

DID RICHTHOFEN REALLY COIN “THE SILK ROAD”?

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There is little doubt that Ferdinand von Richthofen, the famous German geographer, played an important role in conceptualizing and popularizing the idea of a “silk road.” According to historian Daniel C. Waugh, “almost any discussion of the Silk Road today will begin with the obligatory reminder that the noted German geographer [Ferdinand von Richthofen] had coined the term, even if few seem to know where he published it and what he really meant” (2007: 1). But did Richthofen really invent the phrase “the Silk Road,” either in its singular (*die Seidenstrasse*) or plural (*Seidenstrassen*) usages? The German archaeologist and geographer Albert Herrmann certainly thought so. In 1910, Herrmann boldly declared that “it was he [Richthofen] who introduced into literature the apt name silk roads [*Seidenstrassen*]” (Herrmann 1910: 7). Three decades later, the Swedish archaeologist Folke Bergman further solidified Richthofen’s claim to fame with the observation that “Baron von Richthofen, the famous German geographer, has coined the name Silk Road for these ancient caravan routes, and this name has since been widely used by Westerners” (Bergman 1939: 41).

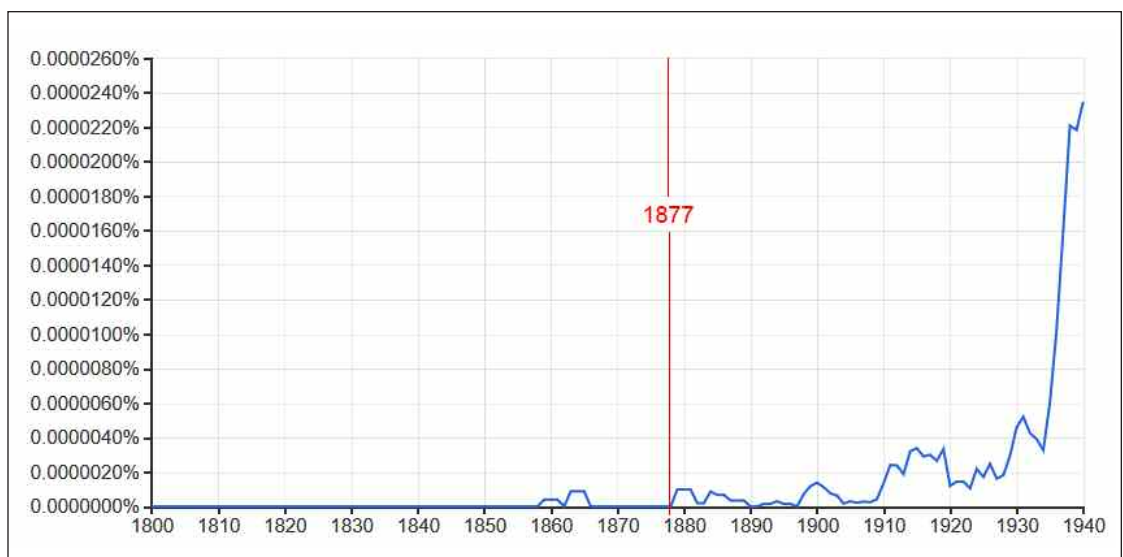
Though scholars have in recent decades made great strides toward a fuller understanding of the origins and spread of the Silk Road concept (Waugh 2007; Chin 2013; Jacobs 2020), the passive attribution of its original coinage to

Richthofen still begs further scrutiny. In their study of the conceptual history of the term “globalization,” Paul James and Manfred Stenger have observed that the process of “naming

the person who first conceived of a significant word or thing has been crucial for the evolution of modern Western public consciousness” (2014: 417). Because of this collective tendency, “intellectual innovators and technological inventors have been singled out and showered with praise” (417). Richthofen is an excellent example of the individualizing drive described by James and Stenger. As an intellectual innovator, Richthofen certainly did much to consolidate the concept of “the silk road” and introduce it to a broader, albeit still academic, audience. But was Richthofen truly the sole inventor of the term?

