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Marta Żuchowska (Warszawa, Poland)

"ROMAN TEXTILES" IN THE *HOU HAN SHU*. A 5TH CENTURY CHINESE VISION *VERSUS* ROMAN REALITY[1]

Key words: Silk Road, long distance trade, ancient textiles, *Hou Han shu*, Sino-Western relations, Da Qin

Introduction

The *Hou Han shu* (後漢書*Book of Later Han*) – the official chronicle of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD) – was compiled by Fan Ye (范曄 398–446 AD), a historian born into an upper class family. Adopted by his uncle, Fan Hongzhi (范弘之), a scholar at the Imperial Academy during the Jin Dynasty (晉朝 265–420), Fan Ye received an extensive education in the classics and historiography. In 432 AD he was appointed to a high official position in the Imperial Secretariat of the court of the Liu Song (劉宋朝 420–479) Dynasty, but in the same year was exiled to the area of present Anhui (安徽) province, because of an incident involving excessive drinking. He used his time in exile to write his great work, the *Hou Han shu.* A few years later he returned to the capital and gradually regained another high position, but was involved in a plot and was executed in 446 AD.[2]

Since the *Hou Han shu* was written as a private enterprise, Fan Ye had no access to official documents. Instead he relied primarily on earlier histories, many of them also titled *Hou Han shu*, but of which none has survived. He also used a text compiled by the late Han historians titled *Dongguan Han ji* (東觀漢記) – a kind

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[2] Nienhauser 1998, 38–39.

of chronological history of the Later Han. Although he died before he could finish his work, it is well written and was subsequently recognized as an official history of the Eastern Han dynasty.[3]

The *Account of Western Regions* (*Xiyu zhuan* 西域傳) in the *Hou Han shu* is one of the sources most frequently cited in the context of trade between East and West. It contains short descriptions of numerous political entities in Central Asia, Parthian Iran (called Anxi – 安西) and a mysterious country of the Far West called Da Qin (大秦), probably the Roman Empire. The account on Da Qin has been translated and discussed by many scholars since the end of the 19th century.[4] Although a great deal of work has already been undertaken regarding the identification of geographical names and analyzing the information presented in the Chinese text, there are still multiple issues, which need more attention and further research.

In the description of Da Qin, there is a list of items that the country produced, including textiles. Although the names of textiles that Da Qin manufactured have been translated,[5] there is as of yet no study that focuses specifically on the textiles themselves. In comparison to other goods, the group of fabrics listed in this account is relatively extensive and detailed – it does not only specify the material used in their manufacture, but also the type of decoration or weave. As a result, we may take this account as a good example of what was known about western goods or at least what was recognized as worthy of note by the author of the chronicle.

There are three main objectives of this article. First and foremost, there is the identification of the terms describing the textiles themselves, based on contemporaneous terminology and the level of weaving that was employed in China at this time, including how some of them developed over time and thus evolved into a different type of weave. The high level of weaving in Han China as an art form necessitated a precise vocabulary. Unfortunately, the majority of these terms were used for different types of silk fabrics, while the language used for other types of cloth are generally unclear. Even when we understand the type of material that is discussed or the kind of weave that is described, we still need to clarify its linguistic and historical context.

The second aim of this paper is to understand the level of knowledge about Roman textile production which was accumulated in the Eastern Han dynasty and, therefore, accessible to an educated Chinese reading the *Hou Han shu* in the fifth century AD. In this regard, it will be necessary to analyse the different types

[3] Nienhauser 1998: 40–41.

[4] Chavannes 1907, Pelliot 1959, 1963, 1973, Hirth 1885, Leslie and Gardiner 1996, Hill 2003, Graff 1996, Yu 2013.

[5] Hirth 1885, Chavannes 1907, Leslie and Gardiner 1996, Hill 2003, Yu 2013.

of fabrics mentioned in the text in order to ascertain whether they were actually produced in the Roman Empire or in regions to the east of it as well as whether the technique of their production was known and used in China.

Finally, it will be necessary to undertake a source analysis of the *Account of Da Qin* in order to separate the Chinese perception of the land called Da Qin from the reality that it attempts to describe about the Roman Empire.

The *Hou Han shu* account of textiles produced in Da Qin

人俗力田作多種樹蠶桑

According to custom, people work in the fields, many plant trees and breed mulberry silkworms.

Although the use of silk was widespread in the Roman Empire, silk fabrics and yarn were imported, while mulberry silkworms were unknown in the West until Late Antiquity. According to Procopius of Caesarea, domesticated silkworms of the *Bombyx mori* L. species were introduced to Byzantium during the reign of Justinian by two monks who smuggled the moth eggs from the East (*De Bello Gothico* 4.17). Although this account is questionable, as it presents what must have been a very complex process as merely a simple event, most scholars agree that sericulture started to develop in Byzantium about the 6th c. AD.[6] Breeding silkworms on mulberry leaves was definitely not a Roman custom neither during the Han period, nor when the *Hou Han shu* was compiled in the middle of the 5th c. AD.

Rather the passage needs to be placed within the context of how the Chinese understood the world outside of China. The reason that Chinese scholars called this distant empire after the first imperial dynasty of China, Great Qin, was to create an idealized reflection of China itself. In so doing, they created an empire in terms that they understood, having a government and customs that mirrored China. It was inconceivable that an empire could exist otherwise. Breeding silkworms and weaving silk was so deeply ingrained in Chinese civilisation that it was inseparable from civilisation itself. That foreign merchants brought information about the production of silk in the west served only to reinforce this worldview.

刺金縷繡，織成金縷罽、雜色綾。

They use gold thread for embroidery, weave woollen textiles with gold thread, and multi-coloured delicate silk fabrics.

[6] Muthesius 2002, 151; Jacoby 2004,198.

Embroideries with gold thread -刺金縷繡 *ci jin lu xiu* – were popular relatively early in the Middle East. According to Diodoros, gold embroideries were among the items taken by Alexander's soldiers from the city of Persepolis (*Bibliotheca Historica* 17.70). During the Roman period they were produced in multiple centres of the Mediterranean, although as a luxury items they were restricted to the wealthiest in society, primarily the aristocrats and monarchs. According to the *Diocletian's Edict*, the salary for embroiderers working with gold (Lat. *barbaricarius ex auro faciens;* Gr. *βαρβαρικάριος διά χρυσοῦ ἐργαζόμενος*) varied between 750 and 1000 denarii for one Roman ounce[7] (20.5–6) and was thus almost twice the salary of a silk embroiderer (Lat. *barbaricarius in holoserica,* Gr. *βαρβαρικάριος εἰς ὁλοσειρικόν*) (20.7–8).

In antiquity there were four methods of producing gold threads, which were used for embroidery or weaving. One entailed producing thin, flat stripes of gold, or gold wire. A second technique involved twisting gold wire around an organic core, usually silken. The third and most popular method was wrapping gold stripes around an organic core, usually of silk, wool, linen or animal gut. Extant archaeological evidence shows that the most popular material for the core was linen, followed by silk. The last technique was the most elaborate and rarely employed – it involved twisting a gilded membrane (usually made of animal gut) around a silk core.[8] We don't know too much about localisation of production centres or workshops, but the *Diocletian's Edict* mentions goldsmiths specialising in the production of gold threads (Lat. *aurinetrix*, Gr. *χρυσονεστοριεύς*) (30.6).

