

## Sino-Hellenic cultural influences from the Alexandrian Era in Asia

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The exodus of Greeks to the Far Orient may have started during the expansionary campaign of Alexander the Great during the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Long before the publication of the first books in geography, travellers and fortune seekers narrated exotic and nebulous stories about the people in the Far East, concentrating mainly on *Cathay* or China. *Zipangu* or Japan was kept secluded in her isolation from any Greek eye as well as from the pragmatic realm of geographic reality. The first modern Greek map of the world showing Japan as *Νήσοι της Ιαπωνίας* (The Islands of Japan) was drawn by the clergyman Chrysanthos Notaras whilst he was a student at Padua University (1706). Archbishop of Athens Meletios also mentioned in his geography book in 1728, while he was fugitive from the Turks in Nafpactos, the Far Orient as the “earthly paradise”.

The geographical boundaries of China and the lands and the peoples in the far orient were mentioned by ancient Greek geographers and ethnographers as late as Claudius Ptolemy (fl. 127-148 A.D.), whilst according to the anonymous author of the *Ο Περίπλους της Ερυθράς Θαλάσσης* (*Navigation of the Red Sea*) composed between 95 and 130 A.D, Greek merchants travelling from the sea port of Myos Hormos in the Red Sea to the coastal cities of India and Taprobane (Sri Lanka) were buying and selling valuable goods of India and China, including Chinese yarn, silk and skins. The author of the ‘Navigation’ seems to have some vague knowledge of the far distant and unknown China: “*Beyond this country, now under the very north, the sea outside coming to an end somewhere, there lies a very great inland city called Thina, from which raw silk and silk yarn and Chinese cloth are brought overland to Barugaza through the Bactrians and again to Limurike by way of the river Ganges. This Thina has not easy reach. People seldom come from it, and not many go there...*”

More than four hundred years after the appearance of the *Periplus*, an aspiring merchant from Alexandria, Kosmas Indikopleustes in his *Topographia Christiana* depicts the existence of the great silk road from China, by land, across the Asiatic steppe to the borders of Iran and of the sea route from Tzinista (China) to India and Taprobane, comparing the distances and advantages and disadvantages of the land and maritime routes of the trade in Chinese silks, whilst in his map the “earthly paradise” was shown in the Far East, beyond the Ocean.

Available written sources attest (*see below*) that the Graeco-Roman world's familiarity with the Far Orient began to develop by the time of the Hellenistic era, ascertaining that China and the Far East were known but vaguely; the armies of Alexander the Great had reached the mouth of Indus river in 327 BC, whilst one of his historians, Onesicritus (369-290 B.C.), covering his eastern conquest, had sailed as far as Sri Lanka. However, it is legitimate to argue that Alexander the Great knew nothing of the extension of Asia in the Indian promontory and he had not the least suspicion of the vastness of China or the existence of Siberia. He was certain that Ganges River bounded the earth on the East. On the other hand, a selective examination of the *Topographia Christiana* clearly portrays the extend of the relations of Byzantium with the regions of far off China and Central Asia on the eve of the Arab conquests during the seventh century A.D. These relations demonstrate that Byzantium had political and economic interests in those lands and people (*see below*). It was also during the Graeco-Roman empire of Byzantium (332-1453 AD), when a Greek adventurer named Alexander the Merchant reached the island of Sumatra and settled for five years in Suvarnapura (Palembang) before returning to Constantinople (c. 1060s).