With the aid of electronic search engines, a question like this is now much easier to answer. If Richthofen invented the term in 1877, as is often asserted, then it should not appear in books or articles published prior to that date. But it does. By inserting the original German phrases into the Google Ngrams search engine, I was able to trace a history of usage that predates Richthofen by several decades. **Figure 1** shows the graph generated by Google after running a search for four variants of the original German terms for the silk road between the years 1800–1940: *Seidenstraße*, *Seidenstrasse*, *Seidenstraßen*, and *Seidenstrassen*. In it, we can see the gradual dissemination of the term “Silk Road” after 1877 and its sudden popularization in the 1930s. Although much fewer in num-

Fig. 1. Search results for German variants of “the Silk Road” on Google Ngrams.



bers, the graph also shows hits for these terms prior to 1877. Upon closer inspection, some of these turned out to be false positives, referencing street names that were merely named after silk. This demonstrates the need to exercise scholarly vigilance while using a tool like Google Ngram. Nevertheless, after carefully sifting through the results, some remarkable discoveries came to light. These discoveries prove that Richthofen did not invent the term “the Silk Road.”

The Silk Road before 1877

In 1874, a German high school teacher named Robert Mack completed a dissertation entitled “The Importance of the Black Sea for World Trade” (“Die Bedeutung des Schwarzen Meeres für den Welthandel”). In it, Mack explained how the Black Sea had historically served as the gateway for trade along the Silk Road to Europe and the Mediterranean:

The caravans of China—on the Silk Road [*auf der Seidenstraße*—[passed] through the Gobi across the Belurdagh to the lands on the Oxus and Jaxartes. For a long time, this road was the only one by which West Asia and India were connected to China. ... For traffic to the Mediterranean and Europe, these exceptionally important commercial centers in Asia depended, because of geographical conditions, on the Black Sea. (Mack 1874: 7)

In this passage, Mack outlines only a rudimentary itinerary for the Silk Road, which is said to pass from China to Central Asia and then continue onward from the Black Sea to Europe. This description is no match for the far more sophisticated one that Richthofen would provide just three years later in 1877. Since Mack’s focus lay with the Black Sea, the Silk Road appears in his dissertation only one time. Therefore, it seems safe to say that Mack merely borrowed the term from somewhere else and that its origin must be found further back in time.

One possible source of inspiration for Mack might have been Hermann Guthe’s *Textbook of Geography for Middle and Upper Classes of Higher Education Institutions* (*Lehrbuch der Geographie für die mittleren und oberen Classen höherer Bildungs-Anstalten*), which was published six years earlier in 1868. As is evident from the title of this

work, Guthe, a teacher at the Polytechnicum in Hannover, was writing for an audience of teachers, students, and autodidacts of geography. In Chapter 7, which deals with the geography of Asia, Guthe included the following passage:

Along these ways the Buddhist missionaries (Xuanzang 640 AD) pushed into India from China; from here Roman traders reached the “Silk Road” [*Seidenstraße*] to bring that precious product [i.e., silk] to the West, and still one can see the remains of the “Stone Tower” [*Steineren Thurms*], a large caravanserai, where the exchange of goods took place. The Nestorians trod the same route to establish Christian communities in Central Asia and to bring to the Mongols a script and the first beginnings of higher civilization, and finally they were followed by Muhammadian preachers. (Guthe 1868: 176)

Guthe pointed out the importance of the Silk Road for both trade and cultural exchanges, with Roman merchants travelling the same route as Buddhist, Nestorian, and Islamic missionaries. These are familiar themes to any student of the Silk Road.

So is Guthe the unlikely inventor of *die Seidenstraße*? It seems not. A closer look at the list of search results on Google Ngram reveals several that predate Guthe’s textbook. In 1858, Johann Kaeuffer, a theologian from Saxony, published his three-volume *History of East Asia* (*Geschichte von Ost-Asien*). In volume two, Kaeuffer mentions “the Silk Road” (*Seidenstrasse*) on five separate occasions (1858: 120, 413, 421, 719, 794). Unlike Mack, however, who considered the Black Sea to constitute an important segment of the silk road, Kaeuffer concluded that the Silk Road began along the banks of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia before heading east to China (Kaeuffer 1858: 413, 719)

