

The Silk Road — a Cultural Thread Connecting Asia

By Mohan Gopal



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Introduction

Japan has no connection to the Silk Road — or so I thought until I began collecting information for this article. To me the image of the Silk Road had been a mysterious last frontier which had got lost in time, with some sort of connection to ancient China, central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan and the northern parts of ancient India. Yet another image was that it was an ancient road along which silk was moved and transported; hence the name. As I read more, I discovered that my ignorance of the Silk Road was appalling. The first book that made me considerably more informed on the subject was *In Xanadu* (1989) by William Dalrymple. This energetic young Cambridge scholar retraced the path traversed by Marco Polo from Jerusalem to the ancient Mongol capital of Xanadu, about 350 kilometers north of present-day Beijing. Marco Polo performed this feat in 1271 and Dalrymple 700-odd years later. It was a long and hard land journey for both of them. As much as Dalrymple gives credit to the English versions to Marco Polo's original *The Travels*, I owe it to *In Xanadu* and to Dalrymple's scholarly yet amazingly readable writing that I could make progress and go well beyond the stage of illiteracy in a very short span of time.

The Silk Road was — to put it rather simply — an ancient route which traversed, from east to west, what is present day China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey to the shores of the Mediterranean. While Chinese silk was a major item carried on this route to be bought by the peoples of the various lands, the Silk Road was also a conduit for many other items like artwork, porcelain, jewelry, fragrances, tools and furniture. There was a considerable flow of products in both directions enabling a brisk trade to develop in items considered exotic or useful by both rulers and ruled.

In addition to material goods, the route was a path for the exchange of architectural ideas, scientific discoveries, religious thought and practice, spirituality, literature, sculpture, music, dance, food, drink and a plethora of cultural traditions. In short, all those creations of mankind, material and otherwise, were traded, transacted, gifted, adapted and adopted across a vast length of over 10,000 km of land.

Unfortunately, what happened along the Silk Road was not limited to all the nice things listed above. The worst of human actions were also enacted along this path. Conquests, plunder, destruction, massacres and brutality saw whole cities being reduced to rubble

along with their inhabitants. As much as cultural wonders were built and appreciated, there were many others which were not so lucky. New rulers often enforced new thought rather than adopt a kindly “live and let live” approach. The Silk Road not only spanned east-central-west Asia; it also spanned a timeline of over 1,000 years with twists and turns, breaks and flows, mostly depending on the whims of the rulers that dominated its path at any given time. These rulers came in various hues and colors. There were those who plundered and murdered, only to return to whence they came with their loot — both material and human. There were those who chose to stay on and enforce cruel laws dictated by their own egos and beliefs. There were of course many more of different permutations and combinations. To be fair to the rulers, the general populace also often exhibited undesirable traits which may or may not have been instigated by their rulers. It is a miracle that despite this multiplicity of the negativities of human thought and action, positive aspects were born, survived and grew in no small measure. Today, we can relish and appreciate the kaleidoscope of beauty that we have inherited.

One of the understandings that I have gained is that the Silk Road was not just a single, almost straight path running across Asia from east to west. There were many land off-shoots, connecting with various areas of Central Asia — of what is today Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; with the Caucasian region encompassing Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and southern Russia; and with the Middle-East — notably today's Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and the lands composing the Arabian peninsula, through Egypt into Africa. There were other terrestrial off-shoots of the Silk Road which included the Indian sub-continent, Korea, Mongolia and Siberia. The “road” included desert trails and mountain paths, in addition to carriage-ways, and these could stop suddenly or shift depending on the human and natural environment.

The Silk Road was not constrained to terrestrial off-shoots. For millennia, mankind has crossed the wide water bodies of this planet in search of exactly those things that made the land-based Silk Road what it was. In short, all the positive and negative traits of humankind have taken maritime paths too. Constituting the Greater Silk Road were sea routes across the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian, the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific, connecting East Africa, continental Europe, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, Southeast Asia, China and Korea. It was this

Photo: UN World Tourism Organisation



Map of the Silk Road

maritime connectivity that in no small measure linked the Silk Road to Japan.

If Xanadu was considered as the eastern terminus of the terrestrial Silk Road (though, geographically speaking, Gyeongju in the Shilla Kingdom of Korea would get this distinction), her maritime counterpart would be the 8th century capital of Japan, Nara. Some of the best outcomes of the Silk Road culminated here under the patronage of Emperor Shomu and have been preserved ever since, surviving both natural and human-inflicted disasters.

The subject of the Silk Road is one that is very difficult to cover in a 3,000-word magazine article, even if focusing just on the cultural unions brought about among the countries of Asia. Researchers spend years and universities have multi-year disciplines specializing on Silk Road studies. This is a humble attempt to give a bird's eye view of a few salient features of this astounding bit of human history in the context of the cultural linkages it created in the Asian continent, and in particular its impact on Japan.

