interconnectivity is not unique to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, this essay builds on Frankopan's (2015) discussion of the commercial and cultural history of the Silk Road, adding elements of futurity and debate between the aspects to argue: i) the Silk Road left a more significant cultural legacy than commercial, but ii) the significance of the commercial legacy will increase in the future. This article concludes that, despite current shifts in the economic 'centre of gravity' adding to the significance of the commercial legacy, it remains largely cultural, although recognition of the interplay between the interlinked aspects is also a vital consideration.

## 1. Introduction

'Neither snow, rain, heat nor darkness could slow the speedy transmission of messages', noted Herodotus 2,000 years ago, referring to a road network that linked Asia Minor with Babylon, Susa and Persepolis, enabling a distance of 1600 miles to be covered in the course of a week: a 'wonder' (Frankopan, 2015, p.2). The Silk Road allowed for a convergence of empires by spurring economic and cultural integration through evolving the nature and volume of trade occurring between them.

Hunter (2004) stresses a 'legacy' is more than just the transmission of material possessions. In this essay, it is defined as anything which is a result of events in the past, which is part of history or remains from an earlier time. Culture holds a wide-ranging definition as anything that refers to society and its way of life (Lebrón, 2013) and is discussed in this essay in terms of the changing geographical distribution of languages and religions. A commercial legacy encompasses more economic aspects, relating to trade, businesses and the sake of financial profit and will be explained through drawing parallels between the nature and methodology of modern trade, compared with two millennia ago. The

examples used throughout will be taken from the early first millennia AD and geographically, from modern China and India. This is because much of the historiography on the subject views the central Asian network from the perspective of sedentary civilisations and most available literary sources being from China, India, Persia and the Roman Empire (Mishra, 2020). The temporal focus owes to the earliest of these sources beginning from the late first millennium BC; the period in which sedentary civilisations came into existence (Christian, 2000).

Frankopan's (2015) book 'The Silk Road' is central to this article as the root of many of the following arguments. Building on the author's discussion of the commercial legacy of these ancient routes in his conclusion, this article adds an element of debate as to whether the cultural legacy, often omitted by Frankopan, is actually more significant. This will be conducted by utilising both Hill's (2009) and Hansen's (2022) discussion on the spread of Buddhism via the Silk Road, as well as Mishra's (2020) research on Silk Road historiography and archaeological studies of sedentary civilisations. Moreover, Frankopan's cultural discussion in 'The Silk Road' is focused predominantly on the spread of religion and language 2000 years ago. This limits the relevance of his arguments to analysing a legacy; therefore, this article will add a modern element to Frankopan's cultural discussion, allowing for comparison with what the author considers a present-day commercial legacy. In terms of the significance of the following discussion in its field, this essay aims to add a unique element of comparison between the largely separately considered cultural and commercial aspects of the Silk Road by other academics, such as Liu's (2011) 'A Silk Road Legacy: the Spread of Buddhism and Islam', and Saighal's (2014) 'Jointly Building The Maritime Silk Road', of a more commercial angle. Moreover, this essay will draw unique parallels between happenings of trade activity two millennia ago, and modern commercial routes and practices. Therefore, arguments throughout this article set to underpin a contradiction to the view that globalisation is simply a present-day phenomenon.

## **2. The cultural legacy**

The most important legacy of cultural transfer along the Silk Road is that of the spread of Buddhism. The religion entered China along the routes, owing to the travelling of Buddhist missionaries in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (Hill, 2009), having originated in North East India. Direct contact between Central Asian and Chinese Buddhism continued up to 8<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the established Silk Road, with the Indian form of Buddhist tantra reaching China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Significantly, the routes allowed for the creation of a new branch of religion, Tibetan Buddhism (Gómez, 2015, p.32), as missionaries continued to travel into new regions of China in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, illustrated in Figure 1.

