

# China's Hellenistic East: From World War II to the Belt/Road Initiative

## 中国的希腊化东方： 从二战到“一带一路”

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**Abstract** Chinese intellectuals' understanding of the Hellenistic East, which marks the history of the Middle East and Central Asia after Alexander's conquest (323–31 BCE), provides a unique window to examine modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals' perceptions of the Chinese placement in the world. Jian Bozan (1898–1968), a Chinese Marxist historian, has particularly emphasized the Hellenistic global background of the early Chinese empires in the 2nd century BCE in his work on early Chinese history in the 1940s. Liu Xiaofeng, an influential contemporary Chinese cultural critic, has published an article to decipher the implication of Chinese engagement with the Hellenistic East in the 2nd century BCE. As I will demonstrate, both these two instances are closely intertwined with their respective cultural milieu which is related to China's intense engagement with the outside world.

**Keywords** Hellenistic East; Silk Road; Classical Receptions; Chinese Historiography; Political Thought

## 1. Introduction

In the Hellenistic period, Bactria and India marked the eastern limit of Greek ethnographic knowledge and geographical imagination. They are also the modern Greek poet Cavafy's (1863–1933) easternmost horizon as indicated in his “Coins”:

Coins with Indian inscriptions:

They are the mightiest monarchs,  
of Eboukratintaza, of Strataga,  
of Manantraza, of Eramaiaza.

This is how the wise book renders the Indian  
inscriptions for us on one side of the coins.

But the book also shows us the other side which is,  
moreover, the good side

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with the figure of the king. And here,  
 how the Greek stops at once,  
 how he is moved as he reads in Greek  
 Hermaios, Ephkratides, Straton, Menander.<sup>1</sup>

This poem shares common ground with “Philhellene,” as both mention coins. However, in “Philhellene,” Cavafy maintained a derogatory tone about the philhellenism of Parthian kings. In this poem, however, he shows a different attitude toward the Indo-Greek coins (Cavafy, 2008/1912: 55). As he points out, although those Indo-Greek kings carry Indian names, they have another side, which indicates their “Hellenicity.”<sup>2</sup> As Cavafy’s views of both the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires are filtered through the Roman perspective, so is his attitude towards the Greco-Bactrian kings here. The text of *Periplus Maris Erythraei* clearly shows how Rome imagined the conquest of Indo-Greek kings through those coins (Casson, 1989: 16–17). The same scenario of imagining Greco-Bactrian kings occurs in Strabo’s representation of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. Strabo had particularly stressed that King Menander had conquered more land than Alexander (Strab. 11.11.1). It seems fair to argue that Rome was impressed with the deeds of the conquest of Greek kings of the Far East, while in contrast, they held derogatory views of both the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires (Rawson, 1975: 148–159). Cavafy shares this Roman perspective, and his horizon broadens from the East Mediterranean to the Hellenistic Far East. Consciously and unconsciously, this poem writes of the dynamic role of Alexandria as the gateway to the rest of the East, especially after the Suez Canal more effectively connected Britain to India through Alexandria. Forster’s writings also showcase Alexandria as a gateway to the East and the city’s strategic role in it (Pinchin, 1977: 346).

While Bactria and India marked the end of the Greek geographic imagination in the late 2nd century BCE, these two regions marked the beginning of Chinese knowledge of the outside world at that time. Likewise, the following two modern instances indicate how Chinese intellectuals share Cavafy’s interest in Hellenistic Central Asia and India by relating it to Chinese geopolitical interests. Jian Bozan, the notable official Marxism historian, devotes two sections in his work on Qin-Han dynasties (written during the Second World War and published in 1946) to elucidate the world-historical background of early Chinese empires.

