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Significance of Silk Roads Today: Proposal for a Historical Atlas

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This essay looks first at the legitimacy of the appellation "Silk Roads", then at some of the layers of significance this phenomenon represents. Finally, it puts forward a concrete proposal for further study of the subject, namely an atlas of Eurasian transcontinental trade routes. It is a project that could be undertaken only by a team of international specialists, and is therefore a fitting complement to UNESCO's Project on the Integral Study of Silk Roads. Moreover, it seeks to serve the interests of both academic community and lay public, and this too is in keeping with the spirit of the UNESCO undertaking.

1. SILK ROADS, A HAPPY SYNECDOCHE

Did "Silk Roads" ever exist? Many scholars would say no. They argue that the term is wholly misleading: factually incorrect and therefore unwarranted. Within their own terms of reference they are of course correct. It would be a rash and ignorant person indeed who would suggest that only one product was ever transported from East to West and that it followed only one itinerary. But this is surely not the meaning of the term: it is metaphor, not an exact scientific description. It sums up the mystery, the exotic splendor of long-distance travel. More than that, it gives back to commerce—an activity often regarded today with a certain disdain—the dignity and primacy it once had.

The desire to acquire the new, the rare, is a basic human instinct. It has driven men to undertake most perilous and arduous journeys, to seek new routes and new connections. Other intrepid travelers have followed behind—pilgrims, scholars, craftsmen—but it is that basic acquisitive urge that has acted as pathfinder. Admittedly, silk was a comparatively late arrival on the scene. Other products had been exchanged long before, some over short distances, some over longer expanses, handed on from one trade to another. We could speak of the Jade Route, or the Lapis Lazuli Route, or the Route of Heavenly Horses, or that of Tea, of Rubies, of Gold, Hides, Furs, even of Melons or Grapes. (Japanese colleagues speak of a "Ceramic Road.")

The list is interminable, indeed a catalog of the material wealth of the region. The beauty of the term "Silk Road" lies in its ability to conjure up something of the

opulence and exclusivity of all these things; it achieves with two words what would otherwise take a whole book to describe. The academic world is suspicious of such terse economy, fearful of the oversimplification, but the lay public senses the aptness of the term. It does not have a distinguished pedigree, an antique genealogy, but Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen caught at something that should have existed (before he found the term in 1877), something that did perhaps once exist in other cultures and times and has now been forgotten. Certainly silk was a substance magical enough to entrance even the most luxury-sated customers in the distant lands to the west. An echo of that magic is still perceptible even in our times and that is surely why the words "Silk Roads" have such evocative power today in so many different lands and cultures.

It is unnecessarily pedantic, therefore, to quibble over the use of this appellation, or to try to restrict its use purely to the periods and routes that witnessed the trade in this one product. Let us accept it for what it is: a happy synecdoche.

The task of scholars, especially of those involved in the UNESCO Project on the Integral Study of Silk Roads, is to broaden and deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of transcontinental contacts, to clarify the relationship between part and whole, between symbol and literal signification, that is encapsulated in this term. Specialization there must be; clear definition of subject there must be, but detailed work must not obscure the essential unity underlying the diversity. In considering Silk Roads we are considering a process that has been taking place for thousands of years, following different routes, passing on different commodities, but always forging connections between East and West, North and South. Let us not lose sight of that in our search for precision.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF SILK ROADS

The significance of Silk Roads (using the term in the symbolic sense outlined above) can be understood on many levels. At its most basic, it represents that simplest and most complex of things, a link. Trade routes provided channels of communication, means of reaching out beyond the confines of the familiar, native circle; once contact had been established with a neighbor, the way was open for all manner of interactions. Familiarity might not have brought friendship, but it did bring the knowledge that the "outsiders" were people, perhaps people with different features and customs, but nevertheless humans from the same mould, not monsters with supernatural, demonic attributes.