Throughout his book, Kaeuffer deploys the Silk Road as an established term, never explaining what he means by it. In several of these usages, Kaeuffer paired the term “Silk Road” with the adjective “old,” and on one occasion he even goes so far as to invoke its fame: “Which was the old famous Silk Road [*die alte berühmte Seidenstrasse*] to China from the west?” (1858: 413). This suggests that he expected his readers to be familiar with the term, while simultaneously hinting at the existence of an earlier source. Kaeuffer himself points the way. In a

chapter on the trade of silk, tea, and rhubarb through Central Asia, Kaeuffer indicates that he drew on the work of the German geographer Carl Ritter and his research into the transfer of sericulture from China to the West: “And here once more,” Kaeuffer wrote, “is due the most honorable recognition of great merit to the great geographer Karl Ritter” (1858: 411).

Ritter [Fig. 2], one of the fathers of modern geography, was the author of an expansive work entitled *Geography in Relation to Nature and Human History* (*Die Erdkunde im Verhältniss zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen*). The first edition, printed in 1817–18, consisted of two volumes. In the second volume, Ritter discussed the historical role of Fergana as the “country of passage for Central Asia.” In it, he frequently deploys the term “Seres,” the inhabitants of Serica, the land where silk was believed to originate:

This is the eastern continuation of the passage, which Ibn Hawqal named “the great road of Fergana” [*die große Straße von Ferghana*] from Samarkand to Khujand. It is also the same great trade route to the Seres [*große Handelsstraße zu den Seren*] from where the great overland road passed through Bactra to Barhgaza in the south to India. ... To this trade route, to which we have already referred to on Ptolemy ... [Ibn Hawqal] adds the interesting news of four rich and famous cities of the Seres, to which the caravans journeyed to get silk and the fine Serian fabrics that made these people so famous. (Ritter 1818/2: 548–49)

As described by Ptolemy, the “great road of Fergana” was imagined to extend from Samarkand to Seres in the east and thence southward into India. Ritter emphasized its significance by pointing out that caravans hauled silk along this road from Seres to Central Asia and beyond. This great passage was, according to Ritter, the link between the Near East and the Far East, connecting China with Turkestan, Iran, and India. Note the absence of Greece and Rome. A more detailed knowledge of this route, Ritter promised, would shine a light on the history of the peoples of the old continent (Ritter 1818/2: 549). Thus it is clear that the *concept* of the Silk Road was manifestly present in Ritter’s depiction of Fergana. Then, as he compares the metallurgical achievements of the Parthians and the ancient Chinese, Ritter takes a great stride towards