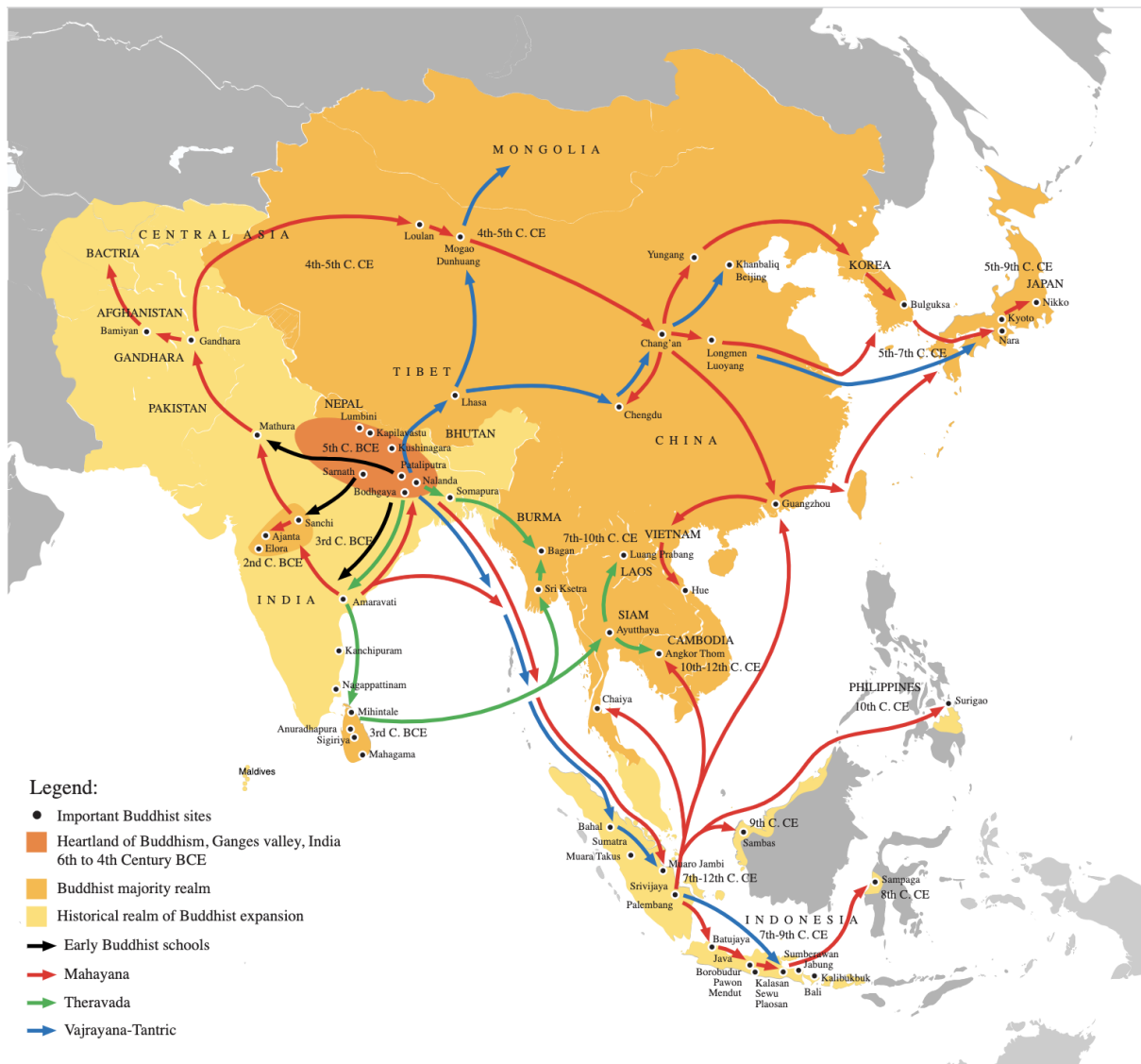


Figure 1. Buddhist adoption in Asia, Mahayana Buddhism first entered China through the Silk Road (Kartapranata, 2014)

That these branches of Buddhism are now the most prominent religions in different regions of the continent, is evidence of the cultural heritage of the Silk Road. Modern Mahayana Buddhism is prominent in East Asia, having derived from the Chinese Buddhist traditions which began to develop during the Han dynasty (Bailey and Taitz, 2005); the era in which the Silk Road transformed into an active trading route. Indo-Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion in Bhutan and Tibet, with adherents also in the surrounding regions of the Himalayas (Powers, 2007); Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the modern geographical distribution of Buddhist sects in Asia.