Nara

Emperor Shomu lived in the 8th century and established his capital in Nara. He ushered in an era where culture boomed, Buddhism flourished and international cultural exchange was enthusiastically welcomed and encouraged. Heavily influenced by the cultural excellence of his Chinese contemporary — the Tang dynasty — he patterned his capital after Chang'an (present day Xian). Music, art, architecture, religion, spirituality, language and literature from the vast Silk Road reached Nara and flourished. The architecture of Todaiji, the Temple of the Great Buddha, was patterned after Chinese architecture. Thousands of articles that either came in from overseas as gifts or were made domestically, blending the best of foreign ideas with local methods, were treasured by the Imperial household. To hold these in safe keeping for posterity, a special warehouse, the "Shosoin" was built on the vast grounds of the Todaiji temple.

The Shosoin Repository has been painstakingly maintained over

Photo: Author



Shosoin Repository in Nara

centuries under the strict joint custody of Todaiji and the Imperial Household Agency. Every autumn a selection of the artifacts are put on public exhibition at the Nara National Museum. One can view and marvel at centuries-old Silk Road art from Korea, China, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle-East and beyond and the amazing creations produced in Japan with imported materials like ivory, sandalwood, precious and semi-precious stones.

Animal motifs can be a valuable pointer to belief systems, timelines and places of origin. In the artifacts of the Silk Road, it is common to come across the peacock — a bird of beauty abundant in India and Persia, with symbolism in Hinduism and some of the pre-Islamic traditions of Persia and Central Asia. Tigers and dragons play a big role in Chinese symbolism, as elephants do in India and Southeast Asia. All these animals appear on various art treasures of the Shosoin, clearly indicating the cultures they originated from. Of these, one of the most significant from the perspective of Nara is the deer. The town abounds in the animal which moves around looking happy and well-fed. There are sacred references to the deer in Shinto with the animal being the symbol of the Kasuga Grand Shrine. At some points in Japanese history, it was a criminal offence to harm deer. The deer appears on motifs related to the emperor in the Shosoin Repository including artifacts attributed to Central Asian origin. The deer has appeared in other faiths too, in particular Buddhism and Hinduism, and has also been thought to be a spiritual symbol in some of the ancient traditions of Central Asia.

Nara is inland by almost 100 km at its closest to the sea in Osaka. Items from the Silk Road would have reached the ancient ports of Osaka and Kobe, in addition to ports much farther away like Bonato and Fukuoka in Kyushu. Depending on the port of entry, a land journey of several hundred kilometers would have been required before reaching Nara, perhaps with trade happening along the way. The maritime path to Kobe and Osaka ports is via the Seto Inland Sea which separates Shikoku from the mainland of Japan. Tomonoura — a small fishing village today on the Inland Sea in Hiroshima Prefecture — is known to have been a port town with over 1,000

years of history. There is every likelihood that ships carrying goods from the Silk Road called at this port.

Textiles

Silk from China was lapped up in mountainous volumes across the empires and kingdoms that stretched westwards for 10,000 km, giving the ancient route its now famous name. It is interesting to note that by most accounts the source of silk and the methods of producing silk thread had leaked out of China fairly early on. However, the quality of the silk coming in from the original land was treasured for thousands of years. It may be a moot point as to whether China was the only origin for silk. There is a possibility that the silkworm was already known in ancient India as references to gods and humans being draped in silk abound in ancient Hindu texts. So also in Japan where reference to the silkworm is made in the ancient texts of Japan that possibly pre-date the officially known exchanges with China. Irrespective of whether there were one or several origins, suffice to say that mankind is indebted to the silkworm for the impact that its cocoon has had on human history. Dresses and other clothing across Europe, Asia and Africa, carpets, tapestries and furnishings have been created through dyeing and weaving in a multitude of ways leading to an infinite variety of designs and patterns. The traditional dresses of Eastern Siberian peoples include silk which the Chinese would have traded for animal furs. Trading routes are known to have existed with the Ainu people of Hokkaido in northern Japan via Sakhalin in Russia, marking what would be the northeastern extremity of the Silk routes.

Tea & Wine

Tea can be called the “international beverage of the Silk Road”. Most records point towards tea cultivation starting in China and spreading in various directions from there. *Ocha* in Japan is the standard accompaniment at meals and may be taken any time in the day. The legendary tea-ceremony of Japan itself is an intricate Zen development of the commonplace act of making and drinking the beverage.

Wine has been known as a product of the Mediterranean lands for thousands of years. The methods of wine making and wine-related artifacts travelled eastwards along the Silk Road. While the production and consumption of wine in Japan is fairly recent, beginning with the Meiji Era of the late 19th century, the Shosoin Repository of Nara and the prefectural museum of Yamanashi at Isawa-Onsen in central Japan are home to a number of wine-related artifacts like goblets, jars, flagons and depictions of vines and wine including tapestries, paintings and sculptures from west Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, going as far back as the 5th century.

Religion & Spirituality

The Silk Road was witness to a myriad of the religious traditions

practiced by mankind across several thousands of years. From ancient Greek and Roman traditions to present day Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, they were all there. There were also very ancient traditions like Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity, Yezidism, Zoroastrianism and others which mostly got crushed under the footsteps of intolerance and persecution. Mankind is fortunate that Zoroastrianism at least survived by transporting itself from its original locale of Persia to the western shores of India and finding a new home for itself alongside the Hindu traditions of the host country.