Archaeological finds are often difficult to interpret, because in most cases only the remains of gold is preserved, while the textiles themselves (as well as the organic cores used to wound the gold thread) do not. As a result, any notion of the type of weave, the material employed, or the nature of the gold thread itself must be conjectural. It is thus often difficult to distinguish between the remains of gold embroideries and fabrics woven with gold thread.

A hank of gold thread was found in Dura Europos. Pfister and Bellinger concluded that the hank was a relic of gold embroidered fabric, burnt in order to recover metal.[9] Fragments of gold embroidery were found in a cremation burial dated to the 2nd c. AD, excavated at Via dei Numisi in Rome. A piece of gold embroidery with a motif of lions in the lozenges was excavated from a 5th c. BC tomb at Koropi in Athens. A larger concentration of such finds was observed in the area of present Ukraine and southern Russia. Fragments of gold embroidery

[7] A Roman ounce (1/12 of *libra*) was about 27,4 g.

[8] Gleba 2008, 68, Bedini et al. 2004, 81

[9] Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 60, cat. no.305. Although no organic material survived the burning process, Pfister and Bellinger suggested that the thread was probably obtained by spinning gold around an organic core.

were found at Kerch (in a 3rd century BC female grave), Sokolova Mohyla (1st century AD burial no. 3), Khokhlach, Ukraine as well as at Suslovskiĭ Mogilnik in Russia (in tomb no. 31).[10]

In China, gold embroidery was not produced before the Sui (隋朝 581 – 618 AD) and Tang period (唐朝 618 – 907AD),[11] so that any information about such luxurious and exotic products would have been worthy of note.

Woollen textiles with gold thread -金縷罽 *jin lu ji*. The term 罽 (ji) is not precise enough to refer to a specific type of weave. In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) (the dictionary compiled in the 1st–2nd century AD), two similar characters are defined: the one, which appears in the discussed fragment of *Hou Han shu* – 罽 (*ji*), and the other 罽 (*ji*) with the radical 糸 (*si* – silk). In *Shuowen Jiezi* we find a definition of 罽：魚网也。"*ji* is a fishnet", but the dictionary, provides also an explanation for 罽：西胡毳布也。"*ji* is the woollen fabric of western foreigners". The second character – with the radical 糸 (*si* – silk) – rarely appears in Chinese during the Han – Tang period, and it seems that eventually both characters connoted the same meaning. In the *Book of Han,* a near contemporary of *Shuowen Jiezi,* the character 罽 (*ji*) describes woollen textiles of northern barbarians. In the *Account of the Western Regions*, *part two* (*Xiyu zhuan xia* 西域傳下), the following statement is made: 匈奴能得其馬畜旃罽 "Xiongnu are able to obtain their horses, cattle, felt and *ji*". The *Hou Han shu* (80.7) refers to 罽 (*ji*) suggesting that it was a kind of woollen fabric used to produce tents (by Xiongnu tribes) or curtains. It could be thus translated as a rug or tapestry, but it seems that the term is used to indicate the material rather than the type of weaving technique that was employed.

Hill, along with Leslie and Gardiner,[12] translates *jin lu ji* as a "woven gold threaded net." This might refer to a hair net or *reticulum*, known mostly from Pompeian paintings and scattered archaeological finds in Italy and Hungary.[13] Although this interpretation is possible, I propose instead to translate the term as "a woollen textile," because it appears elsewhere in the *Hou Han shu* with this meaning.

As a result, the expression *jin lu ji* – "woollen textiles [woven] with a gold thread" – relates to textiles of a foreign origin that were produced in the western regions. Woollen textiles with gold threads were not produced in China and the technique of using gold for weaving appeared no earlier than the Tang Dynasty. The earliest known example of a silk textile interwoven with thin gold stripes is

[10] Gleba 2008, 72–75.
[11] Zhao 2012, 224.
[12] Hill 2003, Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 215.
[13] Gleba 2008, 64–65.

a belt found in the necropolis at the Dulan (都蘭) burial ground, in the Chaidamu Basin (柴達木盆地), of Qinghai (青海) province.[14] Moreover, it seems that the use of golden thread for weaving in China could have been influenced by the fabrics brought from the West. In the *Book of Sui* (*Sui shu* 隋書), book 68, the following information is found:

波斯嘗獻金綿錦袍，組織殊麗。上命稠為之。稠錦既成，逾所獻者，上甚悅。

"Persian [emissaries] offered once a gown made of gold and silk brocade, especially beautifully woven. The emperor[15] ordered Chou[16] to make [a copy of] it. When Chou's brocade was finished it surpassed [the quality of] the [gown] that had been presented. The emperor was extremely pleased."

Like embroideries of gold, textiles woven with gold thread were exotic and thus considered worthy of note by the author of the work as a luxury product from the West.

Wool woven with threads of gold appeared relatively early in the Middle East, and became popular in the Mediterranean and Roman Europe. According to literary tradition, golden threads were first used for weaving in Mesopotamia or Iran. Gold rugs are mentioned in the *Avesta*,[17] and fabrics interwoven with gold are described in the Old Testament.[18] Among the most famous in the Middle East were *attalice vestes* – textiles produced in Pergamon. Pliny the Elder even suggests that they were invented by king Attalus (*Aurum intexere in eadem Asia invenit Attalus rex, unde nomen attalicis. Hist. Nat.* 8.74).[19] They are also mentioned by Propertius in his *Elegiae* (3.18.19). According to Pliny, the Greek painter Zeuxis, after having collected a considerable fortune ostentatiously had his name woven in gold thread on the checker-patterned mantle (*opes quoque tantas adquisivit, ut in ostentation earum Olympiae aureis litteris in palliorum tesseris intextum nomen suum ostentaret*. (*Hist. Nat.* 35.36). *Toga picta,* a purple toga with gold borders, mentioned by Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 10.7.9) was a special garment worn by victorious generals during their triumphant celebration in the Republic and was later adopted by Iulius Caesar.[20] In the version as we have

[14] Zhao 2012, 226.

[15] Yang Di (炀帝]) reigned between 604–617, and was the second emperor of the Sui (隋) dynasty (581–618 AD).

[16] He Chou – famous artisan, architect and engineer of the Sui and early Tang period.

[17] Laufer 1919, 488.

[18] Gleba 2008, 61.

[19] As Chioffi suggests incorporation of provincial Asia into the Roman Empire made the *attalice vestes* a part of the Roman tradition, but at least till the end of the 1st century a big part of textiles woven with gold thread were still imported to Rome from the eastern Mediterranean. (Chioffi 2004, 91–92)

[20] Gleba 2008, 62, Chioffi 2004, 91

it, Diocletian's *Edict* in both the Greek and Latin texts does not mention the type of cloth, which was valued according to the quality of the wool and the weight of gold and embroidery (19.20).

