



THE MARITIME SILK ROAD: A WORLD HERITAGE PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDORS

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Abstract

The Maritime Silk Road, an ancient maritime trade network linking China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and the Mediterranean, is one of humanity's most significant transnational heritage corridors. Unlike the terrestrial Silk Road, inscribed as the "Silk Roads: Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" (2014), it remains underrepresented on the World Heritage List. This paper examines the Maritime Silk Road from a World Heritage perspective, analyzing its evolution, regional traits, core ports, and existing inscribed sites—including Quanzhou (2021), Venice (1987), Melaka and George Town (2008), Lamu Old Town (2001), Kilwa Kisiwani (1981), and Stone Town (2000). Using symbolic narrative and spatial production frameworks, it argues these sites form an unrecognized transnational corridor. Drawing on the terrestrial Silk Road's nomination model, the paper explores a serial transnational nomination for the Maritime Silk Road, discussing its implications for UNESCO's "5C" framework and Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords : Maritime Silk Road; World Heritage; transnational heritage; cultural routes; Quanzhou; Venice; Alexandria; heritage corridors; UNESCO; Belt and Road Initiative

I. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The Silk Road, as a concept, has traditionally been associated with overland routes connecting China to Central Asia and the Mediterranean. However, parallel to these terrestrial networks, a vast maritime network — the Maritime Silk Road (also known as the "Porcelain Road" or "Spice Route") — flourished for over two millennia. From the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) through the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, this maritime network facilitated the exchange of goods (silk, porcelain, spices, tea, ivory), technologies (compass, papermaking, gunpowder), religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), and artistic traditions.

As early as 1913, French sinologist Édouard Chavannes proposed the concept of the "Maritime Silk Road," defining it as the peaceful, friendly, and equal exchanges between East and West via the sea (Chavannes, 1913; cited in Situ and Xu, 2024). In China, Liang Qichao was a pioneer in this field. In his seminal essay "The Position of Guangdong in World History," Liang systematically analyzed the historical evolution, routes, ports, and cultural significance of Guangdong's maritime trade network, identifying seven developmental stages from the Eastern Han to the Opium War (Situ and Xu, 2024). Liang's work laid the foundation for subsequent Maritime Silk Road studies in China.

Despite its historical significance, the Maritime Silk Road has not yet received the same level of recognition within the UNESCO World Heritage system as its terrestrial counterpart. The "Silk Roads: Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2014 as a transnational serial property involving China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (UNESCO, 2014). However, no comparable nomination exists for the Maritime Silk Road.

Table 1. Routes, Trade, Culture, and Nodes of the Maritime Silk Road

Country/Region	Main Routes	Major Trade Goods	Cultural Exchanges	Key Nodes
China	Southeast coast of China to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean	Silk, porcelain, tea, spices	Spread of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese character culture	Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Ningbo
Vietnam	South China Sea to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean	Spices, ivory, pearls	Buddhism, architectural art	Hoi An, Da Nang
Malaysia	Strait of Malacca route	Spices, tin, timber	Islam, Malay culture	Malacca, Penang
Indonesia	South China Sea to the Indian Ocean	Spices, timber, gold	Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam	Sumatra, Java
India	Indian Ocean to the Arabian Sea	Cotton, spices, gemstones	Buddhism, Hinduism, mathematics, astronomy	Gujarat, Calicut
Sri Lanka	Indian Ocean route	Gemstones, spices, ivory	Buddhism, architectural art	Colombo, Galle
Arabia	Arabian Sea to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf	Spices, pearls, frankincense	Islam, Arabic science, literature	Hormuz, Aden
Persia (Iran)	Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea	Carpets, spices, gemstones	Islam, Persian literature, art	Hormuz, Shiraz
East Africa	Indian Ocean to the East African coast	Ivory, gold, slaves	Islam, Swahili culture	Mogadishu, Mombasa
Egypt	Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea	Spices, gold, glass	Islam, Christianity, architectural art	Alexandria, Egypt
Italy	Mediterranean route	Silk, porcelain, spices	Renaissance, Christianity	Venice, Genoa

This table systematically organizes the core attributes of major countries and regions along the Maritime Silk Road, unveiling the inherent complexity and profound diversity of this ancient trans-regional exchange network.