This firsthand knowledge of other people, one of the great gifts of Silk Roads, started from small and uncertain beginnings. We know very little about the earliest contacts of prehistoric times. Archaeological excavations occasionally produce tantalizing examples of artefact from far afield, but it is impossible to plot with any confidence the shifting course of nomadic migrations and intersections. Later, as stable societies developed, there is evidence of more regular patterns of contact, but

it was not until the middle of the last millennium before our era that an organised system of communications began to appear. Great highways such as the Persian Royal Road spanned lands of the Middle East and gave easier access to Central Asia; smaller, less frequented routes fanned out across the continent to cover yet more territory and, in time, to link up with the arterial highways of China and India. Ports around the perimeter connected land routes with sea routes and stretched the network still farther. Few individuals traversed the whole of the Eurasian landmass—names of known travelers such as Fa-hsien, Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta are scattered over a thousand years and more—but relay trade, or short-distance movement of goods and people, provided an effective chain of contact, of communication, of information.

Trade was the foundation of the system, kept it alive and flexible, and gave it new impetus. In its footsteps, however, there followed a rich cultural cross-fertilization. Exchange of technology was a vital element in the evolution of all the great civilizations served by Silk Roads. It was not a one-way traffic: ideas passed backward and forward from one culture to another, each shift bringing new refinement, new application. There was no innate superiority in any one culture or ethnic group, only common human ingenuity constantly seeking to push back the limits of the possible. The same fruitful contact took place in religion and philosophy, as new beliefs and doctrines spread across the continent and gained from exposure to other modes of thought. Artistic development was stimulated by influences from outside. Even in language, scripts and words were borrowed and passed from one people to another, furnishing new avenues of expression. In many other spheres, ranging from music, dancing and sport to the art of the kitchen with its exotic array of fruits, vegetables and spices, the same process of adaptation, transformation and enrichment took place. This, then, is another layer in the significance of Silk Roads: its vivid illustration of the way in which intercultural contacts, far from being a danger to be feared, are crucial sources of inspiration, integral parts of the ecology of culture.

There is a third layer of significance that must not be forgotten, and that is the role played by aggression. We must not sanitize history in order to turn it into an edifying moral lesson. By their own wealth as well as the access they provided to yet greater prizes, Silk Roads have attracted a long succession of invaders. These lands have experienced more than their share of occupation and devastation. And yet there is a dialectic here: out of these traumas have been born new syntheses. Alexander of Macedon did not come to the East in friendship, but in conquest; yet how much poorer would the world have been if he had never left his birthplace on the western margin of the ecumene, if he had never brought Hellenism to the heartlands of Silk Roads. Turks, Arabs and Mongols, each in their turn came as aggressors, yet out of the pain and panic of those upheavals came the glories of Samarkand. It is important not to gloss over these contradictions, because they bear witness to one of man's most remarkable attributes, the resilience that has so often enabled him to turn disaster into triumph.

Silk Roads have been called "Routes of Dialogue": Perhaps their greatest significance lies in the fact that they represent not merely dialogue established, but also dialogue resumed, dialogue that has endured despite the obstacles placed in its path. It is the totality of the experience of Silk Roads that gives resonance to their symbolic significance. They do not stand for something simple, easily attainable; they stand for something far more complex, compounded of the worst as well as the best in us. They are a symbol of our spiritual, cultural and material interdependence, but they also remind us that this has sometimes been bought at a very high price. No one people or one culture can claim domination over Silk Roads. It was a truly international channel of communication, linking the extremes of East and West, North and South. If we would understand the significance of this phenomenon today, we must approach the subject in a spirit of humility, ready to share our knowledge with others, ready to listen to other interpretations, to accept the validity of other experience. If we can achieve this, then Silk Roads will truly become a symbol of international cooperation.

3. PROPOSAL FOR A HISTORICAL ATLAS

The history of Silk Roads is part of our common heritage. This great channel of communication made possible that long and complex intermeshing of ideas that gave shape to our present, joint civilization. It is a lesson for our times that none of us, none of our societies, are "islands unto themselves", but all have contributed to, and benefited from, a common fund of knowledge.

Study of the subject is an immense undertaking, encompassing as it does an area of thousands of square miles and chronology of as many millennia. Broad outlines of history are known; much detail is not. Sometimes this is because evidence does not exist, or because necessary research has not yet been carried out. But this is not invariably the case: Sometimes the work has been done, but is known only to a handful of specialists; sometimes evidence does exist, but is known only to the curator of a remote museum on a distant section of the route. Even with research in international centres there are difficulties: print runs may be small, language barrier may prevent new work being circulated as widely as it deserves. There is also the question of interpretation: A thing might have one significance when viewed in the light of local or national tradition, quite another when seen in supralocal perspective; both perspectives are valuable and there must be room for a variety of appraisals.

