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Silk Roads: Past and Future

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Silk Roads were without doubt arteries of dialogue as well as of travel—dialogue between individuals, leading in the course of time to what we call a “dialogue of cultures”. This is indeed the purpose today of our research around the theme of exchanges and encounters, with the stated intention of driving back ignorance and serving to improve communication between people.

We are not the first to lay stress on the human significance of the history of roads, particularly roads running right across the vast bastion of Eurasia. At the beginning of the century it was the purpose of the International Association for the Exploration of Central Asia, a research body founded by German orientalist Wilhelm Radloff (1837–1918), curator of the Asian Museum in St. Petersburg and member of the Russian Academy. President of the French Committee, academician Emile Senart, spoke at the Sorbonne on 10 December 1909 of Radloff’s disinterestedness and generosity in connection with Chinese Turkistan, calling this area “the latest survivor of night and silence”. As we approach the end of the century it is still imperative to avoid the repetition of both the material and the moral prejudices that embitter all dialogues, as evidenced by judgments passed by Asians on European explorers of the oases and those passed by Europeans on Asian navigators of sea routes.

Nor is it the first time that UNESCO has been involved in a project of this kind. As early as 1956, before its tenth anniversary, it was focusing attention on this subject, through the East-West Major Project, with its many activities, including the major symposium organized in Tokyo and Kyoto in October 1957 by the Japanese National Commission on *History of Cultural Contacts Between East and West*. In a remarkable introductory brochure scientific definitions of the three great silk routes were established—steppe routes, oasis routes, sea routes. The editorial board comprised five renowned scholars: Enoki Kasuo, Fujieda Akira, Iwao Seichi, Matsuda Misao and Yamamoto Tatsuro. Four of them have joined us here today to advise us in our work. This research made it possible to tackle many linguistic, and more especially onomastic, problems with a view to shedding light on the distribution of tribes along the routes. At the same time, Japanese archaeological, geographical, historical and sociological research was reviewed.

Thirty-one years later we meet again to deal with a similar topic, but the problem is posed in a slightly different way to allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of the factors studied.

In the course of the ages, awareness of cultural solidarity of certain complexes has become increasingly manifest. In the West, for example, it appears in various expressions—some geographical, such as “Ports of the Levant”, some political, such as “Middle East” or “Southeast Asia”—in addition to the traditional socio-historical groups, nomadic or sedentary.

Development of dialogue between cultures soon made it imperative to explain the standpoint from which the “partners” involved were in turn to be defined. Small communities or big complexes entail different mechanisms, both in their relationships and in the transmission, and above all penetration, of cultural information. These variations are due to distant kinship, geographical or historical remoteness or to proximity resulting from linguistic or religious affinities. It was even thought of late that if the routes linked complexes from east to west they may have brought into even closer contact wayside populations of the north and those of the south, whether nomadic or sedentary, as pointed out by Haneda Akira. Silk Roads served equally therefore as channels of “transmission” in one direction and “communication” in the other, intersected by ceramic routes, forest routes, bronze routes and fur routes, including the marten route.

From one village or oasis to another, slow passage was effected from the Mediterranean world to that of steppes and deserts. And so we follow, in the wake of merchants or pilgrims of old, relationships that time and changing appearances had obliterated. However, there remains a hard core essentially extrinsic to the linguistic and logical relationship that, though vague and ill perceived, connects the others; i.e., the Chinese world. Long tradition of cultural infiltration has not succeeded in getting the better of it. We should be glad of the fact, for this irreducibility of an extremely alien world offers invaluable stimulus to reflection on the benefits, and at the same time the limitations, of communication. Reasons for this specificity are perhaps to be found in the complexity of mechanisms of transmission of cultural values, slowly instilled all along the route. External values are often assimilated by one region before being passed on to the neighboring region.

Numerous specific studies already exist; what is urgently required is that they all be placed in perspective. For instance, horse-dealing and silk trade inspired an excellent study of Ma Junmin published in 1984 *Zhongguoshi Yanjiu*. The same might be said of the imbalance of exchanges on Chinese home markets and resulting difficulty of linking Chinese trade with international trade—a problem aptly described by Michel Cartier at a roundtable meeting of businessmen at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 1985. It might therefore be advisable to select comparable research to produce a convergent study and wherever possible a comprehensive survey. We might, for example, collate all research on relay posts, and posts in general, along all itineraries of Silk Roads.

We might also draw inspiration from certain interesting activities provided for by the Council of Europe in its program on European cultural itineraries. Four of them have met with general approval: itinerary of the *Santiago de Compostela*

pilgrimage, itinerary of *baroque art*, monuments and collections, tour of *rural habitat* in a given region and, lastly, *silk routes in Europe* and contact with the East. The latter was subject of a symposium at the Italian city of Como at the beginning of this month. One of the main aims of the Council of Europe is to create collective awareness of European culture through travel, to which it has been giving attention since 1964. Little by little projects have matured and current ones again take up itineraries of pilgrimages on one hand and of the spread of art or craft cultures on the other. Selection of itineraries to follow today is no doubt determined by existing possibilities, supplemented by any elements that can enhance them—placing of signposts and commemorative stones along the way, restoration of monuments on the itinerary and holding cultural events all along it, with exhibitions, guides and monographs.

Even if our project cannot extend to such a full program, it should, I think, adopt all positive aspects: idea of pilgrimages, which gives new life to old routes and old cities; idea of art tours, which involves activities to protect heritage; and idea of technological excursions, which makes it possible to keep old manufacturing traditions. It is not impossible to imagine that combinations of these ideas will lead one day to a great cultural highway whereby these oases that have given so much will be abundantly recompensed.

After this exploration of the past it seems to me to be essential to turn to the future and examine the role of the media—not so much in the narrow context of broadcasting and news, indispensable though these are, as much as that of communication, to which we referred earlier. For, in the course of the different stages, mutual cultural enrichment ensues and reveals the many different aspects of cultural values, which do not affect individual sensibilities in exactly the same way. This might provide elements for reflection, which many of our contemporaries might usefully consider as they try to form a clearer idea of the cultural communication of the future.

