

The Ancient and New Silk Roads: Conduits of Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

The concept of the Silk Road of the past was revived in 2013 with the announcement by China of the Silk Road Economic Zone. The history of trade and cultural exchanges across Eurasian in the past has provided a sound foundation for a study of the cultural significance of the Silk Road then and now.

This study will focus on the cultural and humanistic interactions of the Silk Road arising from regional connectivity in the past and which is now intensified under a diversity of co-operation modalities in recent years. Based on the reference to and insights from scholarly works by Chinese and other researchers, this study will examine the nature of cultural exchanges and their impact along the Silk Road especially within the context of China. Despite its recent revival, the enlightening effects of the multi-faceted cultural exchanges and significance of the New Silk Road are already evident. However, further studies await the attention of scholars from different areas of specialisations to build on a better knowledge and appreciation of the role of the Silk Road not only in promoting development but also to cultural understanding and international peace and stability.

Keywords: China, Asia, ancient and new Silk Road, cultural exchanges, regional co-operation

Introduction

The “Silk Road” traced its origin to the Western Han dynasty (202–8 BC) along the route taken by the imperial envoy Zhang Qian (c.164–114 BC) from ancient Changan (Xian) through Gansu. The “Silk Road” traced its origin to the Western Han dynasty (202–8 BC) along the route taken by the imperial envoy Zhang Qian (c.164–114 BC) from ancient Changan (Xian) through Gansu to Central Asia. The term “Silk Road” was first mentioned in a book on China

by a German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen in his *China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon*, published in 1877. It was much later that the term appeared in academic writing.

One of these routes linked “The Road of the Grassland” from north of the Yellow River to the Mongolian plateau, through the Siberian steppes, to the Aral Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and farther west to Europe. Another connected “The Road of Oasis” from North China to West Asia and Asia Minor, or south to various regions of South Asia through oasis settlements between the Hexi area in Gangsu Province and the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang. There was also a maritime route that linked the coastal areas of China and the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the east coast of Africa via Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, India and other countries (Rui, 2009).

Historically, the overland Silk Road was not a single well-defined geographical track but was a collective label for several linear bifurcations of trans-Eurasian routes connecting diverse points of origins in the East, passing through many political territories in Central Asia, to different destinations in Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. Hence the Silk Road was also alternatively known as the Silk Roads or Silk Routes (Andrea, 2014).

China put forward the concept of New Silk Road Economic Zone in 2013. This is a revival of the ancient overland Silk Road with its instant connotations of economic and cultural exchanges spanning centuries of contacts among countries along the route. The ancient Silk Road was a channel of economic, cultural, and political exchanges, understanding and accommodation, and promoted the idea of sharing certain common interests. The history and traditions of the ancient Silk Road could provide insights on the role of the contemporary Silk Road in enhancing trade and development and in cultural relations to accelerate cross-boundary co-operation throughout Eurasia. Countries along the Silk Road represent a diversity of cultures at different levels of economic advancement. By acting as a catalyst to development and improvements in living standards, the New Silk Road is a practical means to foster a common objective of striving towards mutual benefits and enhanced prosperity ensuing from the synergy of joint efforts among different countries and peoples. It is potentially capable of propelling the economic progress of partner countries with new growth points and linkages to renew an international order of economic, political and cultural understanding and accommodation.

The Silk Road is a spatial-temporal reality that, having served its historical purpose, is revived to more than just repeating its ancient role but serving the contemporary function of economic globalisation and cultural exchanges. This role is particularly pertinent in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was announced by China in 2013 and its five principles of co-operation priorities. These are in the areas of policy co-ordination to enhance shared interests and political trust and to minimise suspicion or mistrust; to improve connectivity through land, sea, air and digital platforms to overcome the constraints of physical space; to facilitate free movements of goods and services, of capital and information to enhance multilateralism; to work towards greater financial co-ordination and integration such as building

stable currency, investment and financial systems, to improve the credit information system, to develop the bond market in Asia and to facilitate bilateral currency swap and settlement between countries, and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and other financial institutions. The fifth priority is centred on stimulating people-to-people understanding and cultural relations (Wang, 2016).

