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Development of Japanese Research on Silk Road

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Development of Japanese Research on Silk Road

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese, confined on their islands, have long aspired to see the interior of the nearest continent. Such aspiration was characterized over the past century by popular songs that frequently contained references to such places as Gobi, Himalayas or Arabian Desert.

In the 40-plus years since the last world war, the term Silk Road has become widely known to Japanese people. Especially from 1960s on approximately 100,000 Japanese, not only oriental historians, but also cultural anthropologists, writers, painters, photographers and many members of the general public have visited Silk Road sites. A prominent, widely viewed TV series, "Silk Road", produced by NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai), popularized Silk Road among our people, encouraging publication of many books and organization of many tours to Silk Road areas.

This flood of Silk Road references has received much response, both favorable and unfavorable. Some people regret that this term has been abused by indiscriminate use, and a tendency to reconsider its use has dominated the academic world.

1. TRENDS OF SILK ROAD STUDY IN JAPAN

In Japan, research on Silk Road started with studies of Asian frontier history. This study, completed by great scholars Shiratori Kurakichi, Kuwabara Jitsuzou, Fujita Toyohachi, Haneda Toru and Ishida Mikinosuke is still admired as brilliant in this field.¹⁾ While early studies consisted mainly of historical investigations of place names and local ethnology, Haneda Toru started the study of western cultural history, and soon tried to elucidate Turkic culture through Uighur documents. Ishida Mikinosuke evolved his remarkable theory of history of cultural exchange between Silk Road areas of East and West. Interest in this topic was not high until publication of *Historical Studies of Intercourse between East and West* [1939, Shigakukai, Fuzanbou, two volumes]. The compiled edition of East-West cultural exchange by Goto Sueo and Akiyama Kenzou,²⁾ has become known as a pioneering history. *The Ancient Silk Road* [A. Herrmann, translated by Osamu Yasutake, Kasumigaseki Shobo, 1944] was the first book to use Silk Road in its title—(Die Seidenstrassen). A book on an automobile expedition to northwestern China was

published by Takayama Shoin at the end of 1944 under the title *Silk-road*, written by Sven Hedin and translated by Hasuda Noriteru.

After being interrupted by the turmoil following World War II, Japanese researchers again visited western areas of Silk Road. Kihara Hitoshi, Iwamura Shinobu, Yoshida Mitsukuni, Umesao Tadao and Hirano Ichiro published books about their travels in the late 1950s,³⁾ thus increasing interest in this region. When it was decided to relay the Olympic Flame for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics from Greece to Tokyo by way of Silk Road, an expedition headed by Aso Takeharu and Morinishi Eiichi was dispatched to investigate the relay course. In these ways, the name Silk Road became well known in Japan.⁴⁾

In terms of its place in Asian history, many books on history of Silk Road were successively published between 1950 and 1965 by Matsuda Hisao, Egami Namio, Iwamura Shinobu, Haneda Akira, Kobayashi Takashiro, Fujieda Akira, Saguchi Toru, Mori Masao, Yamada Nobuo, Ise Sentaro, Hayashi Ryoichi and this author.⁵⁾ Years between 1955 and 1965 can indeed be called the "age of enlightenment" with reference to Silk Road.

Between 1965 and 1975, overseas scientific investigations—especially those under auspices of Kyoto University and University of Tokyo—became increasingly frequent; also the strengthened Japanese economy in combination with easing of overseas travel restrictions allowed many researchers, writers, painters, photographers and ordinary travelers to visit Western Asia and India. This age of popularization of Silk Road was ignited by an expedition headed by the late Fukada Kyuya and this author in 1966.⁶⁾ In the 1970s, many publishers joined in producing books concerned with Silk Road. Observing growing public interest and estimating that any book with a title including "Silk Road" would sell, publishers became indiscriminate in issuing such books. This phenomenon, similar to the publishing fever for books on Japanese ancient history, created many vulgar books that offended academics.

Because of this, experts from different academic fields started to set the record straight in the 1970s by becoming actively engaged in research on Silk Road. This marked the age of specialization, with books written by Matsuda Hisao, Maejima Shinji, Enoki Kazuo, Mori Masao, Saguchi Toru, Yamada Nobuo, Shimazaki Akira, Suzuki Osamu, Okazaki Takashi, Soma Takashi, Yajima Hikoichi, Yoshimizu Tsuneo and this author being published.⁷⁾ In addition to specialized books on East-West cultural exchange, recent trend is toward active investigation by anthropologists, painters, writers and photographers of the caliber of Inoue Yasushi, Hirayama Ikuo, Namikawa Banri, Shirakawa Yoshikazu and Shinoyama Kishin. In this way, Silk Road has gradually become an important subject in anthropology, literature, art and natural science.

