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HISTORY OF THE SILK ROAD

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Introduction

It is often mentioned that the “Silk Road” was a trade route between the East and the West. Conceptually, it represents the history of communication between China and the West: goods and merchants frequently travelled along this route. The meaning of the Silk Road and its formation process and scope of influence has been documented in different records, and had an impact on academic research in several countries: in the field of research on the history of China, the study of the Silk Road is a subject that many researchers have tackled and discussed. Early historical chronicles have been analyzed and discussed as well as documents and unearthed artefacts found along the Silk Road; these studies involve political, cultural, and economic aspects. Research has not been limited to China, but has also interested the countries which were along the Silk Road and those which were affected by the Silk Road culture. The Silk Road acted as a cultural bridge between East and West: it did not only promote commerce but also cultural exchanges. For example, Buddhism, as one of the religions of the Kushan kingdom, reached China thanks to this route.

This article is a summary of the history of the Silk Road since the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). It presents the views of Chinese scholars on the development of the Silk Road, and also introduces the works of Chinese and foreign experts. For many years, the Silk Road was just a myth, but thanks

¹ Beijing Normal University. This article is based on our speech at the University of Balamand, thanks to the invitation and warm reception from Professor Georges Dorian and Professor Alex Raymond.
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to the importance of new research and documentation, it is now better known. Was there a spread of Western influences to the East? Or was there an expansion of the Han cultural heritage or was it limited to a closed circle? Perhaps the main result is highlighting the fact that the Silk Road was a multicultural and a three-dimensional image rather than just a simple track.

**The concept of the Silk Road**

The “Silk Road” refers to the trade routes that connected Asia, Africa and Europe, and having China as its starting point. Explicitly, the Silk Road refers to the land route; in its broader meaning, it is also sometimes used to include the commercial maritime route.

The land silk road connected the Chinese hinterland to Europe until the 16th Century. Formed between the 2nd century BC and 1st century AD, it constituted the main channel for economic, political, a cultural exchanges between East and West. Its origin dates from Zheng Qian’s (张骞) appointment by Emperor Wu of Han to travel West, with an initial role to transport Chinese silk production. The German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen named it the “Silk Road” in the 1870s, and is now a widely accepted term.

The maritime trade route (the “Sea Silk Road”) also connected China to foreign countries, for trade and cultural exchanges by the sea route. After the middle period of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) the Sea Silk Road became the main route. However, the Silk Road also includes the “Grassland Silk Road”, the “Oases Silk Road” and the “South-western Silk Road” in the broad sense.
The routes of the Silk Road

All the routes started at Chang'an (长安) (now called Xi'an (西安), an ancient capital of China. The main route travelled northwest through the Chinese province of Gansu (甘) from Shaanxi (陕) Province and split into three sub-routes, two of them following the mountain ranges to the north and south of the Taklamakan Desert to join at Kashgar, and the other going north of the Tian Shan mountains through southeast Kazakhstan. It went through central Asia, south of the Caspian Sea and on through Persia to Turkey and then on to Europe.

It is widely accepted that Zhang Qian (张骞) was the first official envoy on the main route of the Silk Road. He was a Chinese official and diplomat who served as an imperial envoy to the world outside of China in the 2nd century BC, during the Han dynasty. The Han court dispatched Zhang Qian, a military officer who was familiar with the Xiongnu (匈奴), to the Western Regions in 138 BC, along with a group of ninety-nine members to make contact and build an alliance with the Yuezhi (大月氏) against the Xiongnu. Zhang
Qian visited the kingdom of Dayuan (大宛) in Ferghana, the territories of the Yuezhi in Transoxiana, the Bactrian country of Daxia (大夏) and Kangju (康居). He also made reports on neighbouring countries that he did not visit, such as the Arsacid territories, Pakistan and Wusun (乌孙). Zhang Qian's journeys had promoted a great variety of economic and cultural exchanges between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions. From his missions, he brought back many important products, such as the grape, walnuts and pomegranates.

