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The Idea of a Maritime Silk Road: the History of an Idea

The Sogdian traders leading their caravans across Inner Asia, or the Persian sailors crossing the Indian Ocean were not aware they were contributing to the making of "Silk Roads." The idea of a "silk Road" across Inner Asia and the Indian Ocean into the South China Sea is the creation of the German Geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905). This presentation traces how von Richthofen's ideas were appropriated by 20th century archaeologists and historians of South and Southeast Asia to connect the histories of these two regions with that of West Asia and China. The presentation traces the historiography of this idea of a Maritime Silk Road crossing the Arabian Sea to connect Rome with India and eastwards across the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea and China. The presentation concludes with some comments on how this metaphor of a Maritime Silk road has been appropriated by China for its political-economic initiative to develop a series of ports across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to promote maritime connectivity of China with West Asia and Africa.