According to the Oxford scholar, Homer Hasenflug Dubs, Professor of Chinese history, approximately 10,000 Romans, fighting in the army of Marcus Licinius Crassus, who were taken prisoners by the Parthians after the battle of Carrhae in South-eastern Asia Minor in 53 BC, made their way to the East in today's Uzbekistan and later on were enlisted with the Hun chieftain Jzh against the Chinese Han Dynasty (206 BC –AD 220). Having been defeated again by the Chinese, a number of these Romans had settled in North-western China, and was allowed to build a town called Liqian (Li-chien) [the Chinese translation of "Alexandria"] in modern Yongchang county, Gansu province. Other credible writings by British, American, Chinese and Australian scholars, inconclusively reached claims and speculations that a number of Greeks enlisted in the Roman armies were among those Romans prisoners of Liqian. Dubs derived his speculative theory from Ancient Chinese Han Dynasty annals, describing the Han Empire. Thirty years later, David Harris, an Australian author and adventurer came to Gansu in search of the Liqian ambiguity and wrote in his book in 1991 about "*a city built by Romans in China 1,300 years before Marco Polo entered Cathay*". Chinese history scholar Guan Yiquan from the Northwest University of Nationalities in Lanzou began writing in the early 1990s his own research about the "Roman city"; however he died in 1998, leaving behind a draft of 450,000 Chinese characters. Contemporary Chinese authors criticised the theories of Dubs *et. al.* as "*interesting and provocative*" and inconclusive. In addition, to add to the obscurity, the wider area of Yongchang country, a trade hub along the ancient Silk Road, where people of various ethnicities, including Greeks from the Greek Empire (Byzantium) were to be found, was used.

Other sources refer to the first Sino-Hellenic encounter during the reign of the great Chinese Emperor Wu (141-87 BC) who belonged to the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD). In c. 130 BC, the empire was suffering

constant invasions on its western provinces by barbarian tribes provoking enormous unrest and catastrophes. Emperor Wu, in an effort to appease the situation, appointed a gallant warrior, Zhang Qian [Chang Ch'ien], with an objective to find allies across the western borders of the Empire and to organize a strong defence line against the invading nomads Scythians and Mongols, the Huns. Zhang Qian arrived with the Chinese army south of the river Oxus, in the province of Bactria, where he was met by the leaders of a tribe called Chang or Kushan. These people were also fugitives of the invading Mongol nomad forces and having been driven from their own lands, deposed the Greeks and their leaders from the Greek kingdom of Bactria to the southern regions.

The Greek kingdoms of Bactria in the north and the Indo-Greek dynasties in the south were formed in 311 BC following Alexander the Great's overthrow of the Persian Empire. These two Greek kingdoms were overwhelmed by the invading nomads from central Asia in c. 130 BC. Consequently, Chang Ch'ien missed by a few only years the Bactrian Greek leaders; however, it is reasonable to assume that he and his soldiers made their first contact with the Greeks of Bactria, the remnants of the army of Alexander the Great and naturally the most abiding achievement of Greek rule in Asia, the Buddhist monumental Graeco-Bactrian art. It is also reasonable to believe that Chang Ch'ien also sighted some of the most splendid of Greek coins bearing King Demetrios and King Menander [Menandros] (175-135?), displaying them with their Macedonian head-band as Saviours. It is also feasible to propose that during the 200 years of Hellenistic domination in the region with the reign of 40 Greek kings, the Greek presence was apparent in the wider western borders of China. Greek Bactria was overthrown by the invading central Asian nomads, yet the Greek presence south of the Hindu Kush maintained its vigour, with the reinforcement by refugees from Bactria until the closing years of 130 BC.

The father of the Chinese historiography, Sima Qian (c. 145-86 BC) in his work entitled *Records of the Grand Historian*, covering more than 2000 years of Chinese history records the trade between China and the Indo-Greek kingdoms. He refers to Zhang Qian's visit in the Graeco-Indian kingdoms and suggests that intense trade with Southern China was going through northern India. Zhang Qian explains that he found Chinese products in the Bactrian Hellenic markets, and that they were transiting through north-western India, which he incidentally describes as a civilization similar to that of Bactria: "*When I was in Bactria,*" Zhang Qian reported, "*I saw bamboo canes from Qiong and cloth (silk?) made in the province of Shu. When I asked the people how they had gotten such articles, they replied: "Our merchants go buy them in the markets of Shendu (north-western India). Shendu, they told me, lies several thousand li southeast of Bactria. The people cultivate land, and live much like the people of Bactria"*.