**Figure 1. The Strait of Malacca**

Note: All photos in this paper were taken by the authors on-site during field investigations.

From a geo-commercial perspective, the Maritime Silk Road originates from China's southeastern coastal hubs, traverses Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, and stretches all the way to the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa and the Mediterranean littoral, constituting a continuous global trade artery. Leveraging their distinct geographical endowments, countries along the route exported regionally iconic commodities including silk, porcelain, spices, gemstones and ivory, forging a highly complementary international trade ecosystem.



Figure 2. Bosphorus Strait, Türkiye

On the cultural and religious dimension, this route functions far beyond a mere conduit for goods, standing as a pivotal bridge for inter-civilization mutual learning. Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Confucian traditions converged and disseminated along its paths, alongside deep integration of mathematical knowledge, astronomical observations, literary traditions and architectural aesthetics, which indelibly shaped the cultural landscapes of all societies involved.

In terms of critical nodal points, port cities such as Quanzhou, Malacca, Calicut, Hormuz and Venice, acting as both commercial linchpins and cultural melting pots, fulfilled irreplaceable functions in bridging the Eastern and Western worlds, bearing witness to the prosperity and pluralistic coexistence that defined the early phase of archaic globalization.



Figure 3. Istanbul, Türkiye

The Maritime Silk Road was an important ancient maritime trade network connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, East Africa and the Mediterranean region. It covered a wide range and involved multiple key areas. Ports such as Quanzhou, Guangzhou and Ningbo on the southeast coast of China were the starting points of the Maritime Silk Road. These cities became important trade hubs during the Tang and Song dynasties, attracting merchants from all over the world. As a vital channel for trade and cultural exchanges between the East and the West in ancient times, the major regions along the Maritime Silk Road had their own characteristics, forming diverse geographical, economic and cultural features.



Figure 4. The Mediterranean, Greece (the western terminus region of the Maritime Silk Road)

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Narrative and Spatial Production

Recent scholarship has enriched our understanding of the Silk Road as a cultural symbol. Jiang and Hou (2025), drawing on Peircean semiotics and Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of "storyworlds," argue that the Silk Road has evolved from a specific trade route into a regulated symbol whose core connotation — "material exchange and cultural exchange" — has become a metaphor for "connection." This metaphor enables its "accessibility" across different cultural contexts, linking the storyworld to the real world and to people's psychological worlds (Jiang and Hou, 2025: 103-111). This theoretical insight is crucial for understanding why the Maritime Silk Road can serve as a basis for transnational heritage cooperation today.

Similarly, Zhao and Zhao (2025), studying the "Changdao Fishing Chant" as an example of maritime intangible cultural heritage, employ Henri Lefebvre's concept of "spatial production" to analyze the transformation of cultural spaces. They distinguish three dimensions: spatial practice, spatial representation, and representational space, arguing that heritage space production requires overlapping spatial landscapes, integrated spatial conceptions, and multi-agent spatial participation (Zhao and Zhao, 2025: 44-51).

Chen (2021) further argues that the success of different civilizations on the Maritime Silk Road depended on their ability to solve intertemporal commitment problems and build trust networks, with Protestant and Islamic civilizations having advantages over Confucian civilization in this regard (Chen, 2021: 3-26). This civilizational comparison provides additional context for understanding the Maritime Silk Road's evolution.



Figure 5. Venice, Italy

1.3 Research Questions

This paper addresses three research questions:

- What is the historical and geographical scope of the Maritime Silk Road, and what are its key nodes and routes?
- Which existing World Heritage properties are located along the Maritime Silk Road, and how do they collectively represent this heritage corridor?
- Is a serial transnational nomination for the Maritime Silk Road feasible, and what lessons can be drawn from the terrestrial Silk Roads nomination?

1.4 Significance

This study has both academic and practical significance. Academically, it contributes to the growing literature on maritime heritage, cultural routes, and transnational heritage governance. Practically, it provides a conceptual framework for States Parties considering a future transnational nomination for the Maritime Silk Road, aligning with UNESCO's Global Strategy.

II. Data and Methods

2.1 Data Sources

Historical and geographical data on the Maritime Silk Road were drawn from published scholarship, including Li and Dong (2021), Liu (2011), Hansen (2012), Situ and Xu (2024), Chen (2021), and Fan (2021). World Heritage data were sourced from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre official website (December 2025). Port and route information was compiled from historical records and archaeological evidence.