Fragments of gold thread on a woollen core dyed red was found in the so-called tomb of Saint Peter in the Vatican, while a large gold and purple woollen tapestry dated to the 4th c. AD comes from the tomb of a woman at Vergina.[21] A few pieces of gold tapestry from the Augustan period were found in Cádiz, but they were collected from cremation burials so that no organic remains survived. The threads used for this fabric were made of gold stripe, Z-twisted around an organic core.[22] Chemical analysis shows that the gold was of a high quality, with only a small addition of silver (1,88 %) and copper (0,71%).[23] Five fabrics decorated by pattern interwoven with gold thread have been unearthed in Palmyra. Two of them (of uncertain provenience from the tower-tomb of Elahbel or Iamblik) were made of linen warp and weft and are decorated with purple wool and gold thread with a silk core,[24] while three others (from the Iamblik tower-tomb) were probably similar, but the woollen sections of the decoration have not survived and the gold thread had a linen core.[25]

Multicoloured delicate silks – 雜色綾 *za se ling*. In early writings, the term *ling* (綾) is associated with a very delicate type of fabric produced in the area of present Shandong. *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) says: 綾：東齊謂布帛之細曰綾 "In eastern Qi[26] delicate textiles are called *ling*". Later *ling* is used to describe twill damask, but it is difficult to determine when exactly such fabrics appeared in China and when this change in meaning occurred. Fabrics with twill pattern on the twill ground developed probably from an earlier type of Chinese weave called *qi* (綺) – silk damask on a plain weave, or warp-faced tabby with warp floats forming twill pattern, popular during Han dynasty.[27] According to Xu Zheng, twill damasks became popular in China between the 3rd and 5th c. AD, during the Wei (魏) and Jin (晉) dynasties.[28]

[21] Gleba 2008, 65.

[22] "Z" direction of twisting gold stripes around an organic core was observed in all threads collected from the archaeological sites in Rome and its environments analysed by Beddini, Rapinesi and Ferro (2004).

[23] Alfaro Giner 2001, 77–79.

[24] Schmidt-Colinet et alii 2000, 179–180, cat. nos. 465, 466.

[25] Schmidt-Colinet et alii 2000, 150–151, cat. nos. 267–269.

[26] During the Warring States period (*Zhan guo* 戰國 475–221 BC), Qi was a state in present Shandong (山東) province. The term was later used as the name of the area and later revived as the name of the state during the Northern and Southern dynasties.

[27] Li 2012, 128.

[28] Xu 2007, 161.

A curious passage occurs in the *Diverse notes on the Western Capital* (*Xijing Zaji* 西京雜記) – a collection of anecdotes about the Former Han Period, which mentions *ling* fabrics:

霍光妻遺淳于衍蒲桃錦二十四匹、散花綾二十五匹. 綾出鉅鹿陳寶光家，寶光妻傳其法。霍顯召入其第，使作之。機用一百二十鑷，六十日成一匹，匹直萬錢。

"Huo Guang's[29] wife offered to Chunyu Yan twenty four bolts of *jin* [silk] with grape [patterns] and twenty five bolts of *ling* [fabric decorated with] scattered flowers. Ling fabrics came from the house of Chen Baoguang at Jilu[30], Baoguang's wife passed on the technique of its [production]. Huo Xian invited her to her residence [and] made her produce it. The loom had 120 treadles, it took 60 days to produce one bolt; a bolt was worth ten thousand coins" (Xijing Zaji 1.17).

Ling mentioned in the text refers to a patterned textile, probably monochrome in opposition to the polychrome *jin* (錦) fabrics with a grape pattern mentioned in the same paragraph. The loom, used to weave it, was equipped with 120 patterning devices *nie* (鑷), probably treadles, and it may be supposed that it was the so-called *duozong duonie zhi ji* (多綜多躡織機) – a loom with many healds and treadles, used during the Han dynasty.[31] The text of *Xijing Zaji* is, however, quite problematic as a source, because its authorship and chronology are unclear. Although it relates to events in the Western Han Dynasty (西漢朝 206 BC – 9 AD), recent studies have shown that it was not cited before the early 6th c. AD, thereby indicating that it was probably compiled during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝 420–589 AD).[32] It may thus reflect a relatively late weaving technique. The description of *ling* in the *Xijing Zaji* is also intriguing, since the pattern of "scattered flowers" is not typical for early monochrome weaves, which usually bear geometric patterns of chequers or lozenges, although in some cases floral or animal motifs appear.

In the Liu Song dynasty (劉宋朝420–479 AD), the use of *ling* for clothing was restricted to the highest classes of society by imperial order.[33] This suggests that the name *ling* already held a precise meaning, which was probably related to the twill damask.

Archaeological finds of *ling* silks from the pre-Tang period in China are quite rare in comparison to the so-called Han damasks (*qi* 綺). A piece of cheq-

[29] Huo Guang (霍光) was a high official in the Han court , during the consecutive reigns of emperor Wu (武帝 141–87 BC), Zhao (昭帝 87–74 BC) and Xuan (宣帝 74–49). His wife Huo Xian (霍顯) was involved in a plot to have her daughter become empress.

[30] Jilu prefecture (*Jilu jun* 鉅鹿郡) was an administrative region covering roughly the area of present Xingtai (邢台) county in the southern part of Hebei (河北) province, close to the border with Shandong (山東) province.

[31] Kuhn 1995, 91.

[32] Knechtges and Chang 2014, 1648–1652.

[33] Li 2012a, 180.

uer-patterned monochrome fabric was recovered from the Yingpan (營盤) necropolis in Yuli (尉犁) county, Xinjiang, dated to the Han – Jin period.[34]

In the Mediterranean silk damasks are known from Palmyra (Syria). A monochrome fabric made of undyed silk with a herringbone pattern was found in the Elahbel tower-tomb built in 103 AD,[35] while chequer-patterned silk with yellow warp and green weft was unearthed from the tomb of Yamblik, built in 83 AD.[36] Both textiles are of Mediterranean origin and are usually dated to the 3rd century AD. Chequer-patterned damasks from the 3rd and 4th century AD have also been found in Western and Central Europe – in England, Switzerland, Germany, France and Hungary.[37] According to Wild, Latin term *scutulata* describes both woollen textiles with multi-coloured chequer patterns (tartans) and silk twill damasks.[38] They apparently began to be produced in the Roman Empire no later than the 3rd century AD, since *Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices* mentions looms for production of such fabrics (*tela holosericis vestis scutulatae cum omni instrument ex lingo*) (12.32) as well as the workers who weaved them (Lat. *sericarius in holoserica scutulata;* Gr. σειρικάριος ἐργαζόμένος εἰς ὁλοσειρικὸν σκουτλᾶτον) (20.11). However, the technique of the twill damask weave with chequer pattern was already in use in the 1st century AD for woollen textiles, as evidenced by a large fragment of white fabric decorated with a tapestry woven purple band (*clavus*) found at Didymoi (a small Roman fortress located on the Eastern Desert in Egypt, on the road to Berenike).[39]

Given that silk twill damasks do not appear in the archaeological record before the 3rd century AD and that written sources mentioning the term *ling* in context of such fabric in China are probably late, we should understand this term in the *Hou Han shu* as *delicate silk*. This may refer to diverse types of fabrics, indicating their high quality. It is hard to determine whether this part of text reflects true insight regarding western production, or if it simply was another attribute that the Chinese conceived of Da Qin in the same way that breeding silkworms was understood as noted above.

Although most of the sources relate to the import of silk into the Roman Empire, there are some hints suggesting a local production of imported yarn. Multiple silk fabrics have been found in tombs at Palmyra (Syria), many of which were undoubtedly locally produced from imported mulberry and wild silk yarn, including the aforementioned twill damasks. *Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices* mentions the salaries of diverse types of silk weavers (20.9–11) and

[34] Zhao 2002, 47.
[35] Schmidt-Colinet et alii, 178, cat. no. 453.
[36] Schmidt-Colinet et alii, 159, cat. no. 319.
[37] Foulkes 2010, 1.
[38] Wild 1964.
[39] Cardon 2001.

workers who created embroideries on silk (20.7–8), suggesting that there was large-scale production in the 3rd century AD. Silk might have also been dyed in Mediterranean workshops. Sartre[40] suggests that workshops dyed imported silk fabrics with murex purple in Sidon and Tyre, although no such dyed fabrics from Palmyra have been detected.[41]

作黃金塗、火浣布。

They make [fabrics] covered in gold and asbestos cloth.