There is a rich literature on different aspects of the Silk Road from various perspectives. Earlier on, a field of specialisation known as Dunhuang Studies and based on the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Silk Road has attracted serious studies by scholars from Europe, America, East Asia and elsewhere.

Before the announcement of BRI, a Eurasian Land-Bridge was put forward in 1997 by Lyndon and Helga LaRouche as a “New Silk Road” to promote worldwide economic development. Whether by intention or coincidence, the idea embedded in the BRI resonated with the LaRouche proposal which in turn received a great boost to its proposed land-bridge concept. A lengthy report was published on the land-bridge in 2014 with grandiose plans to integrate major development projects throughout the world (EIR Special Report, 2014). This report was followed in 2018 by a second volume with an updated picture of the progress of the BRI. The report stated that the New Silk Road is an idea whose time had come it will become a physical force in the world (Zepp-LaRouche, 2018).

The present study deals with the cultural dimensions of the Silk Roads of the past and the present but with special reference from the perspectives of China. It is obvious that the process of cultural exchanges and diffusion has almost been the by-product of the principal purpose of the Silk Road then and now, and that is to promote cross-border trade and economic activities. While this may be the case, the impact of cultural exchanges has exerted a much more enduring effect on the countries along the Silk Road.

The manifestations of “culture” that dispersed from China westwards were silk and other products such as pottery, tea and other items, and those from Central Asia into China, were largely what might be considered as the “hard culture.” The two-way cultural exchanges comprised largely of “soft culture” in the form of Buddhist, Islamic, Christian and other religions as well as music and musical equipment, dances, and also the migration of peoples mainly into China. From the perspective of China, these cultural items became absorbed into and became part of Chinese culture and the philosophical system. The long-term impact was the enrichment and diversification of the Chinese cultural traditions. On the other hand, the contemporary overland Silk Road, in the process of driving and accelerating trade, development, and economic co-operation, has encouraged cultural exchanges in less tangible forms, and more evidently flowing out of China to its neighbours. These exchanges take the form of education, language learning and student exchange, new work ethics and culture, changing mindset and attitudes, among others.

This paper will argue that the two-way flow of the cultural exchanges between China on the one hand, and its neighbours on the other, has tended to have more lasting effects on China

in the past while the reverse is more so in the present. Cultural interaction along the ancient Silk Road have visibly led to the enrichment of Chinese society with the assimilation of a variety of cultural elements introduced from the trans-Eurasian and South Asia countries and the Middle East.

The Culture of the Silk Road

The Chinese concept of “culture” or *wenhua* is embedded in the ideas of “wen” and “hua.” These ideas were first put together in the ancient text called *Book of Changes*. “Wen” refers to tattoos or designs to represent the primitive totems of ancestors and to symbolise the idea of the “unity of heaven and humanity” as the foundation of nature worship. “Hua” implies a process of change and signifies the mutual change and transformation of all things of creation (Liu, X., 2013).

An ancient Chinese thought is the principle of the “trinity of intelligence” of heaven, earth and humans. The human spirit enables humans to understand, imitate and simulate the phenomena of heaven and earth and to give rise to communication and language to generate a “cultured” and “civilised” or “wen” component of human “civilisation.” This element of “wen” is also manifested in heaven as *tianwen* (astronomy), on the earth as *diwen* (geography) and among humans as *renwen* (humanity). This process of humanising both society and nature leads on further to the emergence of “culture.” Humanity differs from nature in having personal relations, beliefs, and in spiritual enlightenment. It differs from the simple and uncouth in its civilisation and elegance; and differs from material success and military might in its enlightenment in literary and administrative abilities. Hence civil or literary and administrative enlightenment is the path to “becoming cultured.”

