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## SILK, WARS, & ASIANS

When the late actress Anna May Wong walked into a laundrette on Beverly Boulevard in Hollywood, sometime in the 1950s, she told the owner that no one had imported Chinese silk into America since the Korean War. The owner listened, and converted the laundrette to Oriental Silk in 1972, despite the ongoing turmoil in China during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Over the years, Oriental Silk supplied silk to countless Hollywood productions, including *Titanic*, where a lot of it was used to accurately reflect the robes of the prewar period.

Kenneth Wong (who took over Oriental Silk from his parents) and Anna May Wong's families originated from the same village in Guangdong, China. Kenneth's grandfather had been among the first group of villagers to go and get jobs in America. "Get a job," or *dagong*—as we refer to it in Chinese—means "working for the boss" or "selling labor," in the capitalist sense of exchange of labor for wages. But back then, *dagong* was

24

called "coolie labor," and the locals called it "selling the piglet," since many villagers were fooled by labor contractors and sold themselves in return for almost nothing. These villagers found working conditions in America extremely harsh, and many never made it back home. The "piglets" were loaded and shipped off to California, where they worked in the California gold mines and on the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, enterprises that proved extremely difficult and dangerous. As a result, for every kilometer of railroad built, several deaths were incurred.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth's father moved to the US in 1939 during the Second World War and was shortly after drafted into the US Army.

The coolie trade was led by the grossly unequal Treaty of Nanking, which was signed on August 29, 1942 between the

1. The migration trajectory of Wong's family is narrated in Xiaowen Zhu's film *Oriental Silk* (2015) that documents the owner Kenneth Wong's reflection on the time he spent running the family business. Xiaowen Zhu, *Oriental Silk* 乡网 (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020), 25.

25

Qing dynasty and the British Empire. Through the agreement, the British obtained five ports for trading, as well as Hong Kong Island, of which the latter they seized after the Qing dynasty lost the first Opium War (1839–42). Opium was disseminated in China by the British as a way to enter the Chinese market, and for them to freely use the ports in China for trade. While the British demanded Chinese tea, porcelain, and silk, there was very little demand in China for British goods, causing trade imbalance from the British point of view. The British were unwilling to trade in silver with 20 per cent tax on top of everything. Therefore, smuggling opium through the East India Company—even after the Chinese opium ban—created a steady demand among Chinese users, which helped solve the problem of trade imbalance. After Lin Zexu<sup>2</sup>

2. Lin Zexu was a leading Chinese scholar and official of the Qing dynasty, known for his role in the events leading up to the first Opium War. He was a proponent of the revitalization of traditional Chinese thought and institutions, a movement that became known as the



confiscated about 20,000 chests of opium and ordered a blockade of foreign trade in Canton, with all rights to China's control of drug import, the British dispatched a military force to China and called for a war.

Before the Opium War and the coolie trade, textiles from Asia had already contributed tremendously to building the so-called modern world. In *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Andre Gunder Frank directly relates the sweeping rise of the West (in global-economic and demographic terms) to the decline of the East around 1800. In fact, European states used the silver extracted from the American colonies to buy entry into an expanding Asian market that already flourished in the world economy. Brown & Ives, a Providence, US-based company, built the

ocean liner *Ann and Hope* in 1798. Its first voyage was to Canton, China, returning to Providence in February 1799 with 1,725 chests of Bohea tea and nearly 1,500 chests of various other teas and gunpowder; 130 boxes of chinaware, dinner, and tea sets; eight boxes containing 392 pieces of assorted silks; and 500 bales of nankeen cloth, a type of pale yellow cloth originally made in Nanjing, where the Treaty of Nanking was to be signed 143 years later. In her following voyage, from London, *Ann and Hope* would depart for Canton with broadcloths, long ells, Prussian blue, watches, glass ware, cutlery, porter, beer and ale, and return with teas, sugar, cassia, fans, chinaware, mats, window blinds, umbrellas, sweetmeats, silks, and ribbons.<sup>3</sup> Providence built its prosperity upon trade with China. Beyond *Ann and Hope* and numerous other vessels, Brown & Ives also owned the ship *Asia*.