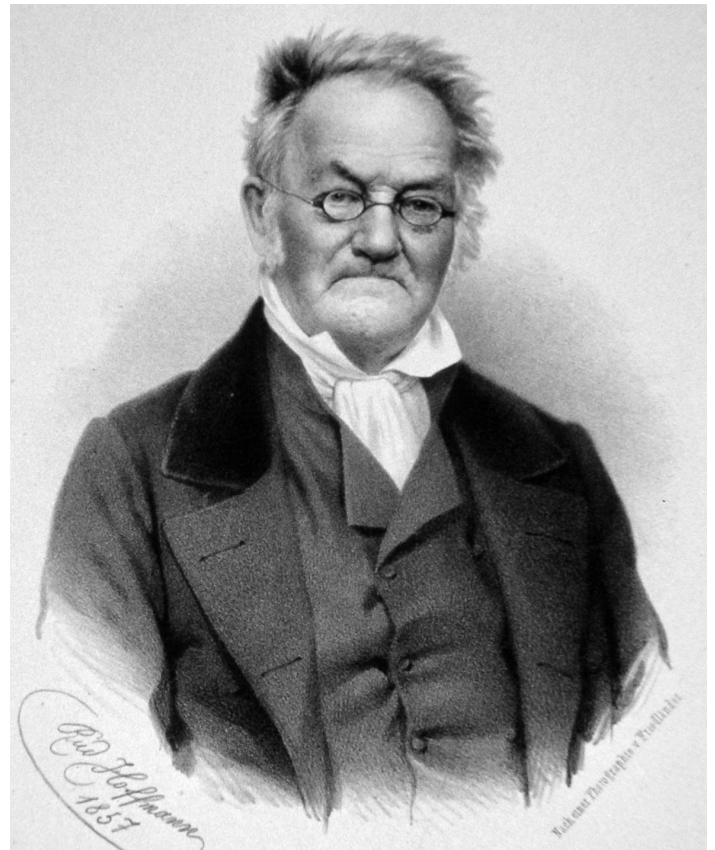


Fig. 2. The German geographer Carl Ritter (1779–1859). Lithograph of a photograph by Rudolf Hoffmann, 1857.

reifying this concept into a term:

Note that Pliny praises the steelwork of the Seres as the most excellent, and Parthian iron as the second best; [and] that the ore mountains of Osruschena geographically lie between both on the big road of the Seres [*Straße der Seren*] through Fergana. (Ritter 1818/2: 558)

With his use here of the phrase *Straße der Seren*, or “road of the Seres,” Ritter draws another obvious link between silk and the route through Central Asia that connected China with lands further west. This makes the *Straße der Seren* a clear precursor to the phrase “Silk Road.” But Ritter’s association of silk with trans-Eurasian interaction was not novel. Already in 1805, Joseph Hager visualized the route of the expedition of Maes Titianus on a map entitled “Route of a Greek Caravan to China” (“Route d’une Caravanne Greque a la Chine”) (Hager 1805: 120–22). As pointed out by Tamara Chin (2013: 201), the imagery of a mulberry tree and silkworms placed in the bottom right-hand corner of the map indicate an association between silk and trans-Eurasian exchange.

The second edition of Ritter's *Die Erdkunde*, published between 1822 and 1859, greatly surpassed its predecessor in both scale and ambition. Of its nineteen volumes, fourteen dealt with the geography of Asia. In the second volume, published in 1832, Ritter returned to the "road of the Seres" (*Straße der Seren*) in a brief annotation on the spread of Nestorianism to the east. As he describes the path followed by Nestorian missionaries, the *Straße der Seren* starts as the "great trade route to China":

Over Merv ... and over Bactria to Samarcand and Sascar [Kashgar] goes the main road of the Christian-Nestorian missions of this time. Also here is the entry to the great trade route to China, on the upper Hoangho [*Huanghe*, "Yellow River"], this is the old road of the Seres [*die alte Straße der Seren*], which was already described by Ptolemy. (Ritter 1832/2: 285)

In 1838, Ritter published the eighth volume of *Die Erdkunde*, which covered the Iranian world. In chapter thirteen, Ritter touched upon the importance of Gilan, a province in northwestern Iran, as a center of silk production. He then posed the question of how Gilan had become such a wealthy center of sericulture. First off, he rejected the claim of Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin, an 18th century German natural scientist, that silkworms and sericulture were indigenous to Gilan. Instead, Ritter pointed to China as the most likely source of sericulture. How then did it end up in Gilan? Initially, Ritter suggested a maritime route through the Arabian Sea to India and Sri Lanka and then onward to China. But he subsequently declared that this wasn't the only passage along which sericulture could have been transferred to the west:

Besides this southern maritime route over Cey-

lon, India and the Persian-Arabian Sea ... opened at almost the same time the northern continental route of the silk road [*nördliche continentale Weg der Seidenstraße*], from China westwards to the Caspian Sea. (Ritter 1838/8: 692)

Here we see Ritter identify the path of the Silk Road as a northern continental route from China to the Caspian Sea. Before we wonder if this usage represents the first appearance of the term "Silk Road" [Fig. 3], we should try to understand what Ritter meant by it. After mentioning the *Seidenstraße*, Ritter summed up the evidence for the existence of an overland route between China and the West. He first turns to the ancients: Pliny, Ptolemy, Dionysius Periegetus, Agathemerus, Ammian Marcellus, and others. Their accounts, according to Ritter, provided ample proof for the existence of an ancient route from Fergana to Samarkand and

Bukhara. Curiously, Ritter referred to this route as the *Serenstraße*. This seems to be a variation on the *Straße der Seren* ("road of the Seres"), which in volume two still encompassed Merv and Kashgar (Ritter 1838: 692–93).