Along the ancient Silk Road, the humanistic processes of cultural exchanges unfolded as various nationalities and communities came into frequent contact. Among the principal vehicles by which cultural contacts were facilitated was a commodity known as “silk.” It was in itself a symbol of “high culture” and a commodity that enjoyed universal esteem and much sought after as a gift symbolic of “warm and cordial friendship.” It was this commodity that provided a sense of spatial-temporal unity to the vast stretches of Trans-Eurasia and prevalent over a period spanning across many centuries.

Produced by the silkworm, silk is the product of natural processes that are inseparable from the planting of mulberry trees and the rearing of silkworms by observing and respecting the regularity of the cyclical order of nature and understanding the practical relationships of the trinity of heaven, earth and humans. The production of silk must be “timely,” “appropriate,” “rule-abiding,” and “harmonious” in keeping with the integrated relationships among heaven, earth, and humans. The weaving of silk dates back to 3700 BC in China. The process of rearing silkworms to the weaving of the final product was a sophisticated operation. Silk and its characteristic smoothness, elegance and softness was long regarded as the material manifesta-

tion of an advanced civilisation. For a long time, silk was a symbol of social eminence and cultural elegance and served as an exclusive and expensive product for the imperial court and aristocrats. The dissemination of the knowledge of silk making to neighbouring countries was in itself a process of cultural diffusion. This knowledge first spread to the Korean peninsula, Central Asia and India by about 500 BC but it was not until about the year 550 that it reached the Roman Empire (History of Silk, 2021).

Significantly, the overland Silk Road not only served as an avenue of ancient Asia-Europe trade but also a corridor of friendship and cultural interaction. Trading activities and cultural mingling sow the seeds of harmony among different nationalities and countries and at the same time stimulated an unprecedented scale of exchanges in economic, political and cultural life. Over time, the Silk Road fostered ideas of cultural understanding, co-existence, mutual benefit and shared prosperity.

The Cultural Significance of the Ancient Silk Road

In its history of more than 2,000 years, the role of the Silk Road was much more than promoting East-West interactions in the spheres of economic, political and cultural life, but also contributed to the peace and stability among countries and nationalities along the route. Within China, it was accompanied by the beginning of contact with its Northwest region and its development into a significant cultural centre.

The ancient Silk Road served as an effective channel of cultural enrichment of all the peoples and territories from China to the Middle East, Central Asia and India. But the impact of this cultural process was clearly evident in China and other countries. The significance of the Silk Road is well recognised by scholars. According to Ji Xianlin, in the history of mankind, only a handful of cultures had attained far-reaching and long-lasting impact (quoted by Li, M. W., 1991). These cultures were those of the Chinese, Indians, early Middle Eastern and Islamic, and Greco-Roman cultures of Western Europe. The only place where these four great cultures converged was China's Xinjiang region. The principal factor that had facilitated this convergence was the presence of the Silk Road along which the culture of China met and interacted with other cultures of the ancient world (Li, M. W., 1991; Zhang & Wang, 2006; Yu, 2013).

The association of the Silk Road with silk and its trade is a reflection of the long history of economic exchanges of a highly exquisite product that was in great demand by all communities throughout this trade route. However, despite the universal connotation of the trade in silk, yet it was "ideas and culture and not goods" that were the intangible "commodities" of the Silk Road (see Andrea, 2014; Kwon, 2018). It is more than a route by which silk was traded but one in which culture and "the spirit of the humanities is embedded" but this idea has not received much attention from scholars. Hence it was in the area of promoting cultural interaction that the impact of the Silk Road far surpassed that of trading of silk and other commodities. It was

a passageway by which the three great religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam found fertile grounds to disseminate. Its significance was to create a conduit of cultural exchanges between the East and West, a land bridge that linked these regions into a coherent historical and cultural space spanning diverse regions.