## 2. Jian Bozan’s Hellenistic East and Cultural Politics of Wartime China

After the Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937 and Japan occupied a large territory in East China, the Chinese capital moved from Nanjing to Chongqing in Southwest China.<sup>3</sup> Chongqing is a port

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/galleries/Exhibits/cavafy/ancients3.html>

<sup>2</sup> For the reasoning of “Hellenicity” in antiquity, see Hall (2002).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent account of China in the Second World War, see Mitter (2013). In this account, on the one side, Rana Mitter emphasizes that China is a “forgotten ally” in contemporary Western memories and discourse; and on the other side, Mitter gives credit to Chongqing’s

city by the upper Yangtze River that, after the Sino-British treaty of 1890,<sup>1</sup> served as a gateway from Southwest China to the outside world. To build the joint anti-Japanese front line, the Chinese Communist Party received legal status from the National Party's government and established its branch in Chongqing during wartime. Jian Bozan served as a committee member of the Association of Sino-Soviet Culture in Chongqing, and the chief editor of the *Sino-Soviet Culture* journal. Jian devoted his leisure time to writing a multi-volume comprehensive history of China. His Qin-Han history occupies one volume of this work.

In the section on the world-historical background of Qin, he writes:

When the ethnic group of the Qin entered China proper and brought a huge surge in the Eastern world, the foam of the Western world was also arriving at the Western frontier of China. It looks like the movement of world history was preparing for the subsequent contact of the two worlds of East and West. During this time, on the one hand, the Greek empire (*Xila diguo*) collapsed, and on the other hand, the influence of the Roman empire had not yet reached the East. Chinese power also has not arrived in Central Asia...As early as the late Warring States period, in conjunction with the death of Alexander, the Greek empire collapsed. In the Qin period, what emerged from the ruin of the Greek empire were numerous independent petty states...These petty states have established their power in every corner. Although they fragmented the broad world from the Mediterranean to the Indus River valley, due to the slave-holder aristocratic groups' corruption of each state and the mutual conflicts among them, they had lost their historical vigor to turn around the wheel of world history...When China was experiencing the transition from Zhou to Qin, the Greek empire looked like a gradually waning bright light that had shined around. Nevertheless, what waned was only the political life of Greece. The Greek culture is the immortal creation. Until our time, it is still regarded as the origin of European culture...Greek culture is the crystal of innumerable slaves' labor. So, it is the essence of human civilization. In the period of Qin, although the Greek empire had collapsed, the Greek culture was still widespread around the former empire's territory. The Greek language was still the *lingua franca* in Central Asia. Greek art and religion were still permeating India. They also transmitted across the Pamir Mountains, reached the northwestern part of the Tarim Basin, and were in touch with the Qiang people in China. So as soon as the Chinese people entered the Tarim basin in the Western Han dynasty,

contribution by being the wartime capital, which has long been neglected in contemporary Chinese narrative of Sino-Japanese war.

<sup>1</sup> Wang Di uses the “step outside from the closed world” metaphor to capture the upper Yangtze River region’s gradual integration into the world economy; see Wang (2001). The acceleration of Chongqing’s modernization process took place in the 1920s and 1930s when Chongqing was under the de facto independent military lord’s government (Zhang (2003)). From the mid-19th century onwards, the Qing imperial court granted increasing autonomy to southern Chinese provinces in modernizing the army by following Western standards. In this dynamic, there was a mushrooming of military landlords in South China, and in the republican time, they became the de facto independent governors in their provinces. This process bears a great resemblance to what Egypt underwent in the 19th century.

they immediately encountered the Sakas, who had a foreign high nose and sunken eyes.  
(Jian, 1999/1946: 18–20)

Before this section, he discussed the emergence of the Qin Empire and the resulting genesis of the Chinese nation (Jian, 1999/1946: 17–18).<sup>1</sup> In this passage, he regards the collapse of Alexander's empire as synonymous with the decline of Greek civilization. In his view, the Hellenistic period was an age of gradual corruption. The contrast between the rise of China and the decline of Greece is thus presented.