Fabrics covered in gold -黃金塗[布] *huang jin tu* [*bu*]. The expression, *jin tu* „covered in gold", specifically in the context of textiles, only appears in the lost Chinese work, *The Brief History of Wei* (*Wei lüe* 魏略) written by Yu Huan between 239 and 265 AD. It was, however, quoted by Pei Songzhi in his commentary to the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi* 三國志), written at some point after 265 AD. *Jin tu bu* 金塗布 is listed as one of the products of Da Qin, thereby confirming that 黃金塗 (*huang jin tu „*covered in yellow gold") is a term related to textiles. The character 塗 (*tu*) means "to spread on", "to apply" so this expression should refer to the fabric which was painted, stamped or covered with gold, but not weaved or embroidered with gold thread.

In the Mediterranean and Middle East the practice that comes closest to this definition was the appliqué of gold bracteates or small ornaments to clothing known from Bronze Age Mycenaean tombs, and well documented in Achaemenid Persia.[42] According to Herodotus, Xerxes offered a golden sword and tiara decorated in gold[43] to the citizens of Abderra (Ξέρξης ἐν τῇ ὀπίσω κομιδῇ ἀπικόμενος ἐς Ἄβδηρα καὶ ξεινίην τέ σφι συνθέμενος καὶ δωρησάμενος αὐτοὺς ἀκινάκῃ τε χρυσέῳ καὶ τιήρῃ χρυσοπάστῳ). (8.120). The practice was also popular among the steppe peoples, especially the Scythians.[44] There are some hints about such a production in Rome.[45] Many ancient authors also describe fabrics made entirely out of gold. They were probably weaved of gold warp and weft.[46] According to Tacitus (*Annales* 12.56.10) and Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* 33.63), such a tunic was worn by Aggrippina. The *Historia Augusta* (*Antoninus Heliogabalus)* mentions also that the emperor Heliogabalus possessed an entirely gold tunic. Such textiles, however, were weaved with gold thread, not covered in gold.

[40] Sartre 2001, 794.

[41] Schmidt-Colinet et alii 2000, 83–84, Tab. 6.

[42] Gleba 2008, 61.

[43] Literally: *'sprinkled with gold'*.

[44] Gleba 2008, 61.

[45] Chioffi 2004, 92 cites an inscription mentioning *segmentarius*, a craftsman who produced metallic plaques, probably gold, used for decoration of textiles.

[46] Chioffi 2004, 92.

In China two techniques of applying gold onto fabrics were known. One was painting with gold or silver using a mixture of powdered metal with chemicals and water called *nijin* (泥金). The other was applying gold foil (*jinbo* 金箔) onto glue to form elaborate decorative patterns on the textile. The latter technique was called *yinjin* (印金) – printing with gold.[47] The practice of applying simple patterns made of gold foil and stuck on textiles with a type of glue is attested in the archaeological record.[48]

The earliest Chinese textile with stamped gold and silver powdered patterns was found in Tomb 1 at Mawangdui (馬王堆), Changsha (長沙), Hunan (湖南) province, dated to the Western Han dynasty (220 BC–9 AD).[49] It was a deep grey gauze *sha* (紗) with stylized floral motives printed in yellow, silver and gold.[50]

Adhering gold foil onto textiles with glue was a relatively late practice. It became popular during the Tang Dynasty (唐朝 618–907 AD). A few examples of garments decorated with applied gold ornaments are known from Tomb 14 at the Yingpan (營盤) necropolis in Yuli (尉犁) county, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, dated to the 1st–4th century AD.[51]

It is difficult to determine the exact meaning of *huang jin tu bu.* The lack of evidence for the production of fabrics painted with gold from the Roman Empire suggests that the information was conceived from some misunderstanding. It could have originated from an account concerning production from another region also west of the Chinese frontier. Although evidence of Central Asian textile production is scarce and any speculation is perforce there is to date no fabric known from the region that can be interpreted as *huang jin tu bu*.[52] The other possibility is that the term *huang jin tu bu* can be used to explain another type of golden textile, the nature of which was difficult to understand. For example, it might mean gold fabrics woven entirely with gold threads, attested by ancient sources, or decorated with gold *appliqué.* The use of the decorative techniques involving the application of gold paint or gold foil on textiles in China could be source of confusion found in the accounts about golden textiles produced in the West.

Asbestos cloth (literally 'cloth cleaned in fire') – 火浣布 *huo huan bu*. Asbestos was a mineral used in the Mediterranean, and was perhaps first used in Hellenistic Greece. Some scholars believe that the first author who described *asbestos* was Theophrastus. In his treatise *On Stones* (c. 300 BC), he speaks of

[47] Zhao 2012, 246.
[48] Wenwu 2002, 30–32.
[49] Li 2012, 132–133.
[50] Changsha 1980, 108–110.
[51] Wenwu 2002, 30–32.
[52] For recent research on Central Asian textiles from this period, see: Frankfort 2013; Yatsenko 2012.

a stone that burns when poured with oil, but stops when the oil is burnt out. He indicates that it was mined in Scapte Hyle, a district in Thrace opposite the island of Thasos, but there is no evidence for the occurrence of asbestos in this area. There were actually two sources of asbestos which could have been used by the ancient Greeks: Karystos, in the southern edge of Euboea, and the Troodos Mountains on Cyprus.[53] According to Pliny the Elder, asbestos cloth was used as tablecloth, because it could be cleaned by fire. It may also have been used as funerary cloth for monarchs when their bodies were cremated. Pliny, however, was not sure about the source of asbestos. He suggested that it was obtained from trees in India (*Hist. Nat.* 19.4). Strabo mentions the *Karystian stone* as a raw material for cloth which might be cleaned in fire, and says that it was mined in the region of Karystos on Euboea (*Geographia* 10.6). Archaeological finds have revealed that asbestos was used in making pottery in the Neolithic Age in around the 3rd millennium BC. This practice spread out Scandinavia and Russia during the Bronze and Iron Age.[54] There is no archaeological evidence to indicate that asbestos cloth was used in the Mediterranean in either the Hellenistic or Roman period.

The special features of asbestos and its use for production of fire-resistant cloth were known relatively early in ancient China, although there is no evidence of the local production of such fabrics. In the *Liezi* (列子), a Daoist text attributed to Lie Yukou (列御寇) (5th–4th century BC), and compiled probably in the Han dynasty with annotations made in 4th century AD, it states:

周穆王大征西戎，西戎獻鋸鋙之劍，火浣之布。(...) 火浣之布，浣之必投於火；布則火色，垢則布色；出火而振之，皓然凝乎雪。

"Jing, the King of Zhou,[55] [set out] on an expedition to the Xirong tribes. The Xirong offered him a *Kunwu* sword and asbestos cloth … to clean asbestos cloth one should throw it into fire. When the cloth takes on the fire's colour, dirt will take on the colour of the cloth. Taken out from the fire it will be white like congealed snow" (Liezi, 5 *Tang wen* (湯問)).

Although the Chinese scholars had the basic knowledge about the "quasi-magical" properties of asbestos, it seems that asbestos was not used for any practical purposes in ancient China. On the other hand, its extraordinary character was considered interesting enough to note that it was produced in Da Qin.

又有細布，或言水羊毳，野蠶繭所作也。

They also have delicate cloth, some say, made of the fine hair of water sheep, [but indeed] made of wild silkworm cocoons.