According to well-documented sources King Menandros about 138 BC marched far down the Ganges. According to well-known British historian, A. R. Burn, Menandros figures in a Buddhist classic, *The Questions of King Milinda*; Milinda, king of the 'fierce Ionians', in his town planned and well-watered capital in the Punjab, held dialogues with the sage Nagasena, ending in his conversion to Buddhism. "*This is the context of the rise of the first Buddhist monumental sculpture, in the province of Gandhara. Hitherto Buddhists, like the earli-*

*est Christians, had not portrayed their master. The motifs are Indian, both free-standing statues and reliefs with, for instance, the birth stories of the Buddha; the technique is Greek. From it descended all Buddhist monumental art, though it swiftly assumes its own character both in southern Asia and in China...*” Nonetheless, broadly speaking Greek influence on Buddhist sculpture remained apparent in the two main schools of arts in India, namely the Gandhara school, where the art is clearly Hellenistic and that of Mathura, close to Delhi, where the Hellenistic impact and stimulus are perceptible. Subsequently, when Buddhism reached China from India during the T'Ang Dynasty (618-906 AD), together with it came also the Hellenistic influences in the Chinese sculpture. These artistic influences were clearer in the religious manifestations of the art, rather than its secular aspects. The Chinese adopted many aspects of the Hellenistic artistic style via the Indian Buddhist monumental art but a few only aspects of the Hellenistic spiritualism. After all, the Greek sculptures always promoted in their statutes the individuality and thus their gods were always anthropomorphic. In China, the dimension of the divine remained always geometric and thus never anthropomorphic.

Finally, it is also logical to assume that Bactrian Greeks used to have some sort of commercial communication with the Chinese as many silk garments imported from the Chinese province of Sichuan were found in the four cities in the region bearing the name of Alexandria. Hence, it was only reasonable for Zhang Qian to report to Emperor Wu, that he found “also a kind of tribe there different from the other indigenous population”. Almost eighty years later under the reign of the Chinese Emperor Han Yua Ti (43-33 BC), Chinese embassies were sent to the South Western borders of the Empire and met there the last Greek King, Ermaios. The latter had unsuccessfully requested a few years earlier the military support of the Chinese Empire against the invading tribes of the Kushans, who having conquered the Greek Bactrian region in the north, were now attacking the last Greek remnants in the south. By this time Indian Hellenism was already “much diluted”, before the invading nomads penetrated the region establishing their Kushan Empire. These events were indecisively described by certain sources utilizing rather tentative evidence:

*“..The Chinese embassies met Ermaios, the last Greek king in the region. However, this finding remains rather uncertain. In the Chinese chronicles is witnessed that their envoys met a king in the region, Yu Mo Fu. The leading historian of the region, Tarn, believes that Yu Mo Fu is the transliteration of the word ‘Ermaios’. His opinion is fully justifiable, if we consider that the Chinese script could not adequately transfer the foreign sounds and from my own experience in China, I could also conclude that the word Yu Mo Fu could realistically be the word ‘Ermaios’...*

*A few years earlier King Ermaios, enduring the invasion of the Kushans, a barbarian tribe, sought the military support of the Chinese by sending his envoys to Emperor Cheng Ti (32-7 BC). The latter decided not to interfere and a few years later the last remaining bastion of Hellenism in central Asia fell to the*

*Kushans. It is interesting to note that historian Strabon also refers to the region and mentions the progressive descent of the barbarian nomads from the north, who finally reduced the Greek presence and eradicated the Greek authority from the region. A lot were also witnessed in the Chronicles maintained by the Chinese Emperors in which for more that 2,000 years professional historiographers were composing with accuracy the historical events of their nation.*

*British historian C.P. Fitzgerald, describing the last days of the Greek dominance in the Orient, comments “what a pity that these relations between the Chinese and the Greeks did not take place one century earlier?” If the Chinese contact with the robust Greek kingdoms of the East was to take place 100 years earlier, then the end result could be very profitable for both nations....”*

