

From the Editor's Desk, shown here in a candid photograph taken
17 January 2018

HAIL AND FAREWELL

Let me begin with the shorter and easier task, introducing the new editor of *The Silk Road*, before indulging in a somewhat discursive personal retrospective regarding the history of this publication and my involvement in it.

Beginning with the next volume for 2018 (its exact publication schedule to be determined), the editor of *The Silk Road* will be Justin Jacobs. Submissions and other correspondence regarding that volume and subsequent ones should be addressed to him, not to me. Any material still sent to me will be forwarded to him, he will set the guidelines for submissions, and determine what will be published. Another significant change connected with this transition is that **the journal will no longer be printed in hard copy after the current number.** It will continue to appear as an online, open access publication, but with a new Internet address. See the details below on p. x.

Justin M. Jacobs is Associate Professor of History at American University in what we in the Seattle area refer to (with some angst these days) as “the other Washington,” in the District of Columbia. Though he was trained primarily as a historian of modern China, his work on the political history of twentieth-century Xinjiang also led him into the study of foreign archaeological expeditions along the Silk Road during the late Qing and Republican eras. His first book, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (University of Washington, 2016), analyzed the political strategies adopted by successive Han governors of Xinjiang after the 1911 revolution to maintain Chinese control over this non-Han borderland. He is currently writing a second monograph, “The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures,” which examines Chinese and Uighur responses to foreign archaeologists and seeks to answer the question of why so many cultural artifacts ended up in Western museums. In preparation for this project, he has developed a multimedia scholarly outreach program, “Indiana Jones in History,” that includes college-level courses, regular public speaking engagements, a free twenty-one part documentary series (available on Youtube and IndianaJonesInHistory.com), and a companion book, *Indiana Jones in History: From Pompeii to the Moon* (Pulp Hero Press, 2017). He also hosts a podcast, “Beyond Huaxia” (available on iTunes), which he describes as “a college-level history of East Asia, minus debt, dorms, and diplomas.” It will draw on material from



several of his courses, with posts of new material once or twice a week over the upcoming year or so.

Of course, passing the torch is not necessarily a comfortable prospect, but I do so with the confidence that Justin brings to the task the qualities needed to take the journal well on in the 21st century. His introduction to the Silk Road and the history of the “Great Game” (of which the Western archaeological exploration of Inner Asia was part) came in some of my courses. In both our cases, broad teaching interests have served as a stimulus to our developing fascination with the history of the silk roads (among other things, he now teaches a course on the historiography of the Silk Road). I began at a further remove than he, and still contribute to the study of early modern Russian history. Justin is already way ahead of me in his mastery of the digital media of the new age, whose creative employment should help this publication to reach new audiences in the way that had been intended from the start. While I have brought to the task a good knowledge of Russian (of benefit to the many who cannot access the huge amount of important scholarship in that language), Justin brings to the journal something it has long needed, an editor who has a command of Chinese. If called on, I intend to continue to help with Russian translation. He combines excellent scholarship with an enthusiastic commitment to broad public education.

It will be up to him to establish where the journal will go in the years ahead. While not attempting to influence unduly what he will decide, I would like to review here where we have been — how this publication emerged, what its goals have been and should, I trust, continue to be, and what I would hope readers might agree we have managed to accomplish. To do this, I draw on an incomplete collection of old e-mails, which contain inspiration as well as some words of caution for others who are considering taking on the responsibilities of editing.

My involvement with the programs of the Silkroad Foundation began in 1998 by attending one of its first summer institutes in China, a program to study Buddhist art at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang. In keeping

with the Foundation's commitment to public education, the goal of such programs has been to provide an educational opportunity for students and faculty who wished either to deepen their knowledge in an already-familiar area or broaden it. For me, this was a plunge into a new world, since I had committed to teaching my first course on the Silk Road the following year, but with practically no prior knowledge of the East Asian end of it. A few years later, the Silkroad Foundation provided support for me to launch an ambitious "Silk Road Seattle" project, whose website (despite needing expansion and updating now) continues to offer a range of materials for those who are teaching or learning about the historical exchanges across the Old World.