The UNESCO Project for the Integral Study of Silk Roads has rightly focused attention on the need for an international, multidisciplinary approach to the subject; no other will suffice. It is a project that will start now, but will continue for many years, no doubt long after the official UNESCO programme has ended. What is required even at this stage, however, is a staging post: What do we know? How do we collate available information? How do we make it accessible to as wide a public as possible? Where do we next direct our research energies?

The proposal for a Historical Atlas of the Silk Roads was discussed at a meeting of international scholars held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in February 1988. The general conclusion was that such a work would provide in concise form an answer to the questions raised above; it would do this by summarizing as much as possible of known work on the subject and by drawing attention to areas that still remain under-researched. As indicated above, the term "Silk Roads" is to be interpreted in a very broad sense, as generic designation for all Eurasian trade routes, over land as well as over sea. Roughly speaking, this represents the area bounded by Japan in the east, Italy in the west, Siberia in the north, Sri Lanka in the south. Detailed information is available for some parts of this territory, but certainly not for all. It is inevitable that there will be a degree of unevenness in presentation, but that is part of the purpose of the exercise: to identify lacunae in our present knowledge. The same is true of the time span: It is important to trace development of these trade links from their earliest, shadowy beginnings, through the stages of their many-faceted development sometimes along one route, sometimes along another; sometimes favouring one product, sometimes another. Not all links in this chain of events have as yet been fully elucidated; in some cases it will not be possible to do more than give an approximate sketch of lines of development.

Focal point for the atlas is development of trade networks. However, it is impossible to understand this phenomenon without appreciating the physical context in which it took place. The atlas will therefore aim to provide information on such topics as population distribution, climate, water sources, urban settlements and so on. It will also take into account cultural environment, and give an indication of various types of interaction referred to in the previous section. In short, the aim of the atlas is to provide a schematized guide to the extraordinarily complex phenomena summed up by the term "Silk Roads".

The proposed format for the atlas allows for flexibility in presentation of information. The core section would be represented by a series of maps. These would include:

- a) detailed relief maps, section by section, of total area to be treated
- b) population distribution maps
- c) climate maps
- d) soil, water and vegetation maps
- e) trade maps, period by period and, where necessary, section by section
- f) maps indicating historical monuments, archaeological sites, urban settlements and similar points of interest (by period).

Additional information is to be supplied by cartograms expressing available statistics (e.g., movement of goods, numbers of caravans per year, types of goods, supply areas, production centres); explanatory texts on a variety of subjects (e.g., religion, language, art); illustrations (pictures, drawings, diagrams); remote sensing images; a gazetteer of place-names, listing and cross-referencing versions used in different periods and languages; a glossary of terms and names.

This is certainly an ambitious undertaking. Without international cooperation it would be unthinkable. The project is based in London, but collaboration with colleagues elsewhere is warmly welcomed and indeed anticipated. The response from scholars in many parts of the world has already been enthusiastic, hence prospects for bringing it to successful conclusion are promising. It is impossible to say as yet how much information will emerge when we start to collect data. Ideally, population maps referred to above should record historical situations as well as the present day: Does enough information exist to permit us to do that? We do not know as yet.

The first task that faces us is compilation of bibliographies, general and specialized. We must also identify existing maps, from earliest to most modern. In longer term, we need to interface with more narrowly focused research projects. These will include expeditions to survey sections of the terrain, as well as investigations of particular topics. For example, much work remains to be done on the history of silk itself: on dyeing and weaving techniques, design motifs, cost and quality of the fabric; places of production, transportation and so on. It is hoped that a team of textile specialists will undertake the task of correlating, sifting and synthesizing this material so it may be incorporated into the atlas.

Modern information technology makes possible versatile storage, selection and presentation of material. This is important, because the aim of the atlas is to serve the needs not only of the specialist, but also of the lay public and, in particular, of the young. The complete, detailed version of the final work will complement existing scholarly material in the field; simpler versions will provide an introduction to the subject at less technical levels. Again, with modern technology, translation need not present a problem. In keeping with the spirit of UNESCO, this project has been conceived as a cooperative venture, one that will involve and benefit people in many lands. The very nature of Silk Roads demands such approach. Only in this way can the multidimensional, multicultural significance of the phenomena be adequately conveyed.