It has been well-demonstrated that the Sino-Japanese War hugely impacted Chinese historiography, especially in its nationalistic discourse (Tian, 2005). Jian is no exception here. Chinese communists during wartime exhibited a cultural shift: they temporarily set aside the idea of social class but embraced a nationalist discourse (Zhang, 2013). Chinese intellectuals during wartime had a common vision that a “New China” would be born out of the ruins of war, as the nationalistic government had abolished most of the extraterritorial rights of Western countries in China during this period (van de Ven, 2018).

Moreover, we can also discern the influence of the School of Strategies of Warring States (*Zhanguo ce pai*) on Jian's history writing. According to this Chongqing-based school which prevailed during wartime, the contemporary world is a revival of the Chinese Warring States period (Jiang, 2001). This school thus particularly favored a global and comparative study of Chinese history. We can observe from Jian's writing how contemporary geopolitical concerns influenced his understanding of China's interaction with the Hellenistic East. The School of Strategies of Warring States played a great role in introducing Oswald Spengler's ideas to a Chinese nationalistic context. In conjunction with Europe's suffering in the war, Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* further reinforced Chinese intellectuals' impression that the West was in decline. With this view, we can better understand Jian's view of Greece. On the one hand, he recognizes the accomplishments of Greek civilization. This recognition can be attributed to the philhellenism prevalent among Chinese intellectuals, which began in the 1920s (Chen, 2016; Jiang, 2019).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he emphasizes the waxing of Greek influence in the Hellenistic period. As Jian cites no secondary scholarship in his work, it is hard to pin down the source of his information on Greek history. However, he evidently shares the derogatory view of the Hellenistic period which was held by most of the Greek historians in his time. In the context of Jian's writing, this derogatory view is clothed in Chinese nationalism.

This view is further stressed in the section on the world-historical background of the Former Han:

<sup>1</sup> As scholars demonstrated recently, the current Chinese nation can only be traced back to the late medieval period, see Ge (2011); Tackett (2017). The case of the late medieval is also exemplary of the proto-national state before modernity.

<sup>2</sup> There are two notable instances of the use of the Greek past in China's war with Japan. One is the translation and performance of Aeschylus's *Persians* to encourage Chinese people to fight against the Japanese invasion.

As we discussed above, the Greek empire was already about to fall apart due to internal corruption. They have lost their historical vigor to turn around the wheel of the Western world. However, the vast land from the Greek peninsula and northern Egypt to the Indus Valley and Soviet Central Asia was still under Greek hegemony. For the Western world during that time, except for the large-scale wars between Romans and Carthaginians in the Italian peninsula, no huge storm from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia. For Central Asia, except for some small struggles among those aristocrats of Greek slave-owners for the rule of colonies, there were only the cultural undercurrents from Greece and India that clashed with each other. Sometimes, the wave of this clash hit the Pamir mountains, producing some small spoon-drift that soon disappeared. In the time of early Western Han, a terrifying wave suddenly came about in the Mediterranean. This is the rise of Rome on the Italian peninsula. In the year when the Western Han unified China proper (202 BCE), the Romans defeated the Carthaginians and unified the modern Italian peninsula... The lighthouse of civilization erected on the Greek peninsula is now turned off under the hurricane of Rome. Although a new lighthouse was turned on in Italy, its light still could not shine to Asia. Thus, in the early Western Han period, entire Central Asia fell into the dark age... The march of barbarian groups is under the command of history. History has ordered the Greeks to store their beautiful culture in Central Asia's wild plain. Now, history ordered those barbarians to partake in the accomplishment of the Greek civilization... Exactly at this point, the Yuezhi people, who had originally scattered in northwest China, started their western march due to Xiongnu's pressure... They crushed Greek power (in Central Asia) in their way... (and) eventually destroyed the Greeks' only haven in the East, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (*Daxia wangguo*)... Now, the remaining Greeks in Eastern Central Asia began their final retreat... This is the situation of the Western world before the mid-Western Han period. At that time, if we climb to the summit of the Pamir Mountains and look afar westward, what we can observe is the enlargement of the Roman cultural sphere, the march of the barbarian cavalry, and the off-stage of the Greeks. But at the same time, we can also see that for the vast wild plain between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, there were quite a few nomads who were driving their lovely herds and singing primitive pastoral songs. At this time, the famous Chinese explorer (*tanxian jia*) Zhang Qian arrived in Central Asia. (Jian, 1999/1946: 145–149)