2.2 Case Selection

Six World Heritage properties were selected for analysis based on two criteria: (1) their historical role as nodes on the Maritime Silk Road, and (2) their inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. These include Quanzhou (China), Venice and its Lagoon (Italy), Melaka and George Town (Malaysia), Lamu Old Town (Kenya), Kilwa Kisiwani (Tanzania), and Stone Town of Zanzibar (Tanzania). Additional potential nodes (Alexandria, Aden, Hormuz, Istanbul, and Morocco) are discussed as candidates for future nominations.

2.3 Analytical Framework

This study adopts a **cultural route/heritage corridor** analytical framework, drawing on the concept of “serial transnational nominations” as defined in the UNESCO Operational Guidelines (UNESCO, 2025). The analysis integrates historical geography, heritage studies, semiotics, spatial production theory, and international policy analysis.

III. The Maritime Silk Road: Historical Overview

3.1 Origins and Evolution

The Maritime Silk Road originated during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). As Situ and Xu (2024) summarize, drawing on Liang Qichao's periodization, the development of the Maritime Silk Road can be divided into seven stages:

- 1. Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE):** Initial opening of maritime routes from Guangdong to the Indian Ocean.
- 2. Jin to Sui Dynasties (265–618 CE):** Increasing development of maritime trade. According to Liang Qichao, “Guangdong merchants held the maritime transportation rights between East and West for nearly 500 years” (cited in Situ & Xu, 2024: 116).
- 3. Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE):** Peak of maritime trade. Guangzhou became “a world-class metropolis.” Arab and Persian merchants settled in Guangzhou, numbering up to 120,000.
- 4. Southern Han (917–971 CE):** Decline due to the court's mistreatment of foreign merchants.
- 5. Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE):** Revival of maritime trade. The Maritime Trade Superintendency was established.
- 6. Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE):** Transition period. Overland routes were more important.
- 7. Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911 CE):** The arrival of European colonial powers fundamentally changed maritime trade. The Opium War (1840–1842) marked the end of the traditional Maritime Silk Road.

Fan (2021) further notes that the modern period (post-1840) saw the convergence of land and maritime Silk Roads as China was global trade, accelerating China's economic outward orientation and industrialization (Fan, 2021: 71-81).

3.2 The Axial Age Connection

Cheng and Duan (2023) explore the relationship between Karl Jaspers' "Axial Age" (800–200 BCE) and the Silk Road. They note that Jaspers himself puzzled over how three independent civilizations — China, India, and the West — simultaneously experienced a spiritual breakthrough. Jaspers suggested that the nomadic peoples of Central Asia may have played a role, and by the end of the Axial Age, there were already contacts between India and the West, and between China and the West via Central Asia (Cheng and Duan, 2023: 105-107). The Silk Road, both overland and maritime, became the material infrastructure that carried the spiritual legacy of the Axial Age across Eurasia.

3.3 Major Routes

The Maritime Silk Road consisted of two major routes: the Eastern Route from Chinese ports to Korea and Japan, and the Southern Route from Quanzhou and Guangzhou through Southeast Asia, across the Indian Ocean to South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean.



Figure 6. Persian Gulf, Sharjah

Table 2. Major Routes and Key Nodes of the Maritime Silk Road

Route Segment	Key Ports/Nodes	Historical Function
China–Southeast Asia	Guangzhou, Quanzhou → Malacca, Java	Silk, porcelain, spice exchange
Southeast Asia–South Asia	Malacca → Calicut, Colombo, Galle	Transshipment hub
South Asia–Arabian Peninsula	Calicut → Hormuz, Muscat, Aden	Gem, pearl, frankincense trade
Arabian Peninsula–East Africa	Aden → Mogadishu, Mombasa, Kilwa, Zanzibar	Ivory, gold, slave trade
Red Sea–Mediterranean	Zanzibar → Aden → Jeddah → Alexandria	Red Sea route
Mediterranean–Europe	Alexandria → Istanbul → Venice	European distribution

Source: Compiled by the author based on Situ and Xu (2024), and Li and Dong (2021).