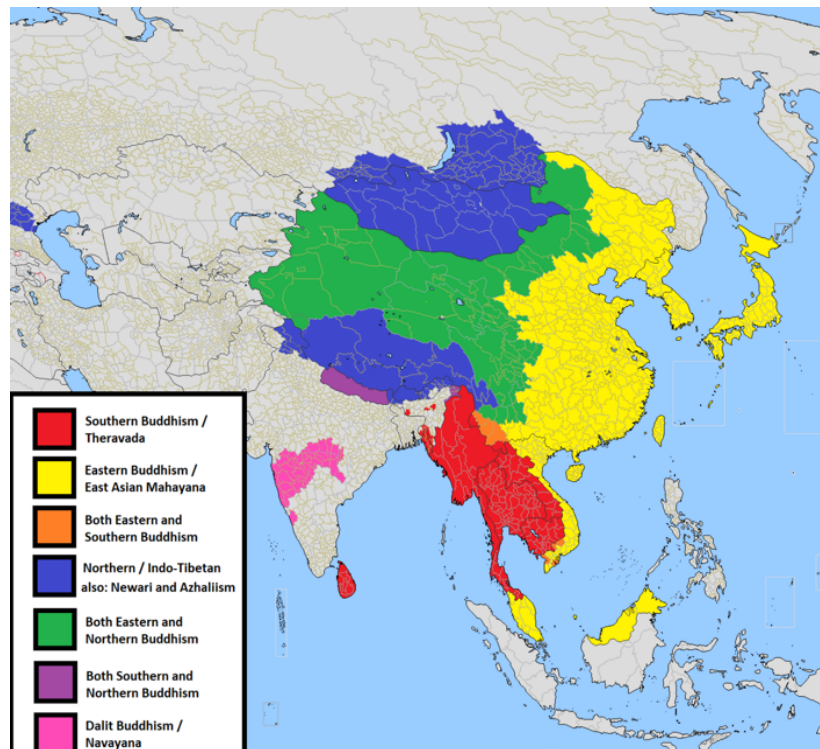


Figure 2. Map showing major Buddhist divisions (Fernandez-Vina, 2013)

Buddhist missionaries also left a cultural legacy in terms of language. They were key translators, working out a system for transcribing unfamiliar terms in foreign languages, which remains in use today (Hansen, 2022). As a result of transcription of Sanskrit texts up to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese language absorbed some 35,000 new words (Hansen, 2012). This example is part of a wider legacy of the Silk Road, by which people speaking different languages would encounter and attempt to understand each other, leading to greater linguistic diversity in settlements connected to the routes.

To further illustrate, the Greek language penetrated deep into the Indian subcontinent having travelled along the Silk Road; Frankopan (2015, p.7) points to how the language was spoken all over Central Asia and the Indus Valley even after the death of King Alexander of Great, therefore beginning to leave a legacy even over 2000 years ago.

Contrary to dominant historical narrative placing the West at the centre of influence along the routes between China and the Mediterranean, there was equally considerable cultural exchange westwards. Transmission from China to the Roman Empire provides an example; Liu (2010) concedes Roman traders need not have travelled far east to purchase their luxuries from China and India; they instead 'made their purchases at depots near the eastern side

of the Mediterranean'. The translucent silk clothing so strongly affiliated still now with Roman culture came directly from China, whilst Roman cuisine was traditionally spiced with pepper and ginger from India (Hancock, 2021).

Notwithstanding the literary focus on the diffusion of Buddhism westward along the Silk Road, significant religious exchange of Christianity occurred eastwards. From around 30AD, Manicheism penetrated from the Near East to Central Asia and further to China along the Silk Road. Moreover, as far into the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the route was used by missionaries to disseminate a new wave of Christian doctrine. The modern demography of China proves the strong legacy left; a 2018 government declaration states there are over 44 million Christians in the country, the distribution of which shown in Figure 3.