Außer diesem südlichen maritimen Wege über Ceilon, Indien und das persisch-arabische Meer, von welchem aus mit der Waare die Griechen und Römer den ächtchinesischen Namen der Seide, Sericum, (sij, Sir, bei Chinesen) kennen lernen konnten, wenn er ihnen nicht auf nördlichem Wege über Persien durch Stevia's zugekommen, öffnet sich aber fast gleichzeitig der nördliche continentale Weg der Seidenstraße, von China gegen den Westen zum kaspischen See hin. Dies ergibt sich aus Plinius (VI. 20) und Ptolemäus Berichten von der Seidencultur, dem Seidenhandel und der Serenstraße zu den Sinen, nach Marinus Tyrius Aussagen von dem macedonischen Handelsmanne und Reisenden Maës (genannt Titianus, s. Ptolem. I.

Fig. 3. Excerpt from Ritter's eighth volume of *Die Erdkunde* (1838/8: 692). The portion highlighted in yellow ("*nördliche continentale Weg der Seidenstraße*") may represent the first usage of the term "*Seidenstraße*."

Ritter then continued by addressing the fact that the route from Fergana into China was still, despite the great efforts of geographers, unclear. Here Ritter gives us a hint of his interpretation of the terms *Seidenstraße* and *Straße der Seren*. In volume eight, which concerns the Iranian world, he writes the following:

Here is not the place for the road of the Seres [*Straße der Seren*], from China over high Central Asia ... especially since what matters to us here now is the location of the western stations from the Stone Tower on to the Caspian Sea. (Ritter 1838/8: 693)

Ritter's *Straße der Seren* was confined to the route

between China and Central Asia. The precise location of western stations or trade stops between the Stone Tower, which Ritter believed to be the Takht-i-Suleiman Rock in Osh, and the Caspian Sea, was his true object of interest. It seems, then, that Ritter's understanding of the terms *Straße der Seren* and *Seidenstraße* was as follows. *Straße der Seren* referred to the stretch of roads from China to Central Asia. These roads, however, constituted merely one segment of the much greater *Seidenstraße*, which covered the whole distance from China to the West, in this case the Caspian Sea.

But this cannot be anything more than a cautious conclusion. In *Die Erdkunde*, Ritter only used the term *Seidenstraße* once and did not provide a clear definition of the term. At the same time, the German geographer Ferdinand Heinrich Müller also used a slight variation of these terms. In his 1837 book *The Ugric Tribe [Der Ugrische Volksstamm]*, Müller defined the *Serenstraße* as a route stretching from China to Europe:

Enterprising merchants, who from the furthest East on the great road of the Seres [*auf der großen Serenstraße*] passed across the East-Asian highlands through the Alpine land of Fergana on the upper Jaxartes (Gihon), brought precious woven silk from the homeland of the silk worm to the Western world. (Müller 1837: 63)

In light of the above evidence, are we now obliged to crown Ritter, who first deployed the term *Seidenstraße* in 1838, as the true inventor of the phrase “the Silk Road”? The immensity of *Die Erdkunde* allows us to witness the gradual reification of an abstract historical concept into a concrete historical term, from vague concepts regarding “a great passage” and the “great road of Fergana” over the *Straße der Seren* into, finally, the *Seidenstraße*. It is important, however, not to fall victim to the individualizing drive that once crowned Richthofen the inventor of the Silk Road. Ritter's definition of the *Seidenstraße* remained limited and unclear in relation to the term *Straße der Seren*.

Moreover, it is certainly possible that there is still yet another author who used the term before Ritter. In order to write *Die Erdkunde*, Ritter drew upon numerous ancient, medieval, and modern

authors. Some notable near contemporaries that Ritter often referred to in relation to trans-Eurasian interaction were Abel Rémusat, Julius Klaproth, and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville. A closer study of the work of these men could cast more light on the roots of the term “the Silk Road.”