Self-Strengthening Movement. In a letter to Queen Victoria, written after he had first reached Guangzhou, Lin asked whether she would allow the import of a substance as poisonous as opium into her own country and asked her to forbid her subjects to bring it into his.

3. Richard Mather Bayles, *History of Providence County, Rhode Island* (BiblioLife, 2010 [1891]), 265–85.

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"Asia" today is increasingly uncritical as it places the other as the "West." As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out in *Other Asias*, China and Japan—both of which had no sustained European colonial experience—are excluded in the list of other Asias. Thus, anti-colonial culturalism does not provide a ground-level cultural cement in the Asia-Pacific, which is, rather, a regional economic initiative that produces a global managerial culture.<sup>4</sup> Apart from Hong Kong, most parts of China were not subject to colonial possession territorially, though China was invaded and had to grant many concessions throughout the nineteenth century to England, France, Germany, Russia, Japan. In a way, the semi-colonial condition of China propels postcolonial studies out of its continuing binarism. On the one hand, China had an ancient, centralized empire that incorporated

smaller kingdoms and tribes into its own imperial system of centralized bureaucracy and tributary states. Additionally, it had attained a cultural, political, and technological sophistication that surpassed that of preindustrial Europe. On the other hand, China suffered from Japanese imperialist invasion. This hinders the fixation on the colonial subject, produced predominately by the West, which is criticized through postcolonial studies as both the origin and solution to the problems of the post-colonies.

Asia is not a place. The very word was used in reflection of Europe's eastward trajectory. From the first century BC, Rome began the process of eastward expansion in Asia. In fact, the first people to call themselves "Asian" were Roman colonists of the province known as "Asia," which included the provinces of Bursa, Bahikesar, Izmir, Usak, Denizh, Manisa, known to us now as Western Turkey.<sup>5</sup> The

4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 212.





Oriental Silk sticker. Image courtesy of Xiaowen Zhu, *Oriental Silk* 乡乡 (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020), 25.

earliest sources found in the history of Turkish clothing date back to the miniatures and wall pictures uncovered in Central Asia. Sources from the first century BC reveal that wool and cotton fabric was woven on handlooms, but with silk that came from China.<sup>6</sup> By tracing the development of sericulture through conflicts and trade routes to Central and West Asia, as well as South Asia, and later to Europe, this text reorients the views away from Eurocentrism through the understanding of Asia as one continent in its plurality. As we repeatedly refer to “Asia” that alters itself with every reference, the plurality of Asia is thus composed of various regions and people.

At the end of the second century BC, Zhang Qian<sup>7</sup> went

6. “Turkish Clothing,” Turkish Culture Foundation, accessed September 11, 2021, <http://www.turkishculture.org/fabrics-and-patterns/clothing-593.htm>.  
7. Zhang Qian was a Chinese official and diplomat who served as an imperial envoy to the world outside of China in the late second century BC, during the Han dynasty. He was one of the first

to the Western Regions and opened the business route from mainland China to Central Asia and West Asia through the Western Regions, thus laying the foundation of the Silk Road. Chinese silk and other commodities began to be exported to Parthia in large quantities. With Parthia as an intermediary, the silks were transported to Rome, where the Roman Empire had a huge demand for precious textiles. The establishment of the Roman Syrian province in 64 BC bordered the territory of Rome and Parthia. Until the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, they remained in the Mesopotamia area. The Silk Road trade also became an important factor in the political relationship between the Roman Empire and Parthia. In 571, in order to get rid of the monopoly of Chinese silk by the Parthians, the East Roman emperor

official diplomats to bring back valuable information about Central Asia, including the Greco-Bactrian remains of the Macedonian Empire as well as the Parthian Empire, to the Han dynasty imperial court, then ruled by Emperor Wu of Han.