It was along this ancient route with its wealth of hidden remains and treasures in various historical sites and traditions that bear witness to the cultural richness and significance of the Silk Road. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the expeditions of numerous European explorers and adventurers “rediscovered” the Silk Road. Most of these expeditions were “rapacious” in their plunder of cultural artifacts that were carted away to enrich the holdings of the British Museum, the National Museum of India, and others in Europe, Japan, and America (Andrea, 2014). Among these expeditions, those carried by Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943) between 1900 and 1943, were major forays into the treasures in western China, which were collectively described as being guilty of “the most daring and adventurous raid upon the ancient world”.¹ It was these adventurers such as Sven Hedin (1865–1952) and others whose expeditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who helped to establish Silk Road and Dunhuang Studies.²

The cultural significance of the ancient Silk Road has been a subject of renewed study by scholars in China and the West. From the perspective of China, the cultural impact may be viewed from various perspectives.

Linkage with the Northwest Region

In inter-nationality communication and exchange, cultural activities were stimulated by commerce and trade but in the process have tended to remain more lasting in promoting understanding and acceptance. From Changan, the old Silk Road traversed the Eurasian landmass to reach the Eastern Rome empire capital of Constantinople more than 7,000 kilometers to the west.

The ancient Silk Road was an overlapping system of different physical environments, cultural areas and diverse nationalities, in which different communities constantly adapt to each other, maintain internal stability and order, practise exchanges and cultural sharing. Nationalities found along the route were the Huns, Turkic, Uighur, Kazakh, Dangxiang and others. The civilisations of some dated back to the Han Dynasty, among which were the Turkic khanate, the Gaochang and Turpan kingdoms. But it was not until the ground-breaking journey of the Han Dynasty emissary Zhang Qian to the western region that facilitated contact between these kingdoms and the Chinese and initiated frequent cultural exchanges among the diverse nationalities of Central Asia and farther west. The present principal minorities in China’s Northwest region trace direct ancestral links with these ancient ethnic communities. Their cultures and histories are in effect the continuation of the cultural exchanges in the tradition of the dynamics of the ancient Silk Road. The connotations of Silk Road interactions confirm the cultural distinctiveness of their ancestors and the manifestations of the economic and cultural exchanges among the various nationalities. While engaging in trade and commercial competition, each nationality

maintained their distinct cultures and injected fresh inputs into their respective cultures with new elements. The ancient Silk Road was thus more than a simple trade route but a cultural system that promoted accommodation among the nationalities in the Northwest while contributing to the development process.

The Diffusion of Religious Cultures

The Silk Road not only promoted the fusion of different cultures, but also the spread of different religions. The dissemination of Buddhism and Islam was the earliest, most widespread and influential (Ma, 2000). Introduced into China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), Buddhism has exerted a profound influence on the religious and philosophical thoughts of the people. Buddhism and its different sects are an integrate part of the cultural heritage of China comparable in significance to the indigenous philosophical thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism. The adoption of Buddhism has inspired new art forms in the numerous grottoes dispersed in west and north China; the appearance of new places of worship, temples and pagodas, and monuments; the designation of sacred places and mountains that intensified the concept of the “unity of humans and nature”, and even in the naming of towns such as Foshan, among others. Besides some Han Chinese and Mongolia nationality also converted to Tibetan Buddhism.

Islam spread to China as early as the Tang Dynasty when Arab and Persian merchants travelled along the maritime Silk Road to in the southeast ports of Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou and Yangzhou. It was along the Silk Road that Islam spread into the Northwest region of China after the 8th century. This process was accompanied by the intermingling of Arabs, Persians and Central Asian ethnic groups leading to the formation of Dongxiang, Baoan, Sarah and other Islamic communities (Ma, 2000). Its diffusion accelerated after the 14th century and gradually became the common religion of the Uygur, Kazak, Kirgiz, and other nationalities. With the integration of Xinjiang as a province of China during the Qing Dynasty, the coexistence of multiple religions in Northwest China has remained unchanged.