Ritter's deployment of the term “silk road” has another fascinating ramification. The Silk Road concept is, because of its relation to Richthofen, broadly considered to be a product of Western imperialist thinking (Waugh 2007; Chin 2013; Jacobs 2020). Ritter's earlier use of the Silk Road draws this assumption into question. Could it be that the Silk Road's inception is related not to Western imperial and colonial ambitions, but rather to more benign cosmopolitan reasoning? Tamara Chin has already pointed out an early link between the Silk Road concept and cosmopolitanism in Immanuel Kant's description of the ancient silk trade between Europe and “the Land of the People of Ser” within a narrative of perpetual peace (Chin 2013: 196). If so, this would reinforce Marie Thorsten's interpretation of the Silk Road as the symbol of an imagined global community, right down to the very origins of the concept (Thorsten 2005).

Ritter vs. Richthofen

Ritter used the term Silk Road 39 years prior to Richthofen. Furthermore, there is little chance that Richthofen was unaware of previous uses of the term. After all, in his oft-cited *China, Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien*, Richthofen made specific reference to Kaeuffer's work (Richthofen 1877/a: 700). Not only that, but his thinking about China was heavily influenced by Ritter (Osterhammel 1987: 167–69). He therefore could not have invented the term independently. This revelation, however, does not mean that Richthofen has now lost all his former significance. In the end, Richthofen still set in motion an important new development in the conceptual history of the Silk Road.

First, he provided a far more precise definition of the Silk Road, in part because he had so much more material with which to work. Between 1838 and 1877, historical and geographical knowledge developed by leaps and bounds. In the decade immediately preceding Richthofen's deployment of

“the Silk Road” term, for instance, Henry Yule (1866) published *Cathay and the Way Thither* and Emile Bretschneider (1875) published *Chinese Travelers of the Middle Ages to West Asia (Chinesische Reisende des Mittelalter nach West-Asien)*.

Richthofen was, therefore, able to produce a far more precise and informed definition of the latest iteration of the Silk Road concept (Jacobs 2020). But his definition was, in the words of Daniel Waugh, “really quite limited” (2007: 5). Richthofen described the routes along which silk was traded through Central Asia from 114 BCE until 120 CE, and justified this tight temporal delineation by stating that before 114 BCE trade in silk had been indirect and unorganized. After 120 CE, when the Han dynasty had retreated from Central Asia, Richthofen asserted, the nature of the silk trade changed so dramatically that “the concept of transcontinental silk roads (*transcontinentaler Seidenstrassen*) has for later eras lost its meaning.” (Richthofen 1877b: 95–122). In addition to his clear temporal criteria, Richthofen’s *Seidenstraße* was also defined in strict spatial terms. It was, as Tamara Chin has pointed out, a “measurable route” (2013: 202).

Second, Richthofen consolidated the concept of the Silk Road under a single term. In the first volume of *China*, Richthofen referred to trans-Eurasian trade routes with various terms. For the southern route through the Tarim Basin, for example, he uses both *Sererstrasse* (“Seres road”) and *Karawanenstrasse* (“caravan route”). But then, like Ritter, he applies the *Seidenstrasse* as an overarching term for the whole route, from China to Iran and beyond (Richthofen 1877/1: 500). On June 2, 1877, during a lecture given at the Society for Geography (*Gesellschaft für Erdkunde*) in Berlin, Richthofen abandoned earlier terms such as *Sererstrasse*. In its place, Richthofen talked only about the *Seidenstrassen*, in its plural form, which was invoked both in the title and throughout the lecture (Richthofen 1877b). It is clear that Richthofen’s work, unlike that of Ritter, shows an evolution towards the consolidation of the Silk Road concept under a single term and a single road, free from the ambiguity of various overlapping terms.

Last but not least, Richthofen’s use of the term

marked the first step toward the transfer of the *Seidenstrasse* from German to French and English. Prior to 1877, Google Ngram does not produce any hits for English and French versions of *Seidenstrasse*. Apparently, Ritter’s use of the term did not inspire French scholars who were studying the same topics. In 1842, for example, Jean-Marie Pardessus published an article entitled “A Report on the Silk Trade among the Ancients” (“Mémoire sur le commerce de la soie chez les anciens”). Though Pardessus gives a description, using Ptolemy’s accounts of Maes Titianus, of the route along which silk had been carried from east to west, he makes no mention of either Ritter’s term or Ritter himself (Pardessus 1842). Even more astonishing is Ernest Pariset’s *The History of Silk (Histoire de la Soie)*, which appeared in 1862. Despite providing his readers with a detailed and comprehensive overview of historical interactions involving silk across Eurasia, Pariset also avoids any mention of the term.