![Fig. 2: Dunhuang frescoes of Zhang Qian's diplomatic missions](image)

However, a non-official trading route was already in use, called the South-western Silk Road. When Zhang Qian arrived in the Western Regions, he found bamboo staffs from Sichuan Province (四川), and merchants told him that they goods were brought from Yuandu (身毒), now India. Thus, Zhang Qian deduced that there was a trade road towards this subcontinent.
The influence of Chinese civilization in East Asia-Japan

There are four river valley civilizations located in the eastern Mediterranean (Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia, and Greece); the Southern Asian subcontinent (India and its surrounding areas); in East Asia (China, South Korea, North Korea, Japan and Vietnam); and finally in South America (Maya, Aztec and Inca cultures). Phoenicia was an ancient Semitic thalassocratic civilization situated on the western, coastal part of the Fertile Crescent and centred on the coastline of modern Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Syria. The Silk Road linked the old great civilizations together and made close interregional connections.

The Eastern Asian circle of culture refers to the areas which were influenced by Chinese culture (or the Han culture), Chinese characters and the Chinese-style legal system and agricultural and industrial technology. Together with Chinese Buddhism, they all deeply impacted East Asian countries in language, ideology, the social organizational structure, and developments in the level of productivity.

The Japanese had learned from China, which exerted deep influence on the Japanese language formation and development. After the Taika Reforms (大化の改革) in 645, Emperor Kōtoku (孝德天皇) dispatched envoys and students to China to learn from the Chinese writing system, literature, religion, and architecture, and even dietary habits. They were called Qiansuishi (遣隋使) or Qiantangshi (遣唐使); they arrived at Shandong and the coastal ports in Jiangsu through the north or middle segment of the Sea Silk Road. Some of them settled down and became famous poets and scholars. For example, Abei Zhongmalv’s (阿倍仲麻呂) Chinese name was Chao Heng (晁衡). Even today, the impact of the reforms can still be seen in Japanese cultural life.

Comparison of urban architecture and layout

During the Tang Dynasty, the capital of China (Chang'an 长安) was standard, square and ambitious. Heijokyo in Japan (Nara Period, 8th Century) was an imitation of this Tang capital. Due to military reasons, its shape was changed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Heiankyo in
Japan (Kyoto 8th-9th Century) follows the example of the capital of China (Kaifeng), and the city of Beijing (北京) is today a continuation of the Kaifeng’s basic pattern.

Comparison of Japanese and Chinese characters

Hiragana (平仮名) and Katakana (片仮名) are components of the Japanese writing system. Hiragana developed from Man'yōgana (万葉仮名), Chinese characters used for their pronunciations, a practice that started in the 5th century. The forms of the Hiragana originate from the cursive script style of Chinese calligraphy. Katakana was developed in the 9th century by Buddhist monks by taking parts of Man'yōgana characters as a form of shorthand, hence this kana is called kata (片). Katakana was almost exclusively used by men for official texts and those imported from China.

Comparison of women’s clothing: Tang dynasty China and Japan

Chinese fashion had a huge influence on Japan from the Kofun period (古坟时代 300-538) to the early Heian period (平安时代 794-1192), as a result of both mass immigration from the continent and the role of a Japanese envoy to the Tang Dynasty. During the Tang Dynasty, women’s clothes were more open, with small-sleeve coats usually made of yarn, still long skirts, wide and long scarves were what they often wore. They could bare the part of body above their chests. This type of cloth could enhance the feminine beauty. Other clothes popular at that time had large sleeves, short-breasted shirts and long light skirts. We can see elements of the Tang dynasty in today’s Japanese geishas and kimonos. The makeup style followed the same origin.
Fig. 3: Japanese Hiragana from Chinese cursive
Fig. 4: Japanese katakana from Chinese character of the radical radicals
Fig. 5: The beauty of the Tang Dynasty (tri-coloured glazed pottery, Tomb Figurines)
Fig. 6: Japanese geisha

Fig. 7: Japanese kimono
To the West

In ancient China, different dynasties had different foreign policies, with openings to the outside world not limited to East Asia, but with extensions to the West.