Despite the peripheral position of Northwest China relative to the ancient cultural areas of Han China, India, Persian, Arabia, Greece and Rome, it was nevertheless the intersection of major civilisations of Asia and Europe. In fact, prior to the period of maritime ascendancy, the Northwest region was the nodal point of east-west overland traffic as well as the conduit of cultural dissemination and exchange. Religion is the manifestation of ancient philosophies, the arts and culture, representing the substance of human thoughts and cultural exchanges. Accompanying the growth of trade and commerce between East and West, the cultures and religions continue to flourish in this region (Li, J. X., 2008).

The three major religions of the world and other religions in the Northwest region converge, diffuse and blend with each other. Islam was first introduced into the Kashi area in the 10th Century, gradually spread to the East, and underwent three stages of development. The first was during the Kalahan Dynasty between the 10th and 11th centuries. The next was the period of

the descendants of the Timur Khan Mongolian Chagatai family of the 14th and 15th centuries headed by Heilu, when Islam was brought to the northern margin of the Tarim Basin, Turpan and Hami regions and thus established Islam as the common religion of the ancient Uyghur nationality. The third was the 16th to 17th centuries when Islam was embraced by the Kazak and Kirgiz (Li, J. X., 2008).

In the same manner, after Buddhism was brought into China, it spread through other provinces and among Tibetans, Mongolians, and the minorities in Yunnan. These processes were indicative of the acceptance of and tolerance to new religious beliefs by various ethnic communities.

Archaeological evidence shows that Christianity was introduced into China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). A Nestorian monk called Aluoben had travelled along the ancient Silk Road to the capital Changan (Downs, 2017). Christianity spread more rapidly during the Yuan Dynasty. It was during this time that the father and uncle of Marco Polo (1254–1324) travelled overland to China in 1255 and were received by Kublai Khan. Marco himself travelled to China in 1271 and remained until 1291. A church was established in the Yuan Dynasty capital in 1299. Although the Christian religion was not followed as extensively as Buddhism or Islam, it was to diversify the religious life of the Chinese and continues to exist until today (Downs, 2017; Zhou & Qiu, 1998).

Historically the ancient Silk Road had fostered religious harmony and exchange across time and space. Major religions collided not in conflict but in peaceful accommodation to leave deep imprint on unique religious and cultural landscapes along the route. Merchants engaged in business transactions as faithful adherents of different religions as they trekked across one region to another. They became familiar with the local languages and adapted to the customs to enrich their cultural histories. Along the route, special geographical localities such as Dunhuang and Turpan emerged as noted historic and cultural sites.

From the perspective of China, the ancient Silk Road was a symbol of the openness of China and various regions to the outside world and from which they benefited to their mutual interest. What was exchanged was more than commodities or skills, but also intellectual thoughts, lifestyles, the arts and diverse cultural elements. The Silk Road and its increased trade acted as bridges of communication and understanding among different nationalities and promoted the idea of “close neighbourliness” to help consolidate regional peace and stability.

Blending of the Arts

The arts evolved out of daily lives and were a part of the spiritual wealth of the nationalities along the ancient Silk Road. They assumed many literary forms and creations such as poetry and novels, mythologies, paintings and murals, sculptures, music, folk songs and dances, musical apparatus and equipment, architectural designs, and others. Active trade and increased prosperity along the route were inseparable from this process of cultural interactions and artistic contacts.

In the 1950s and 1960s, attempts in the systematic study of the history, languages and literature of minorities including those along the Silk Road managed to salvage large quantities of materials on the literary works of the minorities of the Northwest. These efforts ushered in a new chapter in the study of minority culture. The mythologies of minority communities are a typical example that managed to fill a void in Chinese mythology. The minority mythologies allude to the labour and creativities of their ancestors and represent the earliest record of their knowledge of the origins of the world, natural phenomena and social lives in their habitats. Mythological accounts of different peoples reveal similarities in their conceptions and beliefs in their origins.