In correspondence about that latter project, the head of the Silkroad Foundation, Adela Lee, mentioned to me an upcoming "newsletter". My fateful response, on 7 November 2002, was: "As I was looking back through old mail, it occurred to me that I don't think I have ever seen your newsletter. Any chance I can be put on the mailing list?" Little did I know this was the start of an involvement that, arguably, changed my life. As Adela then explained, the goal of this project was that she and the volunteers enlisted to work on Foundation programs would produce two or three times a year a print (and freely accessible on-line) publication where each issue would contain a few "feature articles by specialists," interviews or profiles, some book notices, and news of upcoming events. Volume 1, No. 1, of the newsletter (28 pp.) then appeared at the beginning of 2003, with some articles of real substance and broad interest as well as a recognition of the importance of the Internet—information about "Silk Road Seattle" was included as well as an announcement of an experimental on-line Silk Road course which I was to offer for the Foundation.

However, getting from issue No. 1 to No. 2 proved to be a challenge. In the middle of the preparation for the next one, the volunteer who had agreed to edit it departed. The summer 2003 issue was shelved; only some unedited pieces for a new volume were in hand. Adela and I had been exchanging messages about possible ways to get contributions from the lecturers in the public series she was funding and the desirability of commissioning translations of important primary sources (which might or might not go into the newsletter). In this connection on 15 April 2003 I sent what I thought was a realistic assessment:

Of course anything like this does take some editing, and can potentially involve problems if the submission needs a lot of editing (as can often be the case with academics' material). But there are ways to deal with that, since you have enough academics connected with your activities who

might be strong-armed into occasionally taking on editorial responsibilities.

By autumn, in a flurry of exchanges about the work of my student assistant on "Silk Road Seattle" (Lance Jenott, now a Princeton Ph.D., who teaches at Washington University in St. Louis), on 1 October Adela wrote:

btw do you know if Lance will be able to help out with the newsletter? If not, then we have to start looking for [some]one right away. We have articles piled up and the fall one needs to go out also ... let me know soon about the situation.

Lance was not available. I responded the following day about other options for hiring student help (Adela promising to cover the cost):

... I am quite sure I can find someone here to do the job ... Obviously this is going to be very much a part-time thing — a burst of work and then a hiatus until the material for the next issue comes along, but that might well attract the right kind of help with the right skills.

So I reached an agreement with one of our Regional Studies M.A. students who was involved with our own program newsletter and ostensibly had command of publishing software needed to match the formatting standards set in *The Silk Road* No. 1. Adela had already obtained several articles on Sogdiana, which now was to be the focus of No. 2, and was anxious to move ahead quickly. But on 14 October (this would be a constant refrain over the next years), I had to tell her "I am overwhelmed with work through Th. but then will turn to the newsletter editing." No. 2 did eventually appear at the end of the year. Since my assistant had finished her program and received a job offer, she left rather abruptly. And, as it turned out, she had found the publishing software challenging. So I had to do a crash job of learning how to format the final digital copy to send to the printer in California.

Already the commitment of minimal time was expanding, as was the size of the publication, issue No. 2 occupying 56 pages (of work by a star-studded group of authors, among them Boris Marshak, Frantz Grenet and Étienne de la Vaissière). In fact Adela had to caution me (letter of 31 January 2004):

I am thinking that we should try to keep the newsletter shorter ... than our second one. Somewhere like 35-40 pages is good, anything longer than that is bit too much.

I must have promptly forgotten that admonition: over the years (with her tacit acquiescence) I would deliberately expand the publication to a 200+ page annual (in part naively thinking that a single issue a year would be less time-consuming to produce than two). The thematic scope of the enterprise also was expand-

ing, as No. 2 included articles on ethnography. Later, since in fact in the early going we had not done much with reviews, we began to include a lot about new publications. In our correspondence, Adela and I agreed that we should try to encourage junior scholars to publish with us and that we would like to broaden the range of contributors to include those from, e.g., Central Asia and Iran.

If there was such a thing as a vacuum in my schedule, the editing was surely going to find ways to fill it, with the end result that the “newsletter” became an annual book of some substance, whose production would occupy some months each year. I could expect little, if any, meaningful institutional support from a university that had more than once refused resources to host a leading academic journal on campus. With no help to be had, it became a one-person operation. Naively optimistic, I reported to Adela on 11 February:

My dept. has already come through with the Pagemaker software and the software that will let me move text in and out of pdf files. I have not tried the stuff out yet and probably won't immediately, but I should now be equipped to do all the editing of the next issue here on my machine. I am pretty sure I can master the stuff so that I will not need assistance and can do it all pretty efficiently once I get to the task. So there should not be a repeat of the expensive inefficiencies we experienced with no. 2.