[53] Caley and Richards 1956, 87–88.

[54] Ross and Nolan 2003, 449.

[55] 周穆王 544–519 BC.

This passage is difficult to interpret and has long been a source of debate among scholars. The term 細布 (*xi bu*) literally means 'fine cloth', and was used to describe diverse types of textiles, usually not silken. In later times it also came to include muslins. The *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) uses this expression to explain the nature of at least three types of textiles, one of them originating from Shu, modern Sichuan (四川), but over time their names were forgotten and it is not possible to identify them with any precise type of weave or material. Moreover, part of the text presents another set of problems that might be due to the fact that the author of the *Hou Han shu*, or perhaps the original author who discussed items produced in Da Qin, was himself confused about the type of fabric that he was discussing. There is no such animal as "water sheep" or goat; yet, at some point in its transmission someone realized that this passage is incomprehensible, so attempted to remedy it by adding an explanation about wild silk cocoons as a real material for the production of such a textile.

The idea that wild silk was produced in the Middle East or more generally the Mediterranean in the first centuries AD is an issue that requires more work. We do know, however, that there is some evidence of the use of wild silk in the Aegean in the mid–2nd millennium BC.[56] It was made from cocoons of a species endemic to southern Europe, *Pachypasa otus* D.*,* fed on downy oak, cypress and juniper. In the 4th century BC, Aristotle had a very detailed knowledge about the production of wild silk on Cos (*Historia Animalium* V.19*).* It was in the Roman period, however, that this knowledge was apparently forgotten; indeed, Pliny's passage about Coan silk is a slightly inaccurate summary taken from Aristotle (*Historia Naturalis* 11.26–27). In the description of the silk production process in Serica, Pliny notes that silk fibres were obtained by scrapping tree leaves (*Historia Naturalis* 6.20). Coan silk was still mentioned in poetry, for example in the *Elegies* of Propertius (1.2.2), but the reference to *Coa veste* constitutes rather weak evidence of its common use, since it could be an erudite allusion to the textile that was famous but rarely or even never seen. In the western sources Coan silk became absent after the 1st c. AD.[57] We do not find this type of textile mentioned in any tax tariff, or in any other administrative document from the Mediterranean. It suggests that in the Roman period Mediterranean wild silk production, if it still existed, was at best local and marginal, and did not constitute an important part of regional economy.

In the longer list of products of Da Qin (大秦) presented in the *Wei lüe* (魏略), we find a small passage that appears to convey somewhat different information: 有織成細布，言用水羊毳，名曰海西布. "[They] weave delicate cloth, said to be made of the fine hair of water sheep, called *cloth from the west of the sea*." In

[56] Panagiotakopulu *et al*. 1997.
[57] Wild 2003, 108.

all likelihood, the passages that concern us in the *Hou Han shu* and *Wei lüe* derived from the same source. There have been numerous attempts to explain the meaning behind the statement, *cloth made of fine hair of the water sheep*, of which two studies stand out. According to Pelliot, the term water sheep is a misunderstanding that Da Qin is a country deeply connected to the sea, which derives its resources from the coast. He also observes that in the *Wei lüe* we also encounter the statement that: 此國六畜皆出水 "In this country all six animals come from the water." He thus concluded that the textile produced from the enigmatic water sheep was simply wool produced by sheep.[58]

Hirth,[59] following Bretschneider,[60] in his comments on the translation of the *Hou Han shu* and *Wei lüe* suggested, that *fine cloth made of the hair of water sheep* might be an allusion to sea-silk, also referred to as *byssus*. Laufer[61] went a bit farther suggesting that the material was indeed sea-silk, but not *byssus*, because in antiquity the term was used for cotton or linen cloth. These opinions were strongly criticised by Raschke[62] who calls the theory a "particular fable" and its acceptance by scholars – an "absurd naivety". However, Hill[63] suggests again that *water sheep wool* could be the sea-silk.

Sea-silk is a fibre produced by *Pinna nobilis* L., a large mollusc endemic to the Mediterranean Sea. Since it stands upright on the seafloor, it uses filaments , up to 20 cm long, to fix its position and avoid being moved by the current. When harvested, they were washed, combed and spun, at which point the tufts ready to be weaved were valued for their beautiful golden-brown colour and elasticity.[64]

There are two main problems with the interpretation of the phrase *fine cloth made of the hair of water sheep* as sea-silk. First, there is no archaeological evidence of the production of sea-silk before late antiquity and there is no indication that production centres of any sort existed. Indeed, the oldest attested use of sea-silk is a piece of fabric that was found between the legs of a mummified body in a tomb excavated in ancient Aquincum, in the north-western part of Budapest. The date of burial was probably between 326 AD and the beginning of the 5th century AD. The material must have been brought to Aquincum from the Mediterranean, but it is impossible to determine from where specifically.[65]

The other problem is the modern misunderstanding of the Greek term *βύσσος*, Latin *byssus*, which eventually came to mean sea-silk. In antiquity, the

[58] Pelliot1959, 509–510.
[59] Hirth 1885, 262–263.
[60] Bretschneider 1871, 24, note 4.
[61] Laufer 1915.
[62] Raschke 1978, 854, note 849.
[63] Hill 2003, Appendix B.
[64] Maeder 1995, 109–111.
[65] Maeder 1995, 113–115.

sources used this term to connote a specific type of linen or cotton fabric, probably delicate and expensive.[66] *Diocletian's Edict*, on the other hand, contains a different term which is frequently understood as sea-silk – *sea-wool* (ἐραία θαλασσία) (25.3).[67] The edict also mentions more enigmatic *"dorsal"* or *"spinal" sea-wool* (ἐρέα θαλασσία νωτιαία) (25.10), and a type of clothing, called *dalmaticomafortium*, *made of sea-wool mixed with silk* (Lat. *dalmaticomafortium marinum subsericum,* Gr. δελματικομαφέρτιον θαλάσσιον συνφειρικόν) (19.14). There is a passage in Tertullian, dated in the 2nd or 3rd century AD, that contains his admonition against expensive Roman fashion: "And it did not suffice to plant and sow for a tunic, if it had not also proved possible to fish for clothes. For fleeces also come from the sea, inasmuch as the finer shells of mossy woolliness are adorned with them." (*Nec fuit satis tunicam pangere et serere, ni etiam piscari uestitum contigisset; nam et de mari uellera, qua muscosae lanositatis lautiores conchae comant.*) (*De Pallio* 3.6.2, translated by V. Hunink). This is the most direct evidence of sea-silk production found in the ancient sources. Unfortunately, Tertullian does not mention the name of the fabric he has in mind. [68]

The extremely scarce evidence of sea-silk production in the Roman period suggests that, even if it was produced, it was not popular and probably did not circulate far from the Mediterranean coast in that time. Moreover, ethnographic evidence and modern usage indicate that the production of sea-silk was practiced in the western Mediterranean, especially present Italy and Spain,[69] not in the Levant. No mention of it is found in either the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* or in the Palmyrene Tariff, and it was not found among textiles from Palmyra or Dura Europos. We cannot exclude that knowledge about such a strange and extraordinary fabric was conveyed as one of the wonders of the West to China. The *deli-*

[66] Wipszycka1965, 108–109.

[67] See Maeder 1995, 112 for further bibliography.