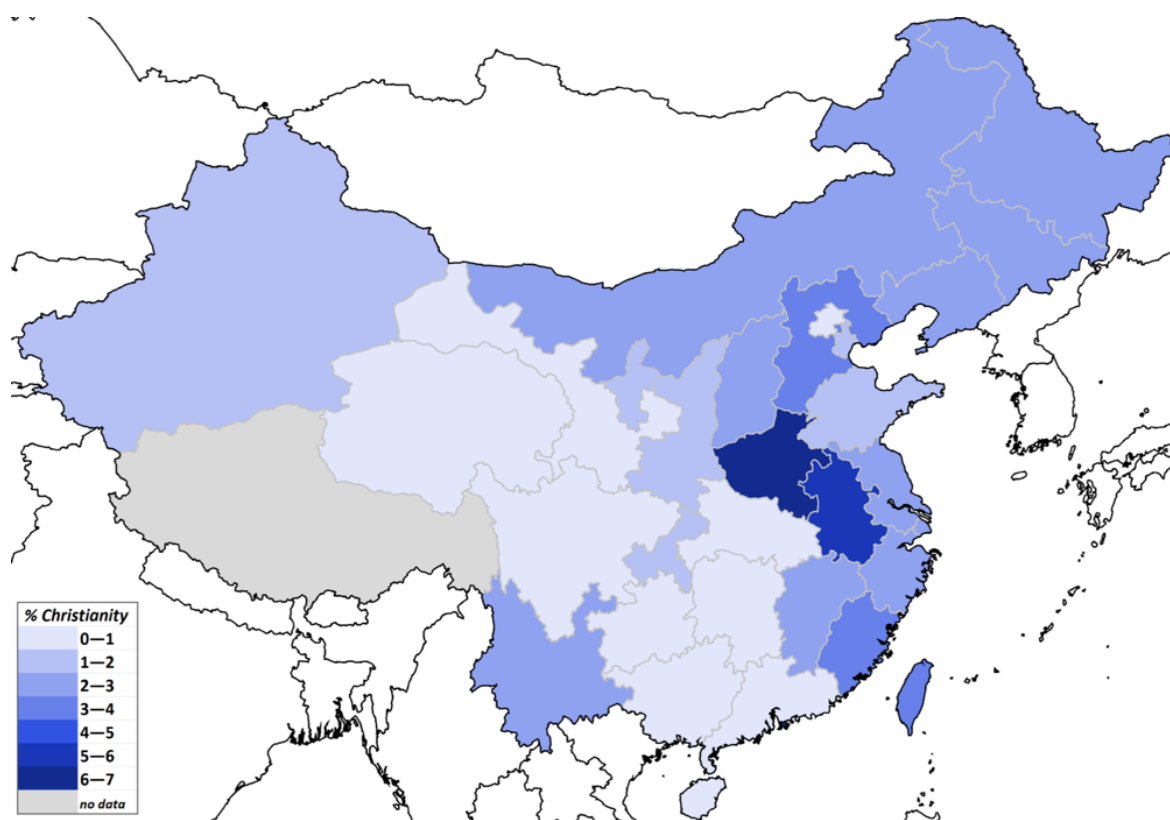


Figure 3. Mapping of Christianity in China by province according to the 2009 Chinese General Social Survey (Emsworth, 2015)

### 3. The Commercial Legacy

The commercial history of the Silk Road contradicts the idea of globalisation as simply a modern phenomenon. To illustrate, once the Roman Empire had conquered Egypt, Emperor Augustus made an effort to understand what lay over the new frontiers in the East resulting in a huge expansion of the horizons of traders (Frankopan, 2015, p.15); commercial exchange with India

exploded with 120 Roman boats sailing for India each year from the Red Sea Port of Myos Hormos. Secondly, the growing ambitions and expanding horizons of China meant luxury objects were traded along the Silk Road into “the wild steppes of the nomad world” (Frankopan, 2015, p.9). The resulting interlocking and interconnection of the markets of the steppes draws parallels with modern globalisation theory.