Understandably, after the good start, Adela was impatient for results and the next issue, for which we were hoping to include some of the material that had been collected the previous year but never published. When she asked whether I had reviewed it, I had to respond on March 10 and 11:

I haven't had time. I will be pretty well tied up with my paper grading through til nearly the end of next week. Then we have a week before start of spring quarter. I assume I will really start getting up to speed on the next newsletter then. At the minute I am pretty brain dead.... There is still plenty of time to get this number out before the end of spring.

Adela's immediate response was to drive away the clouds of despair looming on my horizon. On 11 March, she wrote, “My grapevines told me that at lecture event in Berkeley last Monday, all they talked about was our newsletter. You should be very proud!” And she appended a note from a distinguished scholar at Berkeley (who would himself contribute to the next issue) in which he wrote: “By the way I hugely enjoyed the last number of the Newsletter. It was stellar from start to finish!” Of course good reviews were unlikely to diminish the scope of responsibilities and

in fact might have the opposite effect if one wanted not to disappoint.

So much for the “roots” of an undertaking that now is celebrating a decade and a half since its initial number appeared. This is a good time to take stock of what we have aimed to accomplish, how we have gone about it, and what some of the challenges are which remain.

We must begin with the fundamental question regarding the purpose of the publication. In keeping with the mission of the Silkroad Foundation, the imagined audience is still a general one of those who might be stimulated to learn about the “Silk Road”. Of course what exactly “Silk Road” may mean is part of the challenge, since our concept of it has tended to be much broader than much of the traditional writing about the subject would suggest. The journal has never been intended to replicate narrowly specialized academic periodicals, even if one goal has always been to have among the contributors established scholars and to encourage up-and-coming ones. So there always has been room here for a mix of contributions, some of which may indeed be rather detailed academic pieces, but all of which ideally would be accessible to even non-specialists. If possible, features aimed at highlighting resources that could be used in teaching and learning are part of the mix. The process of informing even the academics in our audience should involve where possible bringing to their attention work that they may not otherwise know (or may have been published in languages they do not read).

From the outset, there has been no formal process of peer review, such as one expects in the standard academic journals. We still solicit articles (a task which largely has devolved on me over the years), though we also receive (but have not been overwhelmed by) unsolicited submissions. Decisions on what to publish (as with any journal) ultimately rest with the editor, who in this case, for better or worse, has acted as the peer reviewer. I often see what I think is gold in material that could never find its way into a standard academic publication. But the perils of rarely seeking outside opinions may mean things slip through without acknowledgement that a subject has been thoroughly treated elsewhere. The lack of formal peer review does have the unfortunate consequence that junior scholars hoping to advance in their profession may avoid us, since their promotion will depend in the first instance on peer reviewed publication, however excellent (and widely cited) a piece might be which we would publish. Yet in some cases where there is a premium for academics in other countries to publish in a respected journal in English, we have been able to provide just such an opportunity. Many of the senior scholars we have solicited for contributions have politely refused to write for us, since they are already over-committed

to other publication projects. What I say here about the burdens of editing will hardly be news to them.

I am not persuaded that writing for a general audience comes naturally to most scholars, given the demands that producing first-rate original research places on them, and given the way in which academic culture determines career success. On the other side of the coin though, individuals who have not been subjected to the rigorous expectations of what the “academy” expects may fail to appreciate how even general writing should be well informed and balanced. The task then for the editor in this situation is to try to provide, as it were, a bridge between the two worlds. In practice this has often meant substantial intervention to help shape what ultimately appears in the journal, ensuring that there be proper introductions, transitions, conclusions, accurate references for those who might wish to pursue a subject further, and, of course, abundant illustrations to heighten the interest beyond words on the page. I am fortunate to have an extensive personal photo archive on which to draw to supplement illustrations the authors supply. Frequently I have created at least sketchy maps so readers will be able to place the focus of an article in a meaningful geographic context. I enjoy designing the cover.

The challenges in all this are compounded when there is a conscious effort to include work by authors from around the world who do not have native English. With the exception of Russian, which I am able and willing to translate, I have had to insist that submissions be in English. The advice here has always been—don’t worry if it is not perfect, as the editor is here to help. If we want your contribution, we will be happy to help polish it (a process which can take days of effort). The effort has been worth it. One of the most significant accomplishments over the decade and a half of my association with *The Silk Road* has been the broadening of our list of contributors both in terms of their personal and professional profiles and in the number of countries they represent. This is, in a sense, a two-way street, making available to Anglophone audiences work they might otherwise never see, at the same time that the editorial interventions and the potential for feedback from readers has to have some impact on the way contributors think about their work, the questions they address, and so on. Often the process has made it possible to acquaint authors with scholarship to which they had previously not had access. Granted, in our day one might argue this is a normal kind of interaction encouraged by many academic publications, international conferences and the like, but some of those we should hope we reach move outside of such networking.