The Treasure in Nanhai No.1

Nanhai No.1 was found in 1987; it's a wreck from the Southern Song Dynasty. It rested for more than one thousand years at 23 metres below the sea. Since it was located on the route of the traditional maritime Silk Road, its historical value is important. From the position of the bow, it can be inferred that Nanhai No.1 set out from China for Singapore, India and other Southeast Asian region, or for the Middle East. Unfortunately, it sank on its way. It is surprising that, although it sank nearly a thousand years ago, the hull was very well preserved and the wood was still hard as new and its cargo was also well preserved. There were thousands of complete porcelains, which included high-quality works from famous kilns in the Song Dynasty such as the Dehua kiln (德化窑), the Cizao kiln (磁灶窑), the Jingdezhen (景德镇) and Longqun kilns (龙泉窑). Many “foreign flavour” porcelains were found: flagons with sharp edges and porcelain bowls with bell mouths had a strong Arabian style. Many were very rare; it was for the archaeologists the biggest single collection of artefacts found in one location.

The Batu Hitam

In 1998, a 9th-century wreck of an Arabian Dhow, which had sailed between Africa and China around 830, was found off the coast of Indonesia's Pelitung. It contained more than 67 000 pieces of Tang dynasty ceramics, dozens of pieces of gold and silver, Jingxin mirrors (江心镜) and Kaiyuan reign (开元) pieces of money. The ship was called Batu Hitam. A large number of the salvaged artefacts is now in the possession of the Maritime Museum founded the explorers.

3 Jingxin Mirrors (江心镜): it was also called Shuixin Mirror. This kind of mirrors were made of bronze and produced in the middle section of the river in Yangzhou during the Tang Dynasty.
Fig. 8: Items of salvage
In addition to gold and silverware, the export porcelains got the attention of scholars. Some of them came from the Changsha Kiln (长沙窑)\(^4\) which originated the technique of Under Glaze Colour Porcelain that demonstrated the Chinese traditional art culture and combined individual styles from Middle Asia. The patterns took the shapes of plants, geometric figures and various transfigured Arabic letters.

**The Battle of Talas**

A military engagement between Emperor Xuanzong (唐玄宗)\(^5\) of the Tang Dynasty and the Arab Abbasids\(^6\) took place in Talas, which was near Tarazi in Kazakhstan in 751, with the Arab Abbasids achieving victory in this battle. Was the battle a direct collision between the most powerful empires of East and West or just a border skirmish? Most scholars believe that it was the encounter of the two ambitious empires; however, its result curbed the momentum of the development of the Tang Empire. After the battle, a group of craftsmen from the Tang army was captured, and papermaking technology was thus brought to the Middle East from where it eventually spread to Europe.

The Silk Road was not only a commercial road: it was also a stage for the exchange and mix of multiple cultures, together with large-scale and frequent national migrations and communications.

**The Evidence of two-way communications**

The spread of culture is not unidirectional: through the Silk Road, the material and culture of different countries came to China itself. People from different regions were also integrated into ancient China.

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\(^4\) Changsha Kiln (长沙窑): a famous kiln in the south during the Tang and Song dynasties. It is located in today’s Hunan province, Wangcheng district, Changsha Dingzi town, Caitaoyuan village. The main products are celadon. There were many types of appliances glazed with blue, yellow, white and other colors. It pioneered the decorative techniques of painting on porcelain.

\(^5\) Xuanzong (唐玄宗): Li Longji (685-762), an emperor of the Tang Dynasty. He reigned from AD 712 to 756.

\(^6\) Arab Abbasi: it was called Heiyi Dashi (黑衣大食) during the Tang dynasty. Heiyi means they revered the black color. It was a dynasty of the Khalifat Empire and the second hereditary dynasty of the Arab Empire. It lasted for more than 500 years (750-1258).
The deduction of statues in the race

(1) The Fuxi (伏羲)7 Nuwa (女娲)8 figure from the Tang dynasty in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum.

It shows China's ancient myths and legends regarding the human ancestor's image, as well as unknown religious meanings. Pangu (盘古) was said to be the god of creation in Chinese mythology: he was a giant sleeping in an egg of chaos. Pangu then died after standing up, and his body turned into rivers, mountains, plants, animals, and everything else in the world, among which is a powerful being known as Hua Hsu. Hua Hsu gave birth to a twin brother and sister, Fuxi and Nuwa, which had faces of humans and bodies of snakes. They decided to become husband and wife. Then they used clay to create offsprings, and with their divine power they made the clay figures come alive.

Fig. 9: Fuxi and Nuwa in Different Regions in China

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7 Fuxi (伏羲): He and Nuwa were respected as the ancestors of mankind. With a dragon's body and the head of a man, he was also called Dragon Ancestor. According to the legend, he taught people to fish and raise livestock. He created words and Guqin.