[68] The possible association of *pinikon* (πινικόν) mentioned in the anonymous first century work, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, with sea-silk, as suggested by some scholars (Maeder 1995, 116) seems doubtful. In the *Periplus*, it is mentioned as a product exported from Omana and Cane to Barygaza and Arabia, but of a lower quality than a similar type from India (*PME* 36), and as a product of Taprobane (Sri Lanka) (*PME* 61). Although the paragraph describing exports from Omana and Cane does not specify that *pinikon* was produced there, stating only that it was exported with purple dye (a product otherwise associated with the Levantine coast), we might suppose that some products of Mediterranean origin were simply redistributed from these ports, which could be the case here with of *pinikon*. The comparison with the Indian product, however, does not leave room for further speculation. Sea-silk was not produced in India, thus *pinikon* has to be another product connected with sea shells. Taprobane, the other exporter and producer of *pinikon*, mentioned in the *Periplus*, was famous for its pearls, which also derived from various port in the Persian Gulf. In this context, the association of *pinikon* with pearls, as proposed by Schoff (1912), seems rather persuading.

[69] Maeder 1995, 110.

cate cloth, some say, made of the fine hair of water sheep might be a reference to an otherwise incomprehensible account about sea silk, which was considered so unbelievable that the origins of wild silk were invented. Although such an explanation is indeed tempting, given that there is almost no evidence of sea silk production in the Roman Empire, let alone its having been exported to the East, Pelliot may be correct in understanding it as a kind of wool.[70]

Chinese perception versus Roman reality

The list of fabrics produced in Da Qin, discussed above, constitutes a very specific group of textiles. The text of the *Hou Han shu* mentions embroideries and woollen textiles woven with gold thread, multi-coloured silks, fabrics covered in gold, asbestos cloth and an enigmatic fabric, perhaps special kind of wool or sea-silk. According to Fan Ye, Da Qin was primarily a producer of silk fabrics and multiple types of textiles decorated with gold. Yet, apparently unknown to the Chinese were fabrics commonly produced in the West, like linen or wool, or other types exclusively produced in the Mediterranean, such as textiles dyed in purple. This view of the Roman textile production is especially interesting when we compare it with archaeological and textual evidence from the Roman period.

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* mentions multiple textiles which were imported from the East and others that were exported from the Roman Empire via Egypt, as well as *entrepôt*s in and around the Indian Ocean. But, as Droß–Krüpe[71] observed, most of the textiles listed as exported from Egypt were not precious and costly luxurious textiles, but average quality fabrics and garments, although we do find accounts that mention purple dyed wool (*πορφύρα*) (PME 24). Gold woven fabric was noted only once: "clothing in the Arabian style, with sleeves, plain, ordinary, with chequer pattern or interwoven with gold" (ἱματισμὸς Ἀραβικὸς χειριδωτὸς ὅ τε ἁπλοῦς καὶ ὁ κοινὸς καὶ σκοτουλᾶτος καὶ διάχρυσος) (PME 24).

Among the textile finds from Berenike, one of the harbors mentioned in the *Periplus* that played a prominent role in the Indian Ocean trade, the largest group was constituted by cotton.[72] In early deposits, connected with the 1st century AD occupation of the site, cotton was mostly imported from India made of Z-spun threads, but a few fragments of Egyptian S–spun cotton were also found.[73] The

[70] Pelliot 1959, 509–510.

[71] Droß-Krüpe 2013, 150.

[72] Wild and Wild 1996, 246, Wild and Wild 2001, 212, Wild and Wild 2005, Sidebotham 2011, 243–244

[73] Wild 2006, 179.

higher quality, more colourful fabrics were made of wool. There were also linen and goat's hair textiles.[74]

The assemblages of archaeological textiles collected from eastern Mediterranean cities, which might have been involved in trade with the Far East, differ from the view of what was produced in the Roman Empire as it is presented in the Chinese text. Among the finds from Dura Europos, the largest group of fabrics was wool (77%), many of which are decorated with purple stripes. Only one example of gold–embroidery was found – a hank of destroyed thread. Linen (12%) and goat hair (below 5%) were also found, as well as felts and two pieces of silk, probably weaved locally (see Fig. 1).[75]

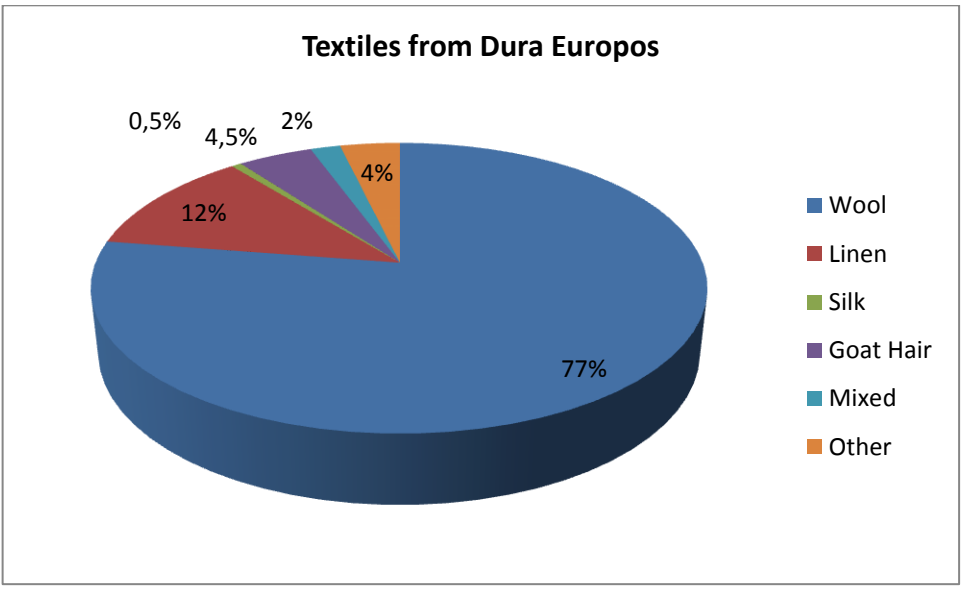

Fig. 1. Types of fabrics found at Dura-Europos (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945).

The assemblage of Palmyra (especially important since the city was a part of the trade network linking China with the Mediterranean) consisted of a high percentage of wool (c. 50%), linen (23%), and a small group of cottons (7%), probably woven from material from the Euphrate valley[76]. Silk (c. 18%) was imported from China and India, but some examples could have been woven locally from imported yarn. Diverse mixed fabrics and a small amount of goat hair were also discovered. Textiles decorated with stripes woven with gold thread,

[74] Wild and Wild 1996; Wild and Wild 1998.
[75] Pfister and Bellinger 1945.
[76] Schmidt-Colinet, personal communication.

always associated with purple wool, were very rare – only five pieces were found (Fig. 2).[77]

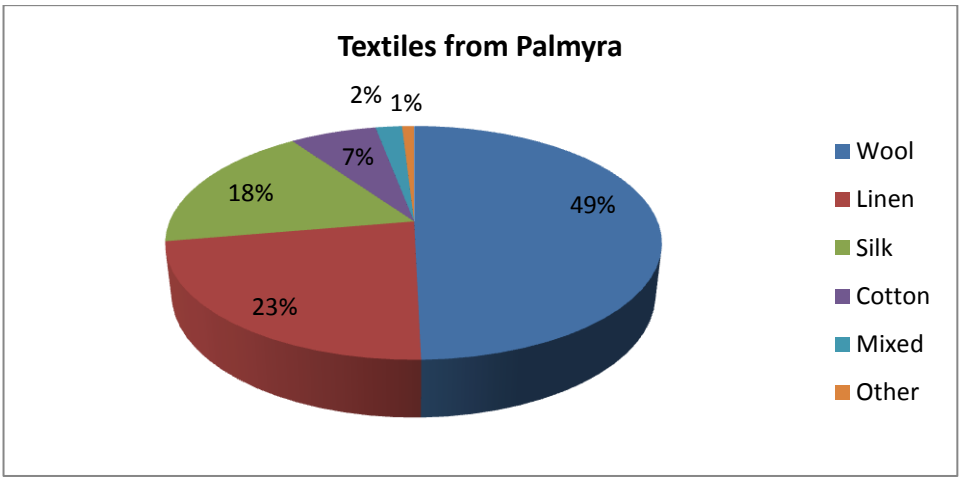

Fig. 2. Types of fabrics found at Palmyra (after Schmidt-Colinet et al. 2000).