Perhaps the most obvious commercial legacy of these routes is shown by how they are once again rising back up, illustrated most profoundly by modern movements of the world’s economic ‘centre of gravity’. This is partly because the most important natural resources, used even as a priority in WW1, lie in Persia, Mesopotamia and the Gulf; oil was also discovered in Iran in 1908 (Evans, n.d.). Moreover, due to their fertility, large parts of the grazing land of the steppes have been transformed into the grain fields of South Russia and Ukraine (Frankopan, 2015, p. 509). New modern connections have sprung up along the spine of Asia, linking this region in all directions, just as the Silk Road did millennia ago; nowadays, these routes take new shapes and forms. For example, new markets are being opened up and tied together between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India by the natural gas TAPI pipeline, with an annual capacity of 950 billion cubic feet (Tanchum, 2015). Moreover, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vital piece of foreign policy in securing the country’s borders on the Asian mainland (Ji and Wallace, 2021). The project consists of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) for land connectivity, along with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) for maritime connectivity (Song and Fabinyi, 2022); both aim to generate linkages from infrastructure and economic activities in more Eastern countries back to China as a hub. Due to China’s pivotal importance in global production networks, these new connections are restoring the ancient Silk Road and shaping the modern economy. Figure 4 presents a visual comparison between ancient Silk Road routes and the course of China’s modern Belt and Road initiative.



Figure 4. Silk Road Routes. Source: The Economist Group Limited (2016)

The commercial legacy of the Silk Road is also increasing its prevalence in modern economic theory. The 'centre of gravity' of the global economy is the average location of economic activity across geographies on Earth, with its calculations taking into account the total GDP produced globally (Quah, 2011). As Figure 5 demonstrates, at the time of the origin of the Silk Road, it was India, China and their empires which dominated global flows of goods. In 1980, there had been a huge shift in where the highest volumes of goods and services were being exported from and imported to, to the mid-Atlantic. However, by 2008, owing to the rise of China and East Asia, the economic centre of gravity began to return to its position in the first millennia, and is predicted to come back full circle.

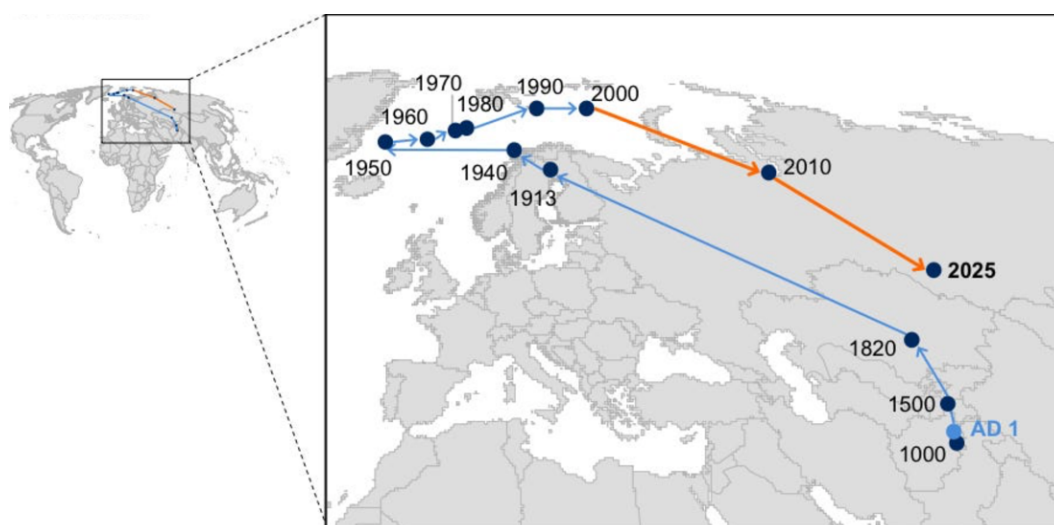


Figure 5. Evolution of the earth's economic centre of gravity. Source: McKinsey Global Institute analysis using data from Angus Maddison; University of Groningen