8 Nuwa (女娲): She was also called Nuwashí and Wahuang. She was the leader of ancient clans and became the ancestor of mankind. She had a human head and a snake's body. She was Fuxi's sister and wife. Her main achievements were making humans with soil and mending the sky with stones.
They are the earliest ancestors of human beings. The myths and legends were mainly popular in the Central Plains of China, but the images appear to show that the same myth figures have different races in different regions. Their relics have even been found in the ancient tomb in Xinjiang, which is in the far northwest.

(2) The Buddhas in Bamyan (Afghanistan)

They were carved during the 5th century into the side of a cliff. The smaller Buddha was 38 metres high and the larger was 55 metres high, with a distance of 400 meters between them. The mark of art was Cao clothing such as water. By this traditional Chinese artistic expression, clothes cling to the body as if figures had just come out of water. The Buddha also had the features of Gandhara art style, the Gupta and the Mathura art style.

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9 Astana tomb (阿斯塔勒墓): it is located about 40 km southeast of Turpan City, Xinjiang, China. It was the official and the public cemetery of Gaochang in the urban and rural areas from the second century to the early ninth century. Most of the tombs belonged to the Han. There were also some tombs for the minority residents.

10 Cao clothing such as water (曹衣出水): it was also called Cao Style. It was a Chinese traditional drawing technique which was created by Cao Zhongda from Cao state of Central Asia during the Northern Qi Dynasty. In his paintings, the folds of clothes were carefully delineated with thin lines. They looked like sheer fabrics and just removed from the water. Cao Style combined the Han cultural tradition after Wei-Jin period and foreign culture.

11 Gandhara art style: it was a Greek style of Buddhist art of the northwest of the South Asian subcontinent (now northern Pakistan and Central Asia Afghanistan's northeastern border area). It had a significant impact on the local Buddhist art development of the subcontinent and the surrounding areas including China, Japan and North Korea.

12 Gupta: the Gupta Empire was an Indian empire. It consisted of two historical periods, from 320 to 534 and from 535 to 730.

13 Mathura art style: Mathura was an art and religious centre of the Kushan Dynasty. It was also at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures. Mathura art style had a more profound cultural tradition in India than the Gandhara art style.
(3) The spreading of Buddhism

There are many caves and ancient city ruins in Xinjiang. From them, we can follow the path of the spreading of Buddhism. The Ancient City of Gaochang (高昌)\textsuperscript{14} and Jiaohe (交河) ruin\textsuperscript{15} are in Turpan; Beiting (北庭)\textsuperscript{16} ruin is in Jimusaer (吉木萨尔), Subhash (苏巴什) Temple ruin\textsuperscript{17} and

\begin{itemize}
  \item Gaochang (高昌) was an ancient state in the Western reign. It is located in the southeast of Turpan Xinjiang, which is now called Karakhoja. As an important traffic hub, it was just on the north route of the Silk Road and it became the central city of politics, economy and culture in the ancient Xinjiang. According to various historical records and archaeological objects, Gaochang was completely dominated by Han people and Chinese culture, as was the vase of Dunhuang between the Han and Tang dynasties.
  \item Jiaohe (交河) ruin: it was the oldest and best preserved adobe building city in the world. It was the most complete preservation of urban heritage in China for more than two thousand years. The highest military authority in the western regions of Tang Dynasty was located here.
  \item Beiting (北庭): the Beiting ruin was located in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region County, 12 kilometers north of Jimsar. There was military authority of Tang Empire. It was called Beiting Duhufu (都护府). In the ruin, there were city walls, temples, seal, coins and other relics.
  \item Subhash (苏巴什) temple ruin: It was also called the Zhaohuli (昭怙厘) Temple which was located in Xinjiang Kuche County and the northeast of Queletage hill. It included the East and West temples. There was a row of caves in the north with statues of Buddha and inscriptions in Kuchean. An ancient tomb was found in the temple.
\end{itemize}
Kezierduoha (克孜尔尕哈) ruin\textsuperscript{18} are in Kuqa (库车) while Kizil (克孜尔) Grottoes\textsuperscript{19} are in Baicheng (拜城).