Image courtesy of Xiaowen Zhu, from her film *Oriental Silk* (2015).

Justinian I united with the Turkic Khan and attacked Parthia. This silk war lasted for twenty years continuously without victory.

Between 553 and 554, Emperor Justinian I ordered Nestorian monks to smuggle silkworm eggs from Central Asia. Combining the existing knowledge of sericulture, silk-reeling, and Egyptian textile technology, the Byzantine Empire finally copied a batch of silk successfully. Byzantine silk has left a great influence in history; the consequence of this significant feat of copying is still felt everywhere in the world. The related court etiquette and church practices

were inherited by the Franks, since Byzantium developed court costumes, as well as civilian, military, and religious clothing styles.

In Western Europe, silk has been found in tombs, as it was used for bookbinding and the decoration of reliquary. Although there is very little information on the origin of these found silks, detailing within the textile can determine whether it is "made in Byzantium." Byzantium's silk industry held an extremely important position in the early Middle Ages, until the Italian silk industry emerged in the twelfth century. The empire was defeated and gradually

collapsed after the Fourth Crusade (1202–4). Around that time, the Song dynasty in China (960–1279) developed a market economy, which in turn made good-quality Chinese silk cheaper, and a large supply of silk was consequently exported to the West.

Lucca is a small city in central Italy and was once a famous silk-producing area. Since the thirteenth century, due to the levels of exploitation of the late Arab empire, imported Chinese silk became extremely expensive when it entered the territory of Europe. The high price provoked the Italians to try to imitate silk by themselves. The quality, however, was slightly inferior to its Chinese counterparts at the beginning, but the skyrocketing price of Chinese silk also gave Lucca's *shanzhai* goods room for development. Soon, cheaper silk produced in Lucca was embroidered with oriental dragons and the phoenix, lions, elephants, the lotus and other "oriental" patterns that eventually exceeded the popularity of Chinese products. In 1495,

King Charles VIII brought silkworm eggs from Persia to France and began to produce raw silk. Krefeld, a small city in Germany, is not only witness to the Sino-German maritime trade, but also home to a major silk textile industry that imported raw silk from China for processing.<sup>8</sup> Developing good relations with Chinese raw silk exporters, merchants from Krefeld became the first foreign merchants to settle in trade ports such as Shanghai and Guangzhou after the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was forced to open the doors.

As for India, the silk industry there can be traced back to the second century BC. Silk was exported from Xinjiang to India via the Silk Road in 40 BC. In the middle of the fourth century, the Persians began to master the technology of making silk, and Persian brocades began to be sold back to China. Due to the war in Persia, brocade of the Tang dynasty

8. Ma Xiu, "Why was China the only place that produced silk in ancient times?", accessed September 11, 2021, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/23221621>.





17th Century Silk and Velvet Textile, Iran, Unknown Artist.

(618–907) quickly replaced the brocade of Persian origin within a hundred years. Persian brocade withdrew from the mainstream cultural circle of silk, and Persia also gradually turned to the raw silk export industry. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that the silk industry in Iran regained the status of its heyday. However, after the change of the Iranian dynasty

in 1722, due to the destruction of tribal wars, the silk industry entered a period of rapid decline. In the early nineteenth century, with the restoration of stability in Iranian society and the stimulation of the export demand for raw silk from European countries and the United Kingdom, Iran's silk industry began to resume development. In 1865, the outbreak of sericulture corpuscles

almost destroyed the entire silk industry in Iran. Later, the Islamic Revolution caused Iran to withdraw from the center of the world's silk industry. After the 1970s, the sericulture industry in Iran resumed development with Gilan and Mazandaran at its center.