Almost two-hundred years after the envoy mission of 128 BC to the western border of the Empire by warlord Chang Ch'ien, in AD 97, the then Emperor of China, Pan Chang, prepared an investigative expedition to the Satum region in the Caspian Sea with an army of 70,000, under the leadership of Kan Ying. The mission was to monitor and identify the state and the nature of the western world and more specifically of the Roman Empire, the Ta Tsin. However, although this expedition was never materialized, it was well perceived within the imperial circles that the Ta Tsin Empire was heavily influenced by the Greek language and civilization. According to Velissaropoulos (1977:4) and the *Chinese Chronicles*, the first Christians to arrive in China were the Nestorians during the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, when almost “2000 Nestorian churches were established” and were compelled to close by the Emperor in 845 AD. Also consistent with the archives of the Chinese T' Ang Dynasty (618-906) is the fact that during the period 643-716 AD at least four envoy missions were organized by the Byzantines to China. The Byzantine embassies were sent to China seeking unsuccessfully their military support against the invading Arab tribes. Even though it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese used the term Butzan and Fulin to denote the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium, according to the *Chinese Chronicles* of the T' Ang Dynasty, there was never any record of any Chinese embassy reaching Constantinople. Yet, the Chinese Archives incorporate the following description of the Byzantine Empire and its capital Constantinople. The description, as exotic and oriental as it may appear, is most significant:

*“...Fulin or Butzan or Byzantium is the ancient Ta Tsin [Roman Empire] which is bordering with Persia and the Western Turks. The country has a large population and there are many cities. The Walls of the City are covered from dressed stone and the city is dwelled by more of 100,000 families. There is a gate with a height of 200 feet, which is fully covered by bronze. In the imperial palace there is a statue from gold of a man, which notices the passing hours with the sound of the bells. The building is decorated with glasses and porcelain, gold, ivory and very rare timber. The roofs are made of cement and are levelled. During the heat of the summer, there are machines that are being moved with water pressure and are*

*used for air conditioning. The machines carry the water high and then it falls as a rain on the windows cooling the air.*

*The King is assisted by 12 ministers. When he leaves the palace, he is accompanied by a man, who carries a sack, where every citizen is free to throw in his request. Men have short hair and wear embroidered cloths. Their right hand remains naked. Women wear their hair in the shape of a crown. The people of Fulin appreciate wealth. They love the wine and the sweets. Every seventh day they have a brake.*

*The country produces corals, lime and many other strange things. They have very skilful magicians, who spit fire from their mouths; they extract water from their hands and toss pearls from their feet. They also have very talented medical practitioners, who could cure a number of illnesses taking warms out from the heads of their patients...”.*

The aforementioned scanty contacts and transactions recorded mainly by Chinese and Indian historians, despite their excitement, remain largely rather speculative and coincidental. According to well documented sources the Chinese discovered the Greeks as early as 1606, when a renowned science scholar and high-ranking imperial mandarin, Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), “a native of present day Shanghai, began to study Euclid’s *Elements* [Στοιχεία] in Latin with the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci.” Xu was introduced to the Western science earlier via his contact with the Christian missionaries and was baptized in 1603. His fascination with the Greek mathematics, physics, logic in geometry and rational thinking overwhelmed him. Immediately he embarked on a campaign to enhance the study of Euclid’s writings in China, convincing Matteo Ricci to translate together the *Elements* into Chinese. By 1607, they managed to publish the first six books of the *Elements*, which became instrumental for the study of western mathematics in the subsequent centuries, and they still remain in use today. Almost four hundred years later (1903), Lu Xun, arguably the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese writer published a story entitled *The Spartan Spirit* making reference to the Battle of Thermopylae. Lu Xun and other Chinese were studying then in Japan (a few only months prior to the Russo-Japanese War), when the Russians threatened to annex the northeastern provinces of China.