(4) The princess of Lop Nor Mummy

Lop Nur\textsuperscript{20} or Lop Nor (罗布泊) was originally a saline lake in China, now largely dried-up, located between the Taklamakan and Kumtag deserts in the south-eastern portion of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Its civilization is dated from 4 000 to 3 500 years. Milan city ruin\textsuperscript{21} and Kizil Grottoes belonged to the Lop Nor civilization.

The Xiaohe (小河) Tomb\textsuperscript{22} is located to the west of Lop Nur. This bronze-age burial site is an oblong sand dune, from which more than thirty well-preserved mummies have been excavated. One of the mummies was called the "Princess of Lop Nor". She was found in 2003 with exclusively west Eurasian genetically paternal lineages. Genetic analyses of the mummies proved that the Xiaohe people were an admixture of population from both the West and the East. The maternal lineages of the Xiaohe people originated from both East Asia and West Eurasia, whereas the paternal lineages all originated from West Eurasia. This was 1500 years earlier than the Silk Road.

\textsuperscript{18} Kezierduoha (克孜尔尕哈) ruin: it was a beacon in Yixihala (依西哈拉) Town of Xinjiang Kuche County. On a platform of Yanshui Valley, the beacon was built in the Han Dynasty. As a kind of ancient military alarm, beacon was a tower with flames. Kezierduoha Beacon was the earliest and best preserved beacon on the north route of the Silk Road. In 2005, it was included in the Silk Road (Xinjiang section) large site protection project.

\textsuperscript{19} Kizil (克孜尔) Grottoes: it was also called Kizil Thousand Buddha Caves. In Mingwutage cliff, which is 7 kilometers from Baicheng County of Xinjiang, it was the earliest excavated and westernmost large-scale grotto in China. It was started in the third Century and gradually stopped in the 8-9 centuries AD. There are 236 officially-numbered grottoes. Most of the statues have been destroyed. In the No.81 grotto, there are exquisite wall paintings, which belonged to ancient Qiuci state cultural relics.

\textsuperscript{20} Lop Nur: Loulan (楼兰) was an ancient state in the Western reign. Its capital was in Lop Nur, Xinjiang, China. The people in Loulan belonged to the Indo European race and used the language of the Indo European tocharian. It flourished, but for various reasons, declined and disappeared before fourth Century. The Swedish Explorer Sven Hedin announced the existence of Loulan city in 1901.

\textsuperscript{21} Milan city ruin: Milan was an ancient oasis city in the south of the Taklimakan Desert. It was also a busy trade center on the South route of the Silk Road and an important access to Central Asia. There are ruins of Yixun City (伊循城) of the Shanshan Kingdom (鄯善国), a garrison of Han Dynasty and a fort of the Tang Dynasty.

\textsuperscript{22} Xiaohe (小河) Tomb: it was located in the Lop Nor desert, 60 kilometres from the Peacock River Valley and 175 kilometres from Loulan city ruins.
Dunhuang is a county-level city in northwestern Gansu Province, Western China. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, it was the main stop of communication between ancient China and the rest of the world and a major hub of commerce along the Silk Road, Dunhuang being the intersection city of all three main silk routes (north, central, south).

The Mogao Caves, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes, is in Dunhuang. Its art covers more than ten major genres, such as architecture, stucco sculpture, wall paintings, silk paintings, calligraphy, woodblock printing, embroidery, literature, music and dance, and popular entertainment. A variety of styles of sculpture and painting can be found everywhere in the caves.
Through the Buddhist figures, it can be seen that the characters of the Han people were more and more obvious over time. The kindly Buddha was similar to an emperor for the Central Plains dynasty. Kasyapa (迦叶) and Ananda (阿难) were disciples of Buddha: Kasyapa represented the elders with wisdom, while Ananda represented a handsome and intelligent young man. Bodhisattva's prototype was the beauty of Tang Dynasty; the heavenly kings represented the generals, while giants represented soldiers.

(6) Longmen (龙门) Caves

The Longmen Grottoes or the Longmen Caves are one of the finest examples of Chinese Buddhist art. Housing tens of thousands of statues of Buddha and his disciples, they are located 12 kilometres south of present-day Luoyang in Henan province.
Fengxian (奉先), or Feng Xian Si, or Li Zhi (李治) cave is the Ancestor Worshipping Cave, which is the largest of all caves carved on the west hill, and built between 672 and 676 for Empress Wu Zetian (武则天). The carvings are claimed to be the ultimate in architectural perfection of the Tang dynasty. It has the largest Buddha statue: the Lord Buddha Losana is 17.14 metres high, its head is 4 metres high and ears are 1.9 metres long.