3.4 Trade Goods and Cultural Exchange

The Maritime Silk Road was not merely a conduit for commodities; it was a network of cultural, religious, and technological exchange. Trade goods exported from China included silk, porcelain, tea, and copper coins. Imports included spices, incense, precious stones, ivory, gold, and glassware. Cultural exchange included the spread of Buddhism from India to China and Southeast Asia, Islam from Arabia to Southeast Asia and East Africa, and Christianity to Asia. Chinese porcelain found in East African archaeological sites attests to the depth of this exchange. Conversely, Islamic geometric patterns influenced Chinese ceramic design during the Yuan and Ming dynasties (Guy, 1990).



Figure 7. The Red Sea (Egypt)

VI. World Heritage Properties along the Maritime Silk Road

This section analyzes six World Heritage properties that represent key nodes on the Maritime Silk Road.

4.1 Quanzhou: Emporium of the World in Song-Yuan China (China, 2021)

Inscribed: 2021 | **Criteria:** (iv)

Quanzhou was the starting point of the Maritime Silk Road and the world's largest port during the Song-Yuan period. Known as "Zayton" in Arab and Western sources, Quanzhou had trade relations with over 100 countries. The serial property includes 22 component sites reflecting the city's integrated maritime trade system: administrative buildings, religious architecture (Qingjing Mosque, one of China's oldest mosques), infrastructure (stone docks, bridges), production sites (porcelain kilns, iron smelting), and defensive structures (lighthouses) (UNESCO, 2021). Quanzhou's inscription explicitly recognizes the Maritime Silk Road as the context for its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).

4.2 Venice and its Lagoon (Italy, 1987)

Inscribed: 1987 | **Criteria:** (i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(v)(vi)

Venice was the western terminus of the Maritime Silk Road and the primary European gateway for Eastern goods. Built on 118 islands, Venice rose to become a major maritime republic during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Venice's connection to the Silk Road is most famously embodied by Marco Polo, whose Travels became one of Europe's most influential descriptions of the East (Larner, 1999). The city's architecture reflects its global connections: St. Mark's Basilica incorporates Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic elements.



Figure 8. Venice, Italy

4.3 Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca (Malaysia, 2008)

Inscribed: 2008 | **Criteria:** (ii)(iii)(iv)

The Strait of Malacca has been a vital maritime choke point for over two millennia. Melaka was founded around 1400 and quickly became the most important trading port in Southeast Asia. Zheng He's fleet visited Melaka multiple times. The city's architecture reflects multicultural heritage: Chinese shop houses, Portuguese fortifications, Dutch administrative buildings, and Malay palaces coexist within the historic core (UNESCO, 2008).



Figure 9. Melaka Historic City

4.4 Lamu Old Town (Kenya, 2001)

Inscribed: 2001 | **Criteria:** (ii)(iv)(vi)

Lamu is the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa. It was a key node in the Indian Ocean trade network, linking the African interior to Arabia, Persia, India, and China. Lamu's coral stone architecture reflects a fusion of Swahili, Arab, Persian, Indian, and Chinese influences. Archaeological excavations have uncovered Chinese porcelain dating to the Song and Ming dynasties (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

4.5 Kilwa Kisiwani (Tanzania, 1981, on Danger List since 2004)

Inscribed: 1981 | **Criteria:** (iii)

Kilwa Kisiwani was one of the most powerful city-states on the East African coast from the 9th to the 16th centuries, controlling the gold trade from the interior. Excavations have yielded large quantities of Chinese celadon and blue-and-white porcelain. Kilwa was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2004 due to deterioration and environmental pressures (UNESCO, 1981).

4.6 Stone Town of Zanzibar (Tanzania, 2000)

Inscribed: 2000 | **Criteria:** (ii)(iii)(vi)

Zanzibar was the spice capital of the world and a major terminus of the Maritime Silk Road. The Stone Town represents a unique fusion of Swahili, Arab, Persian, Indian, and European architectural traditions. Chinese ceramics are ubiquitous in Zanzibar's archaeological record, ranging from Song celadon to Qing export porcelain (Sheriff, 1987).

V. Toward a Serial Transnational Nomination

5.1 The Terrestrial Silk Roads Model

The successful inscription of the "Silk Roads: Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" in 2014 provides a precedent for serial transnational nominations. Key features include transnational cooperation (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), 33 component sites across three countries, and thematic integrity demonstrating the Silk Road's role in facilitating "exchanges of activities in trade, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, cultural practices, and the arts" (UNESCO, 2014).