As Jian's student Zhang Chuanxi comments, readability is an important characteristic of Jian's historical writing (Zhang, 1999: 2). This is particularly true for this section, which somehow reads

like an epic. In particular, Jian uses a lot of natural metaphors to portray the dynamic change in the 2nd century BCE. The decline of the Hellenistic world and the rise of Rome are Jian's main concerns here, as is the case for Cavafy. As Jian argues, when Rome took over the Mediterranean world, no significant incident took place in the Hellenistic world. This is also the theme that runs through Cavafy's historical poems on the vulnerability of Hellenistic kings before Roman authorities.

Jian also partly shares Cavafy's unusual regard for Hellenistic Central Asia. As Cavafy's "Coins" implies, the Greeks in Central Asia and India maintained their military valor in the Far East. This military valor is also what Jian highlights: only the Greeks in Central Asia could cause "waves." Jian's representation here, Greek civilization further declined in the 2nd century BCE. Although we can deduce that Jian alludes to contemporary Europe when he writes about Greece, it may be an over-interpretation to speculate that Jian regards Rome as the United States. Instead, what really concerns Jian is China. In Jian's interpretation, the nomads' sack of Hellenistic Central Asia initiated a dark age there. As he shows by using romantic language, it is exactly during this period when Zhang Qian reached Central Asia as a Chinese envoy. In Jian's representation, post-Hellenistic Central Asia is a "barbarian" landscape where people lead a primitive lifestyle. He suggests that Zhang Qian's travels to Central Asia contain a civilization mission.

This point is further developed in the following chapter about China's engagement in Central Asian affairs:

The stimulus to Chinese people then brought by Zhang Qian's discovery of the Western Regions (Central Asia) is similar to how Columbus' discovery of America stimulated the Europeans. Zhang Qian evidently suggested to Chinese merchants that the land of gold and silver is not in the sea but in the Tarim Basin and beyond. Therefore, after Emperor Wu of Han's war with Xiongnu, the emperor fought to open the trade route to Central Asia. (Jian, 1999/1946: 157)

Compared to the PRC's later official version of Chinese historiography that the Chinese interaction with Central Asia is an equal interaction driven by non-profit factors. Jian explicitly compares Zhang Qian's travels to Central Asia to Columbus's arrival in America, with all of the connotations that the latter incident entails.

Jian shares Cavafy's basic tone when describing the Hellenistic world; he regards it as a time of decline which prepares for the coming of Rome. Due to its geographical proximity, Jian had more interest in Hellenistic Central Asia. The underlying message of his portrait is that China will take over Greece's role in bringing civilization to Central Asia. Jian's writing represents a unique way of expressing Chinese nationalism during wartime when China was aware that its war with Japan had a global framework.

### 3. Writing the Hellenistic East under the Belt/Road Initiative

Not many scholars of Chinese history after Jian in Chinese academia have a world-historical perspective comparable to his. Chinese scholars of Greek history, like their Western counterparts, put priority on archaic and classical Greece, while they relatively neglected the Hellenistic period. However, the “Belt and Road” initiative announced in 2013 has brought some changes. Contemporary Chinese academia is government-driven, and China’s National Social Science Fund (NSSF) sponsors numerous research projects each year. After 2013, an increasing number of Silk Road-related topics have received financial support from this fund. Both Chinese scholars and the learned public also show a great passion for knowledge of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> “The Hellenistic Legacies of the Silk Road” project sponsored by NSSF in 2016 marks the way this Silk Road fervor drives Chinese scholars to pay attention to the Hellenistic East again. China’s active engagement with the broader Eurasian region has sparked a renewed interest in the Hellenistic past of the Eastern landscape, driven by the growing need for knowledge of Central Asia.