Likewise, cultural interactions facilitated the blending and enrichment of the music heritage of the peoples along the Silk Road. Du Shixiong and Zhou Ji spent close to 40 years to study the music of the Silk Road to produce *The Musical Culture of Silk Road* (1997) that presents musical scores to highlight the role of the distinctive music of different nationalities in their daily lives and their influence on the evolution of the diverse musical traditions along the Silk Road. The crystallisation of ancient artistic creations along the Silk Road is displayed in panels of large murals and other historical materials in the grottoes of Dunhuang in Gansu Province of China. “Dunhuang Studies” has matured to become a highly specialised field of academic pursuit. The Mogao Grottoes are the focal point in the diffusion of the religious cultures along the Silk Road. Covering an area of 44,830 square meters, the grottoes are a treasure trove of colourful murals depicting thousands of Buddha and Buddhist figures, dance forms and performance scenes. Despite centuries of neglect and often badly weathered, the Dunhuang murals bear witness to the harmonious interactions among the different nationalities and religious arts that accompanied the wake of economic, religious and diplomatic progress. Other elements that have enriched the cultural and economic lives of countries include the introduction, in many cases, from Central Asia into China, of new culinary arts and numerous exotic crops, in an exchange that confirms the capacity of peoples for acceptance and accommodation of foreign influences.

The musical and artistic performances of various Moslem communities of Xinjiang and other western provinces have contributed to the diversification and enrichment of the cultural life of China. At the same time, greater interaction and the enlarged national platform on stage, television and other media have in turn stimulated the further development and popularity of the music, songs and dances of the western provinces. This process has enhanced the understanding and appreciation of different forms of musical and artistic performances.

Islam spread to China via Central Asia. Today this region and various minorities in China such as the Uyghurs and Kazaks in Xinjiang and the Huis in Ningxia form substantial Moslem communities practising their belief in a large number of mosques. All have learned to respect the cultural sensitivities of and to live in harmony with each other and with other ethnic communities (Zou, 2013).

The New Silk Road and Its Significance

Historically, the impact of the industrial revolution, scientific and technological advancements, developments of navigation and, internally, instability along the western border of China and the eastward and southward shift of the political and economic centre of China after the Tang Dynasty and the self-seclusion of the Qing government, the role of the overland Silk Road in commercial intercourse and cultural exchange between China and western countries came to a stop and led to isolation and backwardness of the Northwest region of China. In 2013, China introduced the idea of the “economic belt of silk road on land” and the “the maritime silk road of the 21st century” to comprise the “One Belt One Road” but now more popularly known as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The overland route connects China with the Central Asian, Russian, and European economic circles, while the maritime route links up with Southeast and Southwest Asia, West Asia, Africa, and Europe. In subsequent communications with countries along these land and sea routes, the emphasis has been on the importance of development and the idea of fostering a community of common destiny. On a longer-term basis, the significance of BRI is that of improving living standards and in stimulating economic development and promoting cultural exchanges among participating countries.

As BRI promotes and accelerates trade and commerce through existing and new modalities by road, rail, and air as well as e-commerce and other digital platforms between China and neighbouring countries and Europe, the role of cultural diffusion including that of intangible culture will increase. This process will spread through trade, social contacts, the workplace, learning of languages, among others. BRI has created commercial opportunities for numerous border towns such as Manzhouli, Alashankou, Kashgar, and those in Yunnan and Guangxi. They are new and dynamic channels of contact for different nationalities. Inhabitants from neighbouring towns seeking employment in these trading centres have stimulated the learning of Mandarin, promoting interest in Chinese culture, mutual understanding and even inter-marriage. These changes not only improve incomes and the general living standard but also act as catalysts in widening cultural exchanges. These “windows of opportunities” for economic co-operation are significant for cultural interactions between countries, companies, people and especially among the young and students (Zhang & Pang, 2015). In essence, the new Silk Road is becoming a highway for the dispersal of cultural elements that are more “modernistic” and less “traditional” and take the forms of languages, educational exchange, technology, new mindsets and attitudes, and other motivational and inspirational influences, among others (Liu, C. M., 2017).