![Fig. 14: Lushena Buddha in Fengxian Temple](image)

Wu Zetian (武则天) was the only empress in Chinese history. In the statues we can not only see the racial transformation, but also track the process of Buddhism in the secular society. This is the important reason why Buddhism was widely practiced in China over a long period.
The blending of objects

From the figures of statues, the activities of foreign people in ancient China can be seen.

(1) Dashi (大食) Pottery Figures in the Palace Museum, from Tang Dynasty

Dashi was originally a tribe in Persia. For the Tang and Song Dynasties, it meant that Arabs, the Arab Empire or Muslims spoke the Persian language. According to the colour of their clothing, there were White-Clothes Dashi, Black-Clothes Dashi and Green-Clothes Dashi. White-Clothes Dashi represented the Umayyad Caliphate. The Umayyad Caliphate was the second of the four major Muslim caliphates established after the death of Muhammad. This caliphate was centred on the Umayyad dynasty (Arabic: الاماميون al-'Umawiyyūn, or بنو أمية Banū 'Umayya, “Sons of Umayya”), hailing from Mecca. The Umayyad family had first come to power under the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (644–656).

Fig. 15: Dashi pottery figures in the Palace Museum from Tang Dynasty
(2) Gold coins from the Eastern Roman Empire

Byzantine coins and their imitations are very important Eastern Roman relics found in China. There are about more than 40 pieces, mainly concentrated in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia (宁夏), Shaanxi (陕西), Hebei (河北), or Henan (河南) provinces.

![Gold coins from the Eastern Roman Empire in the Palace Museum](image)

(3) Glass Ware in Famen (法门) Temple

Famen Temple is located in Famen town, 120 kilometres west of Xi'an, Shaanxi province. In 1987, after the opening of an underground palace, many relics were found. Coloured glaze is what glass looks like in our present days. Chinese glass manufacturing technology was influenced by western Asia, and the most common style was Islamic. Because of its rarity, glass apparatus was as valuable as gold and jade. The unearthed glass apparatuses are mostly hollowware such as disks, plates and bowls; over 20 pieces were found.

The design of the 11 pieces of glassware has a typical Islamic style. The coloured glaze was very popular in the early stages of Islam, and there are only a number of Islamic countries that have specimens of exquisite glaze firing process. This glassware came through the Silk Road to China, together with jewellery.
(4) The Spread of the four great inventions

The “Four Great Inventions” that are celebrated in Chinese culture for their historical significance and as symbols of ancient China’s advanced science and technology. They are the compass, gunpowder, printing and papermaking.

At the end of twelfth century and the beginning of the early thirteenth century, the compass was introduced into Arabia by sea, and then spread from there to Europe. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, gunpowder was first introduced into Arabia, and then spread to Greece and Europe and then to the rest of the world. Printing had spread to Southeast Asia in the eleventh century, and papermaking was first introduced into Korea and Vietnam and then spread to Japan, probably in AD 105.

Many related works and articles in the field of cultural exchanges have been published. The Silk Road and the Cultural Exchange between the East and the West (by Rong Xinjiang 萧新江, the Peking University Press, 2015) details their spread to the Western Regions and the coexistence of religious culture along the Silk Road. Another publication, The Silk Road: A New History (by Valerie Hansen, Beijing Joint Publishing Company, 2015) states
that there had never been a single continuous Silk Road, and there was only a series of markets between the East and West. There was little direct trade between China and Rome, and China’s major trading partners were residents of today’s Iran. The spread of ideas, technology and artistic design is of greater significance.