A colleague of mine recently told me that one or another on-line publication platform can tell us not only

how many people may have accessed a digitized article but even how much of it they have read, whether they copied all or parts of it and so on. I’m afraid I have no such hard data to share, but let me at least give a sense of how we have tried to ensure our journal reach its audience and the degree to which we have been successful.

Very early in the going, we began to receive queries about subscriptions but had no mechanism in place (more importantly, no staff) to handle them. Initially, print copies were given out at events sponsored by the Foundation, and a modest number of mailings were sent to a few prominent academic programs. Over time the mailing list (all copies sent at no cost to the recipients) has grown to include a few dozen major libraries and museums around the world. Also a fair number of individuals have received the print copy—former author/contributors, participants from other Silkroad Foundation programs, and potential contributors whom we have been trying to cultivate (but who, alas, have not always taken the bait). Often one of my main tasks when going to conferences has been to fill my luggage with back issues of the journal to distribute with encouraging notes to potential authors.

The soaring cost of postage is one of the reasons this volume you are reading is the last one we will print on paper. One of the initial mailing bills for the newsletter was only slightly over \$100. Now with inflation in the size of the list, the weight of each volume, and the prices, postage alone for the most recent number exceeded \$3000, much of that because there is no reduced “media” rate for our now numerous international mailings. From the start, I have stuffed the envelopes, filled out the customs forms, taken the packets to the post office, with the exception of one year when I was away and persuaded a colleague to do the work in my absence.

Of course the digital revolution has finally reached the point where print copy (however much many of us like to have a physical book in our hands...) is neither necessary any longer, nor, as is increasingly true of libraries, desirable because of the storage and other costs. If something can be had in digital form these days, many libraries simply will refuse to consider a hard-copy alternative. This, not to mention the fact that, as with postage, printing costs have gone up, one reason of course being my purposeful increasing of the size of the journal and, in the recent numbers, the addition of color inserts. Ideally, we would have had color throughout, but that can be found only in the on-line version, as to print everything in color would be prohibitively expensive. I have often dreamed how nice it would have been to emulate *Saudi Aramco World* or *National Geographic*...

Certainly the journal is reaching many in the academic world, if citations in other publications and reports from Academia.edu are any indication. Even in places where local libraries may be very limited, anyone with an internet connection can find us. We have had the satisfaction of seeing a good many of our articles translated or summarized in Chinese. I am convinced that open access publishing such as we do is essential for all work academics produce, if there is to be any hope of reaching all those who might wish to read it. And we should hope that our audience is more than a handful of other specialists. But the economics of publishing “obscure” research certainly still impede progress in this direction. In the early going, developing an on-line presence for our journal did not always proceed smoothly (I was never responsible for learning how to do the basic web design), but once the framework was in place, my obligation expanded to posting the files for each new volume as it appears. I still agonize when a missing slash or un-closed angled bracket is the cause for a garbled result on the screen with the index pages.

Keeping up with technological change is a challenge for us who are well into their seventh decade and one of the main reasons I am delighted that Justin is taking over. While aware of the importance of digital communication, I am still very much anchored in the world of print books, a creature of the 20th (or is it 19th or 18th?) century, if you wish. Of course without the advances in technology, we could not have accomplished what we have. The editor can communicate with authors almost instantly and even with a frequency that may annoy both parties. After some mistakes by my making editorial interventions authors had not approved, I learned that two or three stages of proofing, communicated by e-mail, are essential. Not being a very good proof-reader myself after living too long with a piece, that has the advantage of shifting some of the responsibility for the final result to the authors themselves. Of course I still am mortified when I discover a dangling participle, split infinitive or typo that somehow escaped detection.

I learned early on that Pagemaker could not handle unusual fonts or characters (hence the first forays into including Chinese ideograms required I create small jpegs and carefully paste them into the formatted text...). And there also was a problem in the compatibility of my software with what the print shop was using, leading to a few instances of garbled rendering of special characters. At Susan Whitfield’s suggestion, I switched to InDesign, which now has a very extensive font selection and can handle almost any alphabet. Undoubtedly, for those who know the program better, there are ways to automate processes that I still tend to do “manually”. I tend to stick with what I

know works. Once I prepare the formatted file of the finished journal, the printer in California receives it in Dropbox. One of the most satisfying parts of the operation is the confidence I have that he and I are on the same wavelength about quality control. (For those who wonder, I can wholeheartedly recommend E. & T. Printing in San Jose, California.)