Liu Xiaofeng’s 2019 article “What is the Chinese Moment in World History” best manifests this dynamic.<sup>2</sup> After Gan Yang, a former student at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, wrote an introduction to the life and thought of Leo Strauss, which marked the introduction of Strauss’s work in Chinese, Liu has become the major proponent of Strauss since then (Gan, 2002).<sup>3</sup> As Shadi Bartsch notices, Liu represents a very classical example of indigenization of the discipline of classics, signifying the effort of contemporary Chinese intellectuals to use the Western classical tradition as one of modern Chinese culture’s resources; in contrast, professional classicists in China regard classics as an international discipline (Bartsch, 2022).

In the latter group’s view, Chinese scholars should simply transplant the well-established model of classics in Western universities into China, as most of these scholars have received professional training in classics in Western academia. However, Liu explicitly states that Strauss provides a unique way to re-read Western classics, and his method will ultimately lead Chinese students to reflect on both the accomplishments and the limitations of the traditional Chinese legacy (Liu, 2019: 219–236). In other words, Liu’s real concern is not Greece but China. Liu’s 2019 article thus has double implications. First and foremost, this article shows how a scholar who had previously been occupied by classical topics like Homer and Plato began to pay attention to a marginal topic like

<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Yuan Jian’s calls to rebuild Chinese knowledge of Central Asia in the “One Belt, One Road” context can reflect this sentiment, see Yuan (2015).

<sup>2</sup> There are three official versions of this article. One is published in the *Journal of Political Thought* (*Zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu*). One is the preface for a recent book on the *Shiji*. Another is an online version of the *Guancha* (Observations) website. I use the print edition in which Liu’s use of this essay as the preface for Dong Chenglong’s 2019 monograph *Wudi wenjiao yu shijia bifǎ: Shiji zhong Gaozu lichao zhi Wudi lijiao de dashi yinyuan* [Emperor Wu’s Cultural Politics and Historiography: Important Causalities from Emperors Gaozu to Wu in *Shiji*] (Liu, 2019: 1–70).

<sup>3</sup> Based on the teaching experience at the Committee on Social Thought, Mark Lilla has a reflection on the fervor of Strauss in China, see Lilla (2010).

Hellenistic Central Asia. Second, as Liu has no interest in becoming a real expert in Greek philosophy or literature, despite his numerous publications on these topics, Liu's 2019 article should not be read as a traditional technical article about China and the Hellenistic East.

Liu's article is a response to Xin Deyong's 2015 book *The Making of Emperor Wu of Han*. Xin is one of the pioneering professional historians of early imperial China. In this book, Xin, based on a careful reading and analysis of sources, demonstrates how the accepted image we have today of Emperor Wu was constructed during late imperial China (Xin, 2015). Liu is an opponent of historical empiricism, and his article is written from that perspective. In Liu's view, Xin ignores the fact that Sima Qian, one of Emperor Wu's contemporaries, was a witness to Emperor Wu's watershed moment. In Liu's view, Sima Qian had carefully expressed his point of view of this period through his historical writing (Liu, 2019: 3–10). Although Liu could have taken a new cultural historical approach to put Xin's historical interpretation to another level, that is not his interest, as he writes at the beginning of the article:

*Moment* [in English in the original] will become the marker of our age. There are two reasons for this statement: first, Hegel uses this word to describe the coming of a new historical stage, and China has already experienced this stage; second, the unrecognizable “Machiavellian moment” is throwing an irresistible glad eye on us. I would say that China’s recent history in the past 150 years has clearly shown that the rise of New China (PRC) indeed should be regarded as another *kairos* (key moment, in Greek in original writing with a Chinese translation in bracket) of world history. (Liu, 2019: 1)

Obscure statements and abstract language are Liu's usual writing style. This passage is no different. Nevertheless, his concern is clearly expressed in the last sentence: how the PRC reconstructs the world. This echoes China's current dominant discourses of “the rise of China” (*Zhongguo jueqi*) and the “Chinese dream” (*Zhongguo meng*).<sup>1</sup> The major body of this piece, which consists of two sections, is devoted to illustrating the way Emperor Wu contributed to another important historical moment in Chinese history. The first section is called “Emperor Wu's Western Anabasis and the First World War” and the second section is named “Emperor Wu's Conquest of Dayuan (Ferghana) in Sima Qian's Writing.”