In order to understand why the discrepancy exists between the textiles that were actually produced in the Roman Empire and those attributed to it, albeit in the guise of Da Qin, it is necessary to analyse separately two issues: the absence of products commonly manufactured in the Roman Empire in the account of Da Qin, and the presence of products attributed to Da Qin, but never produced in the Roman Empire.

The absence of ubiquitous Roman textiles (linen, woollen and purple-dyed fabrics) is especially striking when we compare Fan Ye's account with an earlier that appears in the *Brief History of Wei* (*Wei lüe* 魏略). The latter contains a longer list of textiles produced in Da Qin[78]. Among them we find 細絺 (*xi chi*) fine hemp, which might be interpreted as an attempt to describe a linen textile, a variety of woollen rugs, carpets and multi-coloured fabrics as well as two types of cloth described as *fei* (緋), 'bright red, crimson', which, according to Hill, might refer to a kind of purple-dyed textile.[79] The similarities between some of the passages in both texts suggest that at least some of the sources of information were the same, but it is possible that Yu Huan, the author of the *Wei lüe*, could have relied on additional information brought by later travelers. According to the

[77] Schmidt-Colinet *et al.* 2000.

[78] The list of products of Da Qin in the *Wei lüe* contains many terms which are difficult to interpret. For example, there are numerous terms relating to textiles that are perhaps transliterations. Consequently, the majority remain incomprehensible and require further analysis.

[79] Hill 2004, notes 12.12(42) and 12.12(44)

Book of Liang (*Liang shu* 梁書), the official history of the Liang dynasty (梁朝 502–557) compiled by Yao Silian (姚思廉) in the first half of the 7th c. AD, a Roman merchant named Qin Lun (秦論) visited China in 226 AD and related a great deal of information about his country to Chinese officials (54, 48). Although the *Hou Han shu* was compiled later than the *Wei lüe,* Fan Ye could have not included this account in his work, because the event did not occur in the reign of the Eastern Han dynasty and thereby formed no part of the Han histories which were accessible to him. Another possibility is that both accounts – the *Hou Han shu* and the *Wei lüe* – were based on exactly the same sources, but the *Hou Han shu* is more synthetic.[80] In reality, all the histories composed during the Eastern Han dynasty are lost, so we are unable to know whether the information contained in Fan Ye's work was selected by him personally or if he was drawing upon compilations of unknown authors. In any case, the final result reveals that whoever was responsible for the final outcome he (or she) deliberately selected particular kinds of information about the Western Regions. If so, then this would explain why some woollen fabrics mentioned in the *Wei lüe* would have been omitted: the author would have encountered the same problem as the modern scholar, names that are completely unintelligible and are probably intended as phonetic transliterations from one or more languages. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine why linen fabrics would be omitted. The only plausible explanation is that linen, was considered too common and therefore unworthy of mention, especially if it was considered similar to hemp cloth. Probably only the most intriguing and precious products were included from the original list.

The presence of non-Roman products in the account is actually restricted to the persuasion that the Roman Empire is a great producer of diverse silk textiles and that we find mysterious *fabrics covered with gold* among Roman goods. Since it is impossible to determine what exactly this last term means, it is also very hard to explain its presence on the list. It might be a corroborated information about one of the techniques used for golden threads production – in the proper sense, gold threads used for weaving and embroidery were the organic fibres covered with gold.

The problem of silk production in the Roman Empire was already discussed above. Although silk textiles were woven in the Roman Empire, they were made of imported yarn and definitely did not constitute the main or even prevalent part of the Roman textile industry. Moreover, in the time of compiling *Hou Han shu* the technique of mulberry silk production just started to spread to Central Asia,

[80] Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 41, 57, 65) suggested that the common source of the *Hou Han shu*, *Wei lüe* and one of the unofficial histories of the Later Han – *Hou Han zhi* – was probably *Dongguan Han ji*. They stress, however, that although the *Hou Han shu* was written later than *Wei lüe,* it should be considered as containing information exclusively from the Later Han Period.

not mentioning the period of Eastern Han dynasty, when its production was restricted to China, Korea and Japan. It is thus possible, that production of silk was added and emphasized, because it was considered the most civilized type of cloth. Interestingly, also jade, the most important raw material of ritual and ceremonial objects in China since the Neolithic, is mentioned as one of the products of Da Qin in this account. Since both – silk and jade – were very important elements of Chinese culture, they could have been seen as the indispensable symbols of a civilized country.

According to the *Hou Han shu*, Da Qin was located in a region adjacent to mythological lands that had never been seen by any mortal. It contains a passage that reads: 或云其國西有弱水、 流沙，近西王母所居處，幾於日所入也。 "Some say that lying to the west of this country [Da Qin] are Ruoshui (Weak Water) [and] Liusha (Quick Sands),[81] [which are located] close to the place where Xi Wang Mu (Queen Mother of the West) resides, almost where the sun sets."[82] Therefore, Da Qin was mythologized as existing far to the west, where jade and silk were available. It was natural to associate these products with Da Qin, because they were regarded as indispensable elements of civilization. On the other hand, they were associated with the magical realm of the western edge of the world, the domain of Xi Wang Mu (西王母 *Queen Mother of the West*).

The idea of Xi Wang Mu developed from an early Daoist concept. She is mentioned by Zhuangzi as one of those who possess Dao: 西王母得之，坐乎少廣. "Xi Wang-mu got It (Dao), and by It had her seat in (the palace of) Shaoguang" (*Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Inner Chapters* 內篇, *The Great and Most Honoured Masters* 大宗師, translated by James Legge). In many early Chinese writings, Xi Wang Mu and her western domain is associated with jade, the symbol of incorruptibility and eternal life.[83] The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing* 山海經), a mythical geography of China based on pre-imperial texts compiled in the Han dynasty period, states: 又西三百五十里，曰玉山，是西王母所居也 "Three hundred fifty li further West [there is] a mountain named Yu (Jade Mountain); this is the place where Xi Wang Mu resides."[84] In the same book, in the summary of the chapter describing the whole mountain range including Jade

[81] Liu Sha and Ruo Shui – both locations appear in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas – Shanhai jing*, in the description of Western mountains (*Xishan jing*) as areas close to where Xi Wang Mu resided. Some scholars suggest that they were mythologized reflections of real locations with exceptional geographical features. Thus they identify Liu Sha – Quick Sands – with the Taklamakan Desert, or perhaps somewhere within it (Hill 2003, note 19). Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 276) in their turn state that these locations are unreal.

[82] *Hou Han shu* 88, *Xiyu zhuan* 78.

[83] Rotschild 2010, 35–36.