In stark contrast to Ritter, Richthofen’s liberal deployment of the *Seidenstrasse* in 1877 lecture in Berlin found its way into two separate English translations just one year after the appearance of his multivolume *China* series. In 1878, two articles bearing the exact same title, “The Ancient Silk Road Trader’s Route across Central Asia,” appeared separately in both *The Geographical Magazine* (Markham 1878a) and *The Popular Science Monthly* (Markham 1878b)—one for British audiences and one for the Americans (Chin 2013: 198–99). Both made use of the terms “silk route” and “silk road.” (The French translation, which appeared in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, did not mention the Silk Road (Chanoine 1878: 81–85).

The difference between the reception of Ritter and Richthofen can be explained by major changes that occurred in the field of geography during the decades that had passed between their two careers. When Ritter published the seventh volume of *Die Erdkunde* in 1838, geography was still a discipline in its infancy. By the time Richthofen’s *China* hit the press, however, geography had become a respectable science with a dynamic transnational community of scholars and enthusiasts. In 1871, for example, the first International Geographic Congress was held in Antwerp—a

transnational means of communication among like-minded scholars of historical geography that was not available in Ritter's day.

Although Richthofen was the first to push the term across linguistic borders, a more significant step in the *Seidenstrasse's* venture out of the Germanophone world came in 1882 with the publication of the seventh volume of Élisée Reclus's *New Universal Geography: The Earth and Men* (*Nouvelle Géographie Universelle: La terre et les hommes*). Reclus, a French geographer who had studied under Carl Ritter at the University of Berlin, frequently referred to Richthofen throughout his work in praiseworthy terms. In his *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, Reclus characterized Chinese Turkestan as follows:

Chinese Turkestan has always had great importance as a place of passage. . . . Greek and Chinese merchants met on the Silk Route [*la route de la Soie*]; Buddhist missionaries, Arab merchants, the great Venetian Marco Polo, then other European travelers of the Middle Ages all had to stay in the oases of Chinese Turkestan before resuming their painful march. (Reclus 1882: 104)

In 1895, Reclus's *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* was also translated into English and published in both Britain and the United States as *The Earth and its Inhabitants*. It contained the same characterization of Chinese Turkestan, translating *la route de la Soie* as "the Silk Route" (Reclus 1895: 58–59). Nevertheless, even after 1877, despite all of Richthofen's and Reclus's efforts, the term "silk road" remained confined mostly to the Germanophone world and academic circles. The real breakthrough of the term into French and English should be sought in the 1920s and 1930s, when Sven Hedin, Peter Fleming, Ella Maillart, Rosita Forbes, and others published travel writings about Central Asia that reached a broad audience.

Conclusion

Richthofen did not coin the term "silk road." Scholars such as Robert Mack, Hermann Guthe, and Johann Kaeuffer preceded him. Richthofen was but one of many links in the long chain that brought the *Seidenstrasse* out of academic obscurity and closer to the international fame it enjoys today. He

provided a precise definition, consolidated the concept in a single term, and helped to set in motion the export of *Seidenstrasse* to other languages.

A likely candidate to replace Richthofen as inventor of the term "silk road" is Carl Ritter. Before we make Ritter the new subject of "obligatory reminders" in our discussions about the Silk Road, however, we might do well to step back and ponder the implications of such a move. If the results of my inquiry into the origin of the "silk road" term have taught us anything, it is that we should not concentrate our attention on one single individual. Instead, we should exchange our biographical approach for a prosopographical approach—one that appreciates the complexities of the Silk Road's conceptual and terminological history among many actors and across many linguistic and political boundaries. After all, the reification of the Silk Road concept into a concrete single term was the result of a team effort from a community of scholars that spanned generations.

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