As Jian did, Liu endows the world's historical significance to Chinese engagement in Central Asia. In usual Chinese historiography, Chinese dealing in Central Asia is regarded only as China's frontier issue. Nevertheless, by the Second World War, this issue had already been interpreted from a more global perspective, as Jian does. Liu further interprets this episode as the “First World War” in world history, as he notices:

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent review from an American perspective, see Ross (2018): 81–89.

When writing “Han has conquered Dayuan (the Great Yuan), and the foreign powers have been shocked,” Sima Qian refers to the incident between 104 and 101 BCE when Emperor Wu ordered the Chinese (*Zhonghua*) army to pass across the Pamir Mountains and to undertake a campaign to Dayuan, which is located in the Ferghana Valley, at the western slope of the mountain. It deserves our attention that Ferghana is the dividing line between the ancient Chinese empire and the *oikoumene* (*tianxia*, all under heaven) of the ancient Mediterranean. As ancient historians in the West have regarded Alexander’s Eastern conquest as a great event in world history, we also should regard Emperor Wu’s Western campaign as a great event in world history.” (Liu, 2019: 24–25)

As Jian does, Liu regards the Pamir Mountains as the western limit of ancient China.<sup>1</sup> He then conceives of the entire Hellenistic world as a Mediterranean *oikoumene*, especially by using the traditional Chinese term *tianxia* (all under heaven) to capture this dynamic. The Ferghana Valley is thus exaggeratedly regarded as the dividing line between China and the West. Then, Liu gives a survey of the history of the Hellenistic East, with his comments interpolated. While Cavafy paid particular attention to the Ptolemies in the early Hellenistic period, Liu’s major focus was the Seleucid Empire, as it brought Greek civilization to the Chinese border. His focus thus dwells on Hellenistic Central Asia, especially Bactria:

Our general historiography of ancient Greece today focuses on Alexander’s campaign in India. Alexander’s march to Central Asia is only mentioned in passing. After all, ancient texts give us few accounts. The systematic archaeological excavation is said to have begun in the mid-20th century. From today’s perspective, Alexander’s conquest of Central Asia has more world-historical significance. (Liu, 2019: 26–27)

In contrast with Jian, however, Liu does not regard the Hellenistic world as a time of decline. Rather, he conceives of this period as a dynamic time when cultural exchange between the East and West unprecedentedly heightened. Updated research in Hellenistic history may endorse Liu’s view. However, from Liu’s notes in this article, his knowledge relies mostly on 19th-century and early-20th-century scholarship.<sup>2</sup> China’s contemporary engagement with Central Asia thus gives Liu the *problématique* to dig out the meaning of the Hellenistic past of the East. However, like Jian, Liu’s real attention is drawn to the rise of Rome and its aftermath:

Subsequently, around Seleucid’s struggle and collapse, the first world war broke out. This war lasted about two centuries. The political powers involved in this war include Rome and Ptolemy in the West and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and the Mauryans in the East.

<sup>1</sup> In Jian’s time, Xinjiang was under heavy Russian influence, see Brophy (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For Bactria, his knowledge heavily relied on William Woodthorpe Tarn’s (1869–1957) 1938 monograph *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, as far as his notes can tell.