Figure 10. Morocco

5.2 The Role of Symbolic Narrative

Jiang and Hou (2025) argue that the Silk Road's transformation into a "regulated symbol" with the stable metaphor of "connection" is what makes it "accessible" across cultural contexts. This accessibility has three dimensions: factual sharing (the logic of material exchange is universally understood), value resonance (mutual benefit and cultural exchange are nearly universal), and emotional resonance (stories of travelers evoke empathy across cultures) (Jiang and Hou, 2025: 110-111). This provides theoretical justification for a transnational nomination.

5.3 Feasibility of a Maritime Silk Road Nomination

Opportunities: (1) Six existing World Heritage nodes provide a foundation; (2) China's Belt and Road Initiative has revived interest in the Maritime Silk Road; (3) UNESCO encourages transnational nominations; (4) The "connection" metaphor is inherently accessible across cultural boundaries.

Challenges: (1) Geographic scale spanning over 20 countries; (2) Differential preservation of key nodes; (3) Political instability in several potential component countries (e.g., Yemen, Somalia); (4) Conceptual framing — what exactly would be nominated?



Figure 11. Strait of Gibraltar

5.4 A Proposed Phased Approach

Given these challenges, a **phased approach** is recommended:

- **Phase 1 (Short-term):** Develop a thematic study of the Maritime Silk Road as a cultural route.
- **Phase 2 (Medium-term):** Pursue sub-regional transnational nominations (e.g., "Swahili Coast Heritage Corridor," "Red Sea Maritime Heritage").
- **Phase 3 (Long-term):** Integrate sub-regional nominations into a single serial transnational nomination.



Figure 12. Alexandria, Egypt

VI. Discussion: The Maritime Silk Road and UNESCO's Strategic Framework

6.1 Contribution to the Global Strategy

UNESCO's Global Strategy seeks a representative, balanced, and credible World Heritage List. Cultural routes and maritime heritage are underrepresented. A Maritime Silk Road nomination would fill this gap and complement the terrestrial Silk Roads nomination.

6.2 Contribution to the "5C" Framework

Table 3. The 5C Strategy and Its Potential Contribution to Global Heritage Governance

5C Strategy	Potential Contribution
Credibility	Recognizes a major global heritage network not yet represented
Conservation	Mobilizes resources for endangered sites (e.g., Kilwa)
Capacity-building	Provides training for heritage managers in developing countries
Communication	Promotes shared heritage across Asia, Africa, and Europe
Communities	Engages local communities in sustainable tourism

6.3 Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals

A Maritime Silk Road nomination would align with SDG 8.9 (sustainable tourism), SDG 11.4 (heritage protection), SDG 14 (ocean conservation), and SDG 17 (global partnerships).



Figure 13. Alexandria (a major western terminus for the Maritime Silk Road)

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Summary of Findings

This paper has four main findings: (1) The Maritime Silk Road is a historically significant transnational heritage corridor that connected civilizations across three continents for over two millennia. (2) Six existing World Heritage properties are key nodes on this network. (3) The Maritime Silk Road possesses strong symbolic accessibility, providing theoretical justification for a transnational nomination. (4) A serial transnational nomination is feasible but challenging; a phased approach is recommended.

7.2 Recommendations

For UNESCO: Commission a thematic study on maritime cultural routes and provide technical assistance for sub-regional transnational nominations.

For States Parties: Establish a working group to explore a coordinated approach, strengthen conservation of existing nodes, and develop bilateral and multilateral agreements for joint management.

For researchers: Conduct comparative studies of terrestrial and maritime Silk Road nominations, investigate underwater cultural heritage, and explore the integration of intangible heritage into the nomination framework.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

The Maritime Silk Road is a **living heritage corridor** that continues to shape the identities and economies of communities across Asia, Africa, and Europe. As Jiang and Hou (2025) argue, the Silk Road's transformation into a regulated symbol with the stable metaphor of "connection" makes it one of the most powerful cultural symbols for forging both Chinese national community consciousness and a community with a shared future for humankind. As the World Heritage Convention approaches its 60th anniversary (2032), recognizing the Maritime Silk Road as a transnational heritage corridor would not only fill a major gap in the World Heritage List but also demonstrate the power of heritage to bring nations together around a shared story of peaceful exchange.

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