The on-line presence undoubtedly has had a great deal to do with the fact that many of our articles are now finding their way into course syllabi in universities and probably has contributed to my receiving more requests even from Middle School students to help them with their classroom assignments – a mixed blessing, as you might imagine. If there is one area where I would wish we could be doing more with the journal, it is in its “general education” function as a resource for materials that can be used in (or out of) the classroom. This is one reason for the exponential growth of my contributions to content, which tend now to occupy an unseemly amount of space in any issue. I write reviews if I am unable to solicit them (an area in which we have, however, had some success). The choice of what to review, however brief the comments, is somewhat unsystematic – but generally what I acquire and write about is on my shelf because it appeals to my rather general interests, ones that I hope a good many readers might share. Presumably in the new world of social media, including such reviews in blogs rather than waiting for the next issue of a journal is going to be the way to go. Maybe I am a blogger at heart, but trying to do it within the confines of an old media approach. I am an enthusiast for the study of history through objects, which means in the first instance through museum collections. Hence the number of “museum collection” reviews, many more of which are needed as museums on the whole are forging ahead so rapidly in making their collections available on-line. Articles specifically on pedagogy would not be out of place. I have tried more than once to solicit them, with no success, but, of course, there are other well-established outlets for them in publications such as *Education about Asia*.

During the two-plus decades I have been involved with various Silk Road projects, at least two important annual journals pertaining to our “field” proved unable to continue. While I don’t know all the details, clearly part of the explanation must lie in the inability of overburdened editors to meet demands of time and energy inherent in a regular publishing schedule. The technical demands of polishing certain kinds of research can be daunting. While there are many periodical publications which have the resources to ensure that good work appears without significant delay, other important work languishes for years before it sees the light of day. I think it is safe to boast that

the cramped and cluttered home office where *The Silk Road* originates has done rather well in getting things out without undue delay, sometimes even within short weeks of receiving them. The current volume is more than a month behind my self-imposed deadline, but in the world of academic publishing that is but a miniscule delay.

What we have accomplished to date with the journal should provide Justin with a foundation so that he will not need to build by starting with the basement and, in the absence of a blueprint, proceed somewhat by trial and error. That is, he should not have to repeat the process by which *The Silk Road* has evolved from a small but visionary newsletter, whose continuation and survival after the first number was somewhat in doubt, to the substantial annual of today.

If the journal is to thrive under its new editor though, it is essential that he receive many and good submissions and that those of you whom he approaches for an article or other kinds of help respond positively. Your contributions are important for a readership that, I think, is eager to explore new ideas and broaden its horizons. Given the many troublesome currents swirling in our world today, we have an obligation to share as widely as possible what we know that is based on sound analytical thinking. Lest you wonder, my editing has, incidentally, been *pro bono* work, for no financial compensation, since that way the resources of the Silkroad Foundaton could be devoted instead to developing the journal itself and to supporting the Foundation's other valuable educational projects.

But I have tired of the responsibility, have many other ways to contribute both in academic writing and in internet educational projects, and my family would like more of my time. Occasionally I write to colleagues how I have "lost the will to edit," and in-

creasingly find excuses to procrastinate. Gone are the days when I might find myself on occasion writing Adela soon after arriving in my office before 6 AM so as to get journal business out the way and still have time to prepare for an early lecture, or, heaven forbid, a faculty meeting in mid-afternoon. By retiring from regular teaching and departmental obligations in 2006, I freed up more time (guess what began to fill it...). "Retirement" certainly has not spared me from tossing sleeplessly in the wee hours worrying whether I will manage even to skim the many new books on my shelf which deserve at least a short review notice in the upcoming volume. In fact, the piles in the background beyond my desk include a great many which have yet to receive the attention they merit. Now is truly the moment for me to move on, for the sake of the journal if it is to flourish, and for the sake of those wanting my undivided attention.

That said, these have been some of the most rewarding years of my life thanks to my authors, who have broadened my own horizons, thanks to the opportunities which have been created for interacting meaningfully with many scholars around the world, and thanks to the stimulus of realizing that if I were to do the job well, I also needed to explore the silk routes at first hand in the perhaps vain hope I might somehow master at least a small part of the subject. Some of these processes, I trust, will continue, but perhaps at a more stately pace.

Will I miss all the rest? Certainly, but to quote the familiar verses by American poet Robert Frost: "I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

—DW

Shoreline, Washington, USA
31 January 2018