The end result is that Rome and Parthia arose during the wars. After a century-long fight, these two powers eventually compromised in the last decade before our era. (Liu, 2019: 28–29)

In terms of historical accuracy, this is a problematic statement. In particular, when Liu writes about Mauryan India, what he means may be the Indo-Greeks. But Maurya has already collapsed in the 2nd century BCE (Thapar, 2002: 204–208). Nevertheless, Liu is right in noting the partition of the Hellenistic world between Rome and Parthia. From a scholarly point of view, it is much less convincing to regard the successive incidents taking place from the 3rd century to the 1st century BCE as different parts of a single war. This is thus a highly teleological reading of history based on *hindsight*. If the Second World War impacted Jian's language and ideas about the Hellenistic episode, Liu directly transposes how he understands modern world war to the ancient war. His understanding of modern war may be influenced by Carl Schmidt, his other “spiritual teacher” besides Leo Strauss.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding China, after going over Antiochus VII's death in battle with Rome in 129 BCE, Liu comments:

Since Rome took over the Greeks' role in fighting with Parthia...this war still lasted another century. We should be reminded that Emperor Wu of Han exactly initiated the first total war against the Xiongnu, which constantly “raided and plundered China,” and he started the Ferghana campaign after twenty years.” (Liu, 2019: 30–31)

As Emma Dench observes, synchronization is an effective method for introducing perspective in ancient historical writing (Dench, 1994). This is what Liu does by correlating Antiochus VII's death and China's Xiongnu campaign. However, the way in which he relates Emperor Wu's campaign to the Greek world is by emphasizing the “Hellenicity” of Ferghana based on comparative linguistic “evidence”:

Before that, in 230 or 223 BCE, the independent Greco-Bactrian kingdom expanded northward under Euthydemus I's rule, and it took Dayuan (Ferghana). The kingdom built fortifications in the Greek way in several villages there. Under his son Demetrius I's rule, Bactria further expanded towards Northwestern India. We can already observe from this trend of expansion that it would become an empire. Therefore, when Emperor Wu's army reached Ferghana, it was the first time China was in contact with the Indo-European ethnic groups of the West. As I have heard (*jushuo*), “Yuan” is a transcription of Yavana of Sanskrit, which is Yona in Pali. This word ultimately derives from Ἰωνεῖς (Ionians, with Chinese explanation in bracket), as Yavana is a generic term for the Greeks who settled in

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<sup>1</sup> Besides Strauss and Western classics, Schmidt's work is of great priority in the translation project he is undertaking.

Central and South Asia after they had accompanied Alexander there. (Liu, 2019: 31)

From an academic standpoint, this is arguably the most methodologically deficient argument in the entire article. It is also the argument that discloses Liu's historiographical foundation. Despite Liu's indifference to historical empiricism, which he considers to be intellectually cowardly, his argumentation here is highly empirical, and built upon linguistic "evidence" with problematic assumptions of ethnicity. Pre-Islamic Central Asia is probably the field that can most expose the limits of historical empiricism.<sup>1</sup> Due to the scarcity of evidence, even empiricist historians struggle to craft the meaningful narratives they can produce for topics with abundant sources; as a result, they often rely on linguistic methods to trace cultural exchanges and influences through loanwords. In the East Asian context, a typical example of this effort is to do a phonetic reconstruction of certain ethnonyms or toponyms in Chinese sources and relate them to non-Chinese terms.<sup>2</sup>

This is what Liu does here. He uses linguistic methods to build his argument that China did have direct contact with the Greek people when it marched to Ferghana in the 100s BCE. Liu's archaeological material correlates Dayuan, the Chinese term for Ferghana, to Yavana, the term for Greeks in the Indic language.<sup>3</sup> As Liu explicitly states, Euthydemus built fortifications in Ferghana following a "Greek" way. However, no solid evidence shows us that Bactria had expanded its power to Ferghana during that time; the evidence is mostly limited in the Oxus River, where we do find Euthydemus' fortifications.<sup>4</sup> Second, regarding fortifications themselves, even though we can find coins bearing Euthydemus's image, there is also no way to tell in what way those fortifications are "Greek." As Pierre Leriche proposes, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom highly relied on a pre-existing structure at the infrastructure level (Leriche, 1981: 79). By any measure, Liu's argument here is built upon shaky evidence and an outdated assumption of ethnicity. However, this evidence is crucial for him to set up his narrative for the romantic encounter between China and Greece, which then constitutes a world-historical moment for China in his understanding.