[84] *Shanhai jing, Xishan jing 3 (Xi ci san jing).*

Mountain, it proclaims that all deities from this region should be worshipped with offerings of rice and millet and with burying jade amulets.[85]

Similarly, Xi Wang Mu was associated with silk and sericulture. In Han iconography she was usually depicted frontally, sitting on the summit of a mountain, with arms folded. Her hair was pinned up with a very characteristic hairpin, called *sheng* (勝), whose shape is believed to be derived from the warp beam with two handles, used in the Chinese loom.[86] The same headdress was worn by court-ladies during the ceremony of collecting mulberry leaves.[87]

During the Han dynasty, Xi Wang Mu evolved as an important deity, helping to gain happiness on earth and immortality in the afterlife, and she was believed to rule over the Western Paradise.[88] Discussing the location of her domain and the place where the sun sets in relation to the real political entities in the West, especially Da Qin, caused multiple confusions of the ancient writers, who often note than in the previous accounts these two were located incorrectly. Most of the early histories, however, refer to Xi Wang Mu's domain in context of description of the Western Regions.[89] Therefore, we cannot exclude that the description of Da Qin and its products were also influenced by the vision of the magic lands of Western Paradise.

Conclusions

The account on Da Qin was based on indirect sources, since we have no evidence of any Chinese envoy travelling further than the Persian Gulf [90] or any Roman citizen who went further than the western environs of present Xinjiang

[85] 其祠之禮，用一吉玉瘞，糈用稷米。 For rituals in their temples, auspicious jade [should be] used and buried [for sacrifice], rice and millet [offered as] sacrificial food. (*Shanhai jing, Xishan jing* 3 (*Xi ci san jing*)).

[86] Wang 2001, 45. The same attribute, but of bigger size, is often kept in hand by the *Lady Weaver* or *Heavenly Weaver* from the legend popular in East Asian cultures, so that the identification of this object is quite convincing.

[87] Rotschild 2010, 37.

[88] Wu 1987, 25–30.

[89] Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 273–4) observed that in earlier texts (*Shi ji, Han shu*) the domain of Xi Wang Mu and the place where the sun sets are situated west of Tiao Zhi (probably Characene, but Leslie and Gardiner interpret the location as the Seleucid Empire), since in the time of their compilation this was the western most country known. As more information about Da Qin became available, these mythical areas were likewise relocated further west.

[90] The *Hou Han shu* (88) relates that a special envoy of the Chinese Court, Gan Ying (甘英), in 97 AD travelled through Central Asia to Persian Gulf on a mission to make contact with the Roman Empire, but for some reason he could not continue on his journey farther west by sea. According to the *Hou Han shu*, local sailors persuaded him that such a journey was long and arduous.

during the Han dynasty.[91] Information was probably obtained from merchants, possibly of Central Asian origin, who knew something about the countries of the West, often from other merchants. Their understanding of the political system, traditions and customs was not always correct and up to date. They knew what could be bought at different markets, but did not necessarily know where various products had originated. It should be also realized that some of the information was communicated intentionally to mislead people. Information was thus filtered through different people from different backgrounds ultimately to individuals who recorded it for posterity. Along the way, as one might expect, a great many details were lost in translation. Moreover, the documents were then re-edited by scholars living many decades later until they reached the final form as we have them from FanYe, who published his work some two hundred years after the fall of the Han dynasty.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the text as we have it is not what information is correct or incorrect about the Roman Empire, but the idealist, and mythological vision that the Chinese infused in their understanding of the outside world. The account of Da Qin differs strongly from other countries west of China in the minuteness of description and a number of questions discussed. Multiple aspects of Da Qin are described, such as flora and fauna, local customs, government system and local products, while in the majority of cases only the number of households, population and manpower of the army are mentioned, followed by information about geographical location of described kingdom. But this detailed description is actually in a big part an idealised vision of the distant country, built upon the Daoist concepts, myths concerning Western edges of the world and conceptualisation of an ideal, civilised country.

In the *Hou Han shu* Da Qin is presented as a rich country where food is always plentiful and inexpensive[92]. It is governed by honest monarch who listens to his subjects,[93] and abdicates in face of calamitous events, allowing another to

[91] Pliny in his *Geography* (1.12) describes a route of the caravan sent by Maes Titianos, a citizen of Hierapolis, to Sera Metropolis, considered to be the capital of Serica. The account seems to be reliable, since it was based on the earlier work of Marinos of Tyre, who may have been an acquaintance of Maes. The route is described in detail up to the *Lithinos Pyrgos* (Stone Tower), but here the route ends with a statement that the rest of the journey takes about 7 months. This unusual lack of detail suggests that the caravan did not reach Sera Metropolis, but stopped at *Lithinos Pyrgos* (a place located near the western border of Xinjiang, perhaps in the vicinity of Daraut Kurgan in modern Kyrgyzstan, as P'iankov 2015 argues). A detailed analysis of this account, relating the only known attempt of such a far travel undertaken by Roman merchants was published by J. D. Lerner (1998) and P. Bernard (2005).

[92] 穀食常賤，國用富饒 "The grain and food are always cheap, resources of the country abundant."

[93] 常使一人持囊隨王車，人有言事者，即以書投囊中，王至宮發省，理其枉直 "[The king] often order to a man to follow his carriage carrying a bag, those who have something to say

take his place[94] – an interesting transposition of the ancient concept of the mandate of heaven combined with the Confucian concept of a virtuous man as an ideal ruler.

A discussion on all of the elements in this construct goes far beyond the limits of this paper, its features, however, manifest in the list of textiles said to be produced in Da Qin. The types of cloth listed in the account have nothing to do with what was actually manufactured in the Roman Empire. It is also hard to agree with the statement of Leslie and Gardiner who, in the conclusion to their monumental work, *The Roman Empire in the Chinese Sources*, claim that "The list of products of Da Qin is acceptable as referring to the Roman Empire, so long as we realise that products from the other western countries may well be included under the general label of Da Qin."[95] They overlook one significant fact: there was no country west of China that produced mulberry silk during the Eastern Han, while the text emphasizes that the inhabitants of Da Qin plant mulberry trees and produce silk. Here, as is the case throughout the text, authentic information is mixed with a vision of the ideal, the civilized and the quasi-mythical. The list contains textiles exceptional for their beauty, like multi-coloured silks, textiles that are as expensive as they are exotic, like those weaved with gold or covered in gold, and those imbued with strange, quasi-magical purposes, like asbestos cloth. Even if some of fabrics were in fact actually produced in the Roman Empire, they were carefully chosen to reflect the other worldly quality of this distant region.

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[to the king], throw a letter to the bag. Arriving to the palace, the king opens the bag and examines the rightfulness of the cases."

[94] 其王無有常人，皆簡立賢者。國中災異及風雨不時，輒廢而更立，受放者甘黜不怨

"Their kings are not permanent [rulers], usually a virtuous man is chosen and established [as a king]. If disasters occur in the country, wind or rain at an unusual time, he is deposed and replaced immediately by another. The deposed [king] leaves willingly [and] does not complain."

[95] Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 280.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the interpretation of terms relating to fabrics from Da Qin (Roman Empire) in the *Account of Western Regions* (Xi Yu Zhuan) of *Hou Han shu* (The Book of Han), the official chronicle of the Later Han dynasty composed in the middle of the 5th century AD. A re-examination of the text reveals that Roman textiles as they appear in the Chinese Annals differ greatly from what we know of them in western literary accounts and archaeological remains. Moreover, the argument is made that the primary reason for this misunderstanding is due largely to Chinese philosophy and how the Chinese perceived the world beyond China's borders.