2. CRITICISM OF SILK ROAD FEVER

Silk Road fever, indicated by indiscriminate publication of a wide range of

books, was heightened by the prominent NHK-TV series "Silk Road", with two separate series released in 1980 and 1983. Some young researchers reacted harshly to this trend-turned-into-a-fever by mass media. Mano Eiji, Horikawa Toru and Hori Sunao led such criticism, saying Central Asia should not be regarded merely as a transit point on the East-West axis of Silk Road. They argued that research on Silk Road areas should be approached by region and race, as these provide foci for understanding interaction and confrontation among cultures and peoples from East, West, South and North, and that Silk Road history should be researched from within.

These criticisms by young researchers indicated basic attitudes toward study of Central Asian history, and gave candid guidance to other Silk Road researchers who might be adversely affected by popular journalism.

However, an important point to keep in mind is that these criticisms are primarily concerned with basic attitudes toward Central Asian history. The study of Silk Road itself is not, as described by Hori Sunao, overdone, and it still is a very important field for study of East-West cultural exchange, which along with Central Asian history forms a major department of history.

It is natural that researchers in Central Asian history place region and race at the center of their research, and claim that an internal approach to the construction of assumptions about history is important. However, researchers should not ignore the aspect of transportation among neighboring countries, especially those dealing with Silk Road. Ignorance of this area can cause great misunderstanding and confusion in research. Recently professor Mori developed a keen observation concerning this point.⁸⁾

Originally East-West cultural exchange covered not only Asian history, but also Japanese and Western history, making its study interdisciplinary. Its field of research is extremely extensive, including chinoiserie and Japonism.⁹⁾ Histories of East-West cultural exchange, Central Asia, North Asia and South Asia require mutual cooperation as research on Silk Road, a major area of East-West cultural exchange, becomes more important. Now that mutual understanding by people, not only Eastern and Western cultures but by people of the whole world is required, it is quite natural that history of East-West cultural exchange and its heart, historical study of Silk Road, will increase in significance.

3. PROSPECT OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The term Silk Road originated from "Seidenstrassen" as used in 1877 by F. F. von Richthofen to designate West Asian transportation routes followed by silk traders in China, Transoxiana and India between the years of 114 B. C. and 127 A. D. Current progress in research on East-West cultural exchange reveals existence of steppe routes through North Asia and a marine route around South Asia in addition to the generally acknowledged oasis route through Central Asia.¹⁰⁾ Because of recent specialization in historical science, North Asian history and

Southeast Asian history are now regarded as separate fields. That fact sometimes leads researchers on East-West cultural exchanges along Silk Road to tend to ignore North Asia and Southeast Asia.

Results of recent research show that steppe routes were more important in ancient East-West cultural exchanges, to be replaced in importance only in recent times by marine routes. In this sense, steppe routes were the main routes in ancient times, oasis routes were in ascendance from the later part of ancient times to the middle ages, and marine routes took over in modern times. A main theme of research on Silk Road in modern times might deal with developments seen as result of the spreading power of such countries as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and France (even perhaps Africa and the United States). Research on East-West cultural exchange is not meant to deal with Central and West Asia alone; it means to discover and enlarge upon the entire history of humanity by conducting meticulous investigations of pieces of the whole. Therefore, Silk Road research should keep the global point of view in mind.

To this end, we should broaden the study of East-West cultural exchanges enough to include North and Southeast Asian perspectives. Recent research trends in Central Asian history naturally indicate emphasis on primary historical documents, unearthed at local sites.¹¹⁾ While continuing research on already discovered primary documents, we should also make efforts to unearth new documents. Although many difficulties can be expected, we should cooperate with researchers in countries like China, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria—practicing historical science with a behavioral science approach. Collaboration on Xinjiang with Chinese scientists can probably be accomplished. Cities along Silk Road have been remarkably modernized, so subjects of historical and cultural study are unlimited; they can range from ancient times to today.

Popularization and specialization will undoubtedly develop further in future Silk Road research. Popularization will make this study more familiar to the public and will help it spread. At the same time, nonacademic, vulgarized theories may also spread. Researchers in related fields should seek greater historical accuracy to thwart tendencies toward vulgarity.

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