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At the time of writing this text, it has been twenty years since the events of September 11, 2001, and the contemporary reality is that "Asia" has become the main theater of the War on Terror. Simultaneously, the wars waged by the US on Palestine and Iraq are also located in the center of West Asia, now referred to as the Middle East. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were included in the "axis of evil" by the US, and the Philippines were disciplined with counter-terror exercises. Therefore, no single region of Asia can be considered exemplary of the continent.

The concept of "Asia" has undergone continuous invention in Asian subjectivity. For

literary critic and translator Takeuchi Yoshimi, Asia is a subject of resistance. In his 1960 lecture, "Asia as Method," Takeuchi mentioned an example of when statesman, physician, and political philosopher Sun Yat-sen met an Englishman on a boat to England: the man asked him, "Are you Japanese?" to which Sun answered, "No, but I am curious why you asked." The Englishman said that because the Japanese defeated the Russians, it proved that the yellow race could defeat the whites. In 1924, Sun put forward "Greater Asianism" in Kobe, to counter Japan's "Greater East Asianism."<sup>9</sup> Sun emphasized the existence of very diverse structures within Asia and the emergence of Russia after the October Revolution in 1917. Unwilling to follow the path of Western powers, Russia can also be regarded as an internal part of Asia, or an alliance of Asia. This is not only a response to

9. Wong Hui and Yang Beichen, "Asia' as the new world historical issue: Wong Hui discuss 'Asia as Method,'" *Dian Ying Yi Shu*, no. 387 (2019): 3–11.





Anna May Wong, in a "dragon dress," in "Limehouse Blues" (1934). Courtesy John Kobal Foundation / Getty.

Japan's ambitions, but also what "Greater Asianism" is trying to explore—neither an identical nor convergent Asia.

As mentioned, the concept of Asia or East Asia was a derivative of Europe's eastward trajectory and European "civilization." There is not only a hierarchy in European civilization, but also a process of racialization in the nineteenth century. The concept of civilization underwent a stage of racialization, carrying the

stigma of racism and nationalism. In this sense, the concept of the Orient is the same as nationalism, emphasizing identity politics or a single cultural identity. Sun clearly pointed out the non-identity within "Greater Asianism."

Is Xinjiang Central Asia or East Asia? Is Tibet considered South Asia or East Asia? Should Guangxi and Yunnan to be regarded as Southeast Asia or East Asia? Is China an East Asian country? Not at all. "Asia as Method" is not a static method to separate the West from Asia and China, as that would become Orientalism again. The method, indeed, is the process by which the subject is formed. "Asia as Method" shows the spirit of China's resistance to the oppressions of imperialism, colonialism, and unequal treaties. The political, economic, cultural processes that formed the Chinese subject are the means of understanding histories and ourselves. So that we don't return to the dualism of Asia and Europe, or the center and periphery, when questioning concepts such as East Asia.

With the growth of China's economy, we increasingly lack a sympathetic and nuanced understanding of the struggles, sacrifices, and histories of people in the regions of South Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia that have nurtured centuries of rich civilizations. Many people look at China and other countries from the periphery of the US empire. They can neither understand the great significance of the subjectivation process, nor can they understand its deep tragedy. The tragic events that are happening in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, amongst others.

Whether one is in the Global North or South, the search for an originary "Asia" for the sake of identity leads to nothing. It is characteristic of identity politics to emphasize one aspect of life and omit others, resulting in a seemingly "unique" and one-dimensional identity. Identity politics itself is a process of self-othering, and not a process of subjectivation. The becoming of the subject is always a process in relation to other subjects,

which is a political process. What we are doing here is not looking for an Asia before Euro-America. We are claiming the word "Asias," however unjustified historically.

In 1950, after the US crossed the 38th Parallel, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army entered the Korean War, a year after the People's Republic of China had been established. The Chinese soldiers had their names and hometowns written on multiple pieces of fabric sewn inside their military uniform. This way, even if the bodies disappeared during the bombing, the fabrics would prove that they were not captives, but martyrs.