After elucidating the way this world-historical moment came into being, Liu goes further to argue how it matters for China by comparing it with Greece:

After Alexander had crushed the Persian empire, his further eastern campaign was said to fulfill his intellectual curiosity. In contrast, Emperor Wu's constant Western campaign was for the survival and security of the Chinese commonwealth (*Huaxia gongtong ti*). There is a huge price for peaceful coexistence, both politically and economically. The constant

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Beckwith's book on the comprehensive history of the silk road is exemplary of this approach in the Central Asian context, in both its strength and weakness, see Beckwith (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Beckwith's recent debate with Étienne de la Vaissière on the ethnic identity of the Jie people, an obscure ethnic group in early medieval China, based on the linguistic reconstruction of a one-sentence Chinese transcription of the Jie language, can methodologically illustrate this issue (both of them have collaboration with linguists, which renders historiographical debate into a purely linguistic debate), see Beckwith et al. (2015): 143–151; de la Vaissière et al. (2016): 125–144.

<sup>3</sup> For the comprehensive treatment of the ethnonyms of Yonas and Yavana in Indic sources, see Karttunen (2015).

<sup>4</sup> For current archaeological discussion of Euthydemus I's fortifications, see Ртвеладзе, Двуреченская, Горин, and Шейко (2014): 151–160.

tributes (to Xiongnu) are not only an economic burden (for China) but also show (China's) political weakness. Therefore, Emperor Wu decided to permanently solve the Xiongnu problem....We should be aware that without Alexander's (he is Aristotle's pupil) curiosity-driven campaign, there would have been no way for Emperor Wu to open this political silk road, despite the emperor's self-determination...(Nonetheless), we should also not forget that the original agenda of Alexander's eastern campaign was to get rid of the incessant threats to the pan-Hellenic political community from the Eastern land. (Liu, 2019: 33–34).

Liu's political agenda in this article is further demonstrated here. It is right for Liu to note here that Emperor Wu's Western campaign is closely related to his concern for the Xiongnu. Nevertheless, Chinese historical engagement with the Hellenistic East, in Liu's writing, evidently alludes to the current Belt/Road initiative. Emperor Wu's harsh policy toward the Xiongnu is analogized to the current elevated tension between China and the United States. Liu uses the term "peaceful coexistence" (*heping gongchu*) to capture the early Han's dealing with the Xiongnu through marriage and tributes. Likewise, Zhou Enlai, the prime minister of the early PRC, developed the idea of "peaceful coexistence" when he met Indian diplomats in 1954. It then became the most important diplomatic principle of the PRC. Liu uses the Han-Xiongnu relationship to cast doubt on the validity of this principle. This interpretation of history in political language demonstrates his understanding of the current political situation.

In any event, as someone who is devoted to introducing Western classics into contemporary Chinese culture, Liu is exemplary in showing how contemporary Chinese engagement with Central Asia leads scholars to revisit the Hellenistic East. Liu's article should be regarded as a cultural artifact rather than an academic discussion. It should be read with Liu's previous writings on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Antigone (Liu, 2010)). In conjunction with Liu's early focus on individual freedom and inner tranquility, Liu shows how these figures fight against either political authority or dominant cultural trends in his *belles lettres chinoises*. As Liu's concern was increasingly drawn toward Chinese politics, Emperor Wu became one of his heroes. In his representation here, Emperor Wu is someone who carves out a space for the "Chinese commonwealth" by participating in the "First World War" which Liu construes. As a Chinese intellectual with a deep background in German romanticism, like his German precursor, Liu, while writing this article, moves further in the direction of regarding "state" and "nation" as aesthetic objects.

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