From a global perspective, the rapid recent rise of the East Asian economies is infusing new production, consumption, and logistical processes and various innovative elements to the existing global economy. The result of these processes is to intensify the trend of Eurasian inter-regional co-operation. From 1999, China has put in place a strategy to develop its western provinces. This is in line with the opening up policy of shifting from the coastal area to the hinterland in a concerted attempt to minimise the disparity in regional economic development

and to boost national security. Like the ancient Silk Road, the new one is based on the same principle of furthering economic interests as well as facilitating culture interactions. The revived Silk Road will facilitate the purposeful sharing of common social and economic aspirations among all communities and countries along the route.

The ruins of ancient Loulan kingdom in the Takla Makan desert and the existence of Dunhuang were indicative of the past prosperity of Northwest China. Together with the capital domain of Changan farther to the east, the entire Northwest region undoubtedly had played an immeasurably positive role in the political and mercantile development of China. But after a protracted period of economic stagnation, China realised the urgency for political and economic reforms to pull away from abject poverty. The May 4th New Cultural Movement of 1919 is generally recognised as the defining moment when China began to learn from the West and launched its national programme of social and political modernisation. The preoccupation with material progress has brought negative impacts on the spiritual life of the people as a result of the growing disregard for traditional moral values and even the practice of local cultures. Development driven by the reform and opening up policies have also led to the over-exploitation of local resources, pollution and various forms of environmental destruction.

The new Silk Road will provide a platform to implement economic development and cultural exchanges for the mutual benefits among participating regions and countries. The overriding objective of cultural exchanges is to enable different regions and countries to learn to understand, accommodate and respect each other, and at the same time to be mindful of environmental and social sensitivities. In general, the Silk Road will contribute to cultural enlightening among participating nations and communities while driving the forces of development to advance regional peace. Indeed the core ideas of the New Silk Road and hence its long-term aims are to accelerate development and trade as well as to promote cultural exchanges, understanding, peace and prosperity in the spirit of co-operation, development, and mutual benefit (Liu, W. D., 2018).

Towards Balanced Development and Regional Co-operation

The economic geography of the trans-Eurasian Silk Road is characterised by the presence of two developed regions in the east and west, and an economically lacking region in between. However, in this extended corridor that spans through a vast landmass, it is Central Asia that constitutes the strategical core involving the multiple interests of politics, economy, energy, security and related areas. The historical ties between China and Central Asia through the north-west have produced inseparable multi-level and multi-dimensional cultural and synergistic interactions. The advent of the new Silk Road with its fresh impetus in development will inevitably promote attempts to achieve a more balanced development of the entire Eurasian region through a new model of regional co-operation.

In the contemporary period, the economic and cultural diffusions from China to neighbouring countries and vice versa, in the form of less tangible cultural elements, and driven by increasing trade and commerce along the many routes by road, rail, and air, and through different modes by e-commerce and other digital platforms, are made possible by new concepts of co-operation for mutual benefit. China itself, with its population of 1.3 billion in 2020 is a land of immense ethnic diversity. Of its 56 different ethnic groups, the Han Chinese comprise 91.5% or about 1.2 billion of the total population, but there are several minority groups with populations exceeding 10 million. Among them are the Zhuang (16.9 million), Hui (10.5 million), Manchu (10.3 million), and Uyghur (10 million). They are spatially concentrated in specific parts of China, such as the Zhuang in Guangxi, the Hui in Ningxia and the Uyghur in Xinjiang. The nationality policy of China is based on the principle of equality, the right to mother-tongue education and freedom of religious beliefs, among others. In view of the vast territorial expanse of China, the new Silk Road and its economic and socio-cultural orientations have greatly enhanced national unity and harmony in a way that was difficult to achieve in the past when distance and accessibility were real barriers to movements and exchanges of various kinds.