#### **4. Evaluation: is the legacy of the Silk Road more heavily cultural or commercial?**

As previously mentioned, exchanges were most furious before 1000AD and were often linked to Buddhism (Hansen, 2022), indicating the cultural legacy is of greater significance. Furthermore, the commercial legacy is weakened due to how dramatically differently modern trade is conducted compared with Silk Road times. Excavated documents from the ancient routes show that Silk Road trade was often local and small-scale (ibid.) with little empirical basis; a clear distinction from the global nature of modern trade. The Silk Road also declined after the first millennium, partly induced by the rise of maritime trade; a safer and more profitable alternative. Indeed, 2000 years ago, trade between China and the world beyond developed slowly due to difficulty with mapping routes over land owing to geographical barriers like the Gobi Desert, mountains and extremes of temperature (Frankopan, 2015, p.11). To further diminish the strength of the commercial legacy, an element of irony can be established; Western fashion houses, such as Prada and Burberry, are making huge sales across the Persian Gulf, China and the Far East (Frankopan, 2015, p.517); fine fabrics and silks are therefore being sold back to the place they originated and were exported from two millennia ago. Lastly, the nature of trade has changed drastically since Silk Road times. For example, trade in China under the Han dynasty was not even fully monetised, with silk and grains being used as international currency (ibid.). The Silk Road can therefore be considered an exploratory starting point for present-day commercial exchange, but with very little identifiable modern commercial legacy.

However, the limitations of the claim that the Silk Road left a stronger cultural than commercial legacy must also be examined. Importantly, it is of a tentative nature due to a lack of archaeological evidence. Indeed, proof of a Silk Road connecting China and the Roman empire is particularly weak; only a few stray findings of silk are available from sites, with it not even clear that these are of authentic Chinese variety (Mishra, 2020). Secondly, the Silk Road should be regarded as a concept with several dimensions; it may be erroneous to consider the cultural and commercial legacies as completely separate entities. For instance, cultural aspects along the ancient Silk Road were often influenced by trading behaviour. Indeed, Muslim traders of the Arabian Peninsula took a greater share of Red Sea trade in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, gaining a new ability to reach South China (Babelon, n.d.). Concurrently, their interactions introduced Islamic doctrine to a diverse range of people in the extent of their territory, namely those living in important coastal cities in the Indian Subcontinent, through which Muslim merchants had to pass via the Silk Road to reach China's ports. This highlights the inevitable confluence of cultural and commercial aspects, limiting a claim that one outweighs the other. It may therefore also be true that all cultural legacies could be regarded as commercial to some extent.

It may be unreasonable to draw comparisons between the cultural and commercial legacies of the Silk Road due to the disparity between them. For instance, the manner in which modern commercial exchange is conducted has changed due to the modern predominance of maritime trade and containerisation and other technological innovations as basic as monetisation. At the same time, cultural aspects are easier kept constant despite digital advancements, which do not affect a religious set of beliefs, for example, in the same way that they do trade mechanisms. In fact, early advances like the 8<sup>th</sup> century development of woodblocks as an alternative to hand-copying quickened the spread of Buddhist ideology (Barrett, 2019), strengthening the cultural legacy. It may therefore be unfair to construct an argument comparing the two aspects that are so unequally impacted by global development.

## **5. Conclusions**

The most important legacy of the Silk Road is the attitude of tolerance fostered by Oasis Kingdoms along the routes, allowing for the spread and adoption of new religions and languages across empires 2000 years ago, as travellers planted their cultures like seeds in the settlements they encountered. It is therefore true the Silk Road has provided a cultural legacy, demonstrated by the survival of Buddhism in China and dissemination of Greek. In future research to evidence this claim, in order to draw more comprehensive parallels between the present-day and Silk Road era, cultural exchange from the second millennia CE until the decline of the routes should be considered. Such historiography of a more extensive time period is frequently discussed in Frankopan's (2015) 'The Silk Road', albeit as separated considerations.

Based on the massively changed nature of modern trade compared to Silk Road times, the claim that the routes left little commercial legacy is somewhat strong. However, owing to present-day shifts in the economic 'centre of gravity' back towards Asia, the commercial legacy is actively increasing in significance. This futuristic viewpoint differs from popular opinion in this field, which often overlooks the hugely prevalent cultural legacies of the Silk Road in both the East and West, in favour of prioritising focus on the commercial aspect of these trade routes as they rise once again in maritime form.

Underpinning the arguments why the Silk Road left a significant legacy is the idea that globalisation was a fact of life 2000 years ago, as it is today. It seems economists have their attention on groups of countries with no historical connections but superficially similar measurable data, such as BRICS and MIST (O'Neill, 2011). It is the Mediterranean to which we should be looking with its riches and wealth of ancient connections waiting to re-emerge in front of our eyes, thereby establishing an even stronger Silk Road legacy. Their modern rise,

therefore, remains unobserved by many, as a topic area requiring extensive further research.

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