In 8th century Japan, Emperor Shomu enthusiastically welcomed and encouraged Buddhism, while actively maintaining the country's home-grown faith of Shinto, thus creating the base for an amazing juxtaposition of the two faiths that continues to this day in Japan. An elaborate and grand ceremony was held in 752 consecrating the great Buddha idol at Todaiji. An Indian monk, Bodhisena, led the “Ceremony of the Opening of the Eye” which involved painting in the pupil of the Buddha's eye. In the archives of Todaiji are stories regarding the visit of the venerable monk and the conclave with monks from China, Korea and Japan that was held to commemorate the occasion.

The austere path of Zen Buddhism is credited to the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who is supposed to have arrived in China around the 6th century. From China, Zen reached Japan in the Nara period, where it caught on with the support of the nobility. Numerous paintings and other artwork depicting Bodhidharma and his disciples abound in museums across Japan and in temple archives.

If there is one tradition in Japan that is known to every child and adult in any walk of life, it is that of Daruma. Daruma-san, as he is affectionately known, is portrayed as a head which comes in different sizes, mostly coloured in red and white stripes (though I have seen blue, yellow and black Daruma). The pupils of Daruma are painted into his eyes upon achieving a goal. Daruma is found in offices in Japan and even in the offshore software project centers of Japanese clients. However, the linkage of Daruma-san and Bodhidharma is not as well known.

In temples across Japan, one can see divinities and symbolisms from the Buddhist, Chinese and Hindu traditions sculpted side by side. It almost feels as though the divinities travelled from India, meeting other divinities on their way through China and all together took office in Japan to grace the land along with Shinto *kamisama*.



The Art of ZEN special exhibition at the Tokyo National Museum (Ueno Park) in November 2016

Photo: Author

Photo: Author



Paths leading to the burial mounds of Emperor Shomu and Empress Komyo in Nara

Music

Sometimes a melody may catch one's fancy to such an extent that it tends to go on in one's brain for days like a needle stuck in a gramophone record. A song I got stuck on is in a dialect of the Hindi language and begins with the words *Mat kar maya ko ahankar*. The song itself is in the genre of hymns attributed to the 14th century Indian mystic Kabir. My first exposure to it was courtesy of Vikram Hazra, a gifted Indian musician. A rendering of this song by a group called "Kabir Cafe" evoked in me images of the Silk Road and the musical confluence brought by it across Eurasia. Saint Kabir himself expounded a blend of Islamic Sufi mysticism and Hindu spiritualism.

The "Kandisa" is a prayer that dates back to some of the earliest of Christian traditions. It is in Syriac Aramaic, an almost extinct language of the Middle East. The prayer is chanted in the Syrian orthodox churches in southern India to this day. A music group called the "Indian Ocean" has set the ancient prayer to lovely music in a way that transports the listener through spirit and time.

There are many examples in the music of the numerous lands that traverse the Great Silk Road where one can hear the impact of exchanges that have enriched human life, resonating across different peoples. The famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma made this the subject of study and created the Silk Road Ensemble. One of their performances was inside a replica of the Donhuang Caves. Donhuang in northwestern China was at its peak a bustling junction of the Silk Road, with two major branches going westwards, circumventing the Taklamakan desert around its southern and northern peripheries. It is a surviving tribute to mankind's world heritage with caves whose 2,000-year-old paintings mark a meeting point of Indian and Chinese spiritual traditions. Sane Shanahan, a percussionist with the Silk Road Ensemble, sums up the cultural confluence beautifully as "many different cultures juxtaposed next to each other, creating a unified whole".

Photo: Author



Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum

Conclusion

The Silk Road has had a tremendous impact upon mankind as an enabler of cultural exchange. One is reminded of a quote by Mahatma Gandhi: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." Those peoples and rulers who could follow this simple but profound principle gave and thereby gained, at least spiritually. Emperor Shomu and Empress Komyo appear to have lived this principle.

At the western end of Yamanashi Prefecture in central Japan, nestling on a hillside, is the quaint town of Kai-Koizumi. As you emerge at the station from the equally quaint two-car train on the JR Koumo single line you find one of the best tributes to the Silk Road. The Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum is special. It holds a private collection of artifacts from the Silk Road collected by the museum's founder, the late Ikuo Hirayama, and his wife across a span of 40 years through personal visits to the various lands, with walking as the preferred mode of movement. Additionally astounding are the paintings created by Hirayama in the Japanese *Nihonga* art style that uses pigments from semi-precious stones. The paintings are spell-binding, not just because of the excellence of the artist but of something beyond, of a depth of spirit that has captured the best of what the Silk Road had to offer. To quote Michiko Hirayama, the current museum director, "We believe we must not forget that what we now proudly call Japanese culture has been blessed with the culture of many countries."

This is a valuable message for the whole of mankind.

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