At the regional level of cross-border contacts, new economic synergies are opening up opportunities that were non-existent in the past. New linkages by road and rail and digital platforms have turned landlocked provinces and countries into logistic hubs and even into manufacturing and trade centres. In effect, new highways have transformed physical places from being fixated spatially to being highly accessible locations interconnecting different countries and regions in Central Asia. In the process, inland ports functioning as logistic and manufacturing nodes have sprung up at strategic sites and which were, prior to the revival of the Silk Road, effectively unproductive *terra incognita*.

On a long-term basis, innovative means of communication through infrastructural connections especially by rail connectivity, information technologies by means of e-commerce, big data, 5G, and other innovations will stimulate education exchanges through higher education, language studies, tourism, artistic events, and increased employment mobility including working in Silk Road countries. Over time, the cumulative effects and cultural impact on individual countries may vary but would be significant and immeasurable (see Ghiasy & Krishnamurthy, 2021; Kassenova & Duprey, 2021).

Countries along both the continental and maritime Silk Roads under the BRI are largely developing economies with a population of 4.4 billion and economic output of about US\$21 trillion, representing 63% and 29% respectively of the world total (China Economic Net, 2014, May 15). The majority are keen to take part in development and in favour of engaging in mutually beneficial collaboration. In addition, the BRI would also stimulate joint endeavours among countries along the Silk Road to take advantage of China's strategy of developing the western provinces and border regions and the further opening up of the eastern seaboard in a co-ordinated policy of overland and maritime development to open up to the world economy.

Conclusion

Politically, the New Silk Road draws the countries of Eurasia closer to foster a community of common destiny. The current global situation is undergoing profound changes and veering towards a multi-polar world that embraces economic globalisation. At the same time as countries are economically interdependent, they are also subjected to the impact of frequent regional turbulences. Promoting a political environment of peace and stability through co-operation is a basic requirement to meet various challenges and to promote trade and development.

Whether it was the ancient or the revived Silk Road, the common aspirations of the peoples were and are focused on creating an integrated, multi-faceted and open cultural understanding through synergistic partnership for the benefit of all. The parallel occurrence of people-to-people and economic exchanges is an important insight derived from the ancient Silk Road. Strengthening humanistic exchanges is a positive approach to fostering economic co-operation among the countries to enhance regional peace and understanding. The lessons of more than two millennia of exchanges demonstrate that on the basis of solidarity, equality, mutual trust and benefit, different countries and nationalities, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development. Strengthening cultural exchanges and understanding among Silk Road countries would encourage greater interactions in the areas of cultural and artistic endeavours, production technologies, scientific achievements, political systems and even religious beliefs, and to enhance friendly exchanges among countries and regions.

The New Silk Road has drawn insights and benefits from the ancient experiences and exchanges. The historical continuity of the idea of the Silk Road testifies to the sustainability and benefits from multilateral contacts. The cultural connections that have enriched and diversified Chinese culture from Central Asia in the past is today witnessing a greater flow of new ideas and processes emanating from China as a source of cultural and economic innovator.

The legacy of the ancient Silk Road and the inspirations of the new Silk Road symbolise an important historical mission by which different nationalities continue to pursue their unique way of life. The legacies and inspirations of the Silk Roads deserve further serious studies for their lessons and insights to today's complex economic, political, and security situations.

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Notes

- 1 From a quote by Jeannette Mirsky in her introduction to a 1964 reprint of Aural Stein's 1933 memoir, *On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks* (Stein, 1964: xiii, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), xiii, cited by Andrea, 2014: 109.
- 2 Dunhuang is situated in Gansu Province and comprises a series of caves known as the Mogao shrines. European adventurers who “discovered” these caves in the early 20th century found them to be the major depository of Buddhist art and sacred texts. They soon became the target of “rapacious raids” committed by these adventurers right up to the mid-20th century.