The two books refer to the Sogdiana (粟特), an ancient civilization of a Persian people. From the Han Dynasty to Song Dynasty, they were active on the Silk Road, in order to do business in Europe and Asia. The Sogdians established a trading network across the 1500 miles from Sogdiana to China. During the Tang Dynasty, they had nine Zhaowu surnames. Some think they had Uighur ancestors and the Uzbek people are their descendants. There are large numbers of Tang Sogdian tombs and epitaphs. In the midst of the Tang dynasty, many of Sogdians changed to Han surnames (Rong Xinjiang 2005).
The Relics of Foreign Religious

The Spread of Islam in China

The Phoenix Temple also known as “Zhenjiao (真教寺) mosque”; it is located in Zhongshan (中山) road Hangzhou (杭州) City, Zhejiang (浙江) Province; it is one of the four temples of Islam in the Chinese coastal area. It was founded during the Tang Dynasty reign and destroyed during the Song dynasty rule. In the Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1636-1912), it was rebuilt. One of the stones had Koranic verses inscribed on it dating to 1451. The temple has also preserved its Arabic inscriptions. In the Five Dynasties, Hangzhou and Arabia had friendly exchanges. Now here is the worship centre of Islam in Hangzhou.

Fig. 19: The Phoenix Temple
Sanya in ancient China was an important transport gateway for overseas trade. It was also one of the transit points of the ancient Silk Road. Many of Arabia's Muslims came to Sanya and settled there. Their tombs were also found there. This is the earliest, largest and most extended period of the Islamic cemetery in the south of China. There are relics of the Tang, song and Yuan dynasties.

Fig. 20: The Islam tombs in Hainan province

Christian heritage in China

Nestorianism spread to China, influenced by a number of Buddhist concepts. The Church of the East or Nestorian Church had a presence in China during two periods: first from the 7th through the 10th centuries, and later during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries. Locally, the religion was known as Jingjiao (景教). It was practiced by many of the non-Han people; today, there are still a few followers in Hong Kong.

The stele commemorating the propagation in China of the “Luminous religion of Daqin” (e.g. the Ta-Chin Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom, or Church, is important for the history of Christianity in China. It reveals that the initial Nestorian Christian church had been recognized by the Tang emperor Taizong (太宗), through the efforts of the Christian missionary
Alopen in 635. Alopen and his fellow Syriac missionaries came to China from Daqin (大秦, Roman Empire) bringing sacred books and images. Buried in 845, probably during religious suppression, the stele was not rediscovered until 1625.

Under the Song Dynasty rule, and in the Quan (泉州) province, there was a cross on the stele. During the Yuan Dynasty, Nestorian temples were called the cross temples. According to the “Yuan records”, there were 72 cross temples in China.

![Fig. 21: The Cross Temple in Beijing.](image)

The lower part of the cross was a typical Buddhist lotus petal. It showed that a Nestorian fruit came from a Chinese Buddhism flower. It also showed the unique significance of the contact, communication, collision and fusion between the Christian religion and Chinese culture.

**The Belt and Road**

Today, the new focus is on the New Silk Economy Development Zone and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, also known as The Belt and Road, One Belt, One Road or the Belt and Road Initiative, is a development strategy and framework aiming at primarily establishing connectivity and cooperation
among countries and between China and the rest of Eurasia. It hopes to solve the problem of unbalanced development between the East and the West of China by adjusting the centre of foreign exchange.

The Belt and Road initiative, meeting the development needs of China, countries along the routes and the region at large, will serve the common interests of relevant parties and answer the call of our time for regional and global cooperation.

The Middle East, including Lebanon, in ancient times and today, is an important area of the Silk Road Economic zone. We hope to further deepen exchanges and cooperation in the field of culture.

Conclusion

Along the Silk Road, we encountered markets, oases, deserts, seas, castles and tombs. We had a glimpse of life in different ethnic groups and regions. Languages, folk customs, handicrafts, religions all were the expressions of their culture. New research in this field delves deeper into the history of the Silk Road, just as diversity of world history is the product of the development of many different cultures, which had their own characteristics and influenced each other. From the historical and geographical point of view, the Silk Road gave economic advantages to the countries along the route. In contrast, the demand for trade between countries was a key factor in the formation, expansion and evolution of the Road. The numerous unearthed objects and sites confirm its development and prosperity. Through their geographical location, there is clearly a network of cultural communication. The network made its way through the most important core cities of all times in the Chinese civilization. It can be said that the Silk Road is a clue to the study of cultural history and traffic history. The Silk Road is also a treasury of historical research, as it provides the paper and carved stone materials and folk customs, which supplied the historical data for thematic studies. Therefore, we should pay attention to the history of the Silk Road, treasure the cultural heritage of it, and maintain its fine tradition of two-way exchange.

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