

The Silk Road – an Example of a Global System in the Pre-Modern World

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Introduction

The late Dr. Takao Moriyasu, a professor at Osaka University and senior researcher at Toyo Bunko's Oriental Library, published a book on the history of the Silk Road in 2020. It was written with the conviction that historians must explain about contemporary developments based upon a search for the past.

One of the features of the modern world is the conflict between diversity through globalization and nationalism. At the end of the 20th century, immigration was largely encouraged as part of the process of globalization, and diversity was considered a driving force for economic prosperity. But it was too optimistic to envisage future human civilization as being a borderless diversified paradise in which nationality had become meaningless.

This optimism was based on upbeat views about the economy, namely the belief that economies would grow continuously with globalization, and the low growth of the current century would fade away. But with effective growth in demand declining, we cannot expect job growth to continue permanently anymore. Increased awareness of the limits to job opportunities has intensified competition for jobs among different groups of people. National citizens and immigrants comprise one such distinction. The former will naturally be annoyed with the latter increasing at a greater pace than ever, and immigrant labor, which has already reached a level that cannot be ignored, is now confronting serious headwinds in many developed nations. Mature economies cannot continue to achieve high economic growth. This is a lesson of history, and we can see many examples, such as the Roman Empire or other empires. As an economy matures, stagnancy prevails when it reaches saturation point.

The hostility born of such economic issues is observable around the world today, and it is starting to kill the idea of diversity. This is in particular true of the mature economies of developed nations. This enmity towards immigration has today led to political divisions based on income inequality. Whereas the rich can still enjoy the benefits of growth from globalization, the poor are under pressure to secure jobs in competition with immigrant workers. The United States can no longer maintain its leadership in global governance based on the free flow of goods, services and human labor, as it is increasingly exposed to the risk of political disruption between anti-globalization voters who seek to prioritize domestic interests and liberals who still welcome globalization. So global governance is now in the hands of various groups of nations rather than the US and other developed nations.

As relations among nations become more complex, the simple

categorization of nations, such as developed and underdeveloped, or democratic and authoritarian, is no longer meaningful. Their interests cannot be protected anymore simply by relations among like-minded nations. They occasionally have to develop new relations with other countries. This situation applies to the case of Japan, as the US is not the only nation that Japan needs to consider as a key ally in determining its national security and economic prosperity. Japan now needs to pursue elaborate diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. For example, South America and the nations of what we call the Global South will be important nations in helping Japan maintain its influence in global governance. As its popularity among such nations would be critical for Japan if it wishes to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it needs to restructure its foreign policy.

In this regard, Japan must learn about the economy, politics and cultures of such nations, and above all, their history. Dr. Moriyasu's book provides important lessons on global diversity and the need to learn from the Global South.

Globalization Started in Central Eurasia

According to Dr. Moriyasu, two technological revolutions in the pre-modern era around 1000 BC made it possible for humans to create wide regional empires, such as the Assyrian, Persian, Macedonian, Roman, and those of the Kushana Dynasty in India and the Qin Han Dynasty in China. The first was the use of iron, which brought about the third agriculture revolution when ironware tools raised productivity and dramatically expanded the areas used for agriculture. The second was the emergence of cavalry with the domestication of horses, which became the basis of strong military forces and rapid communication of information.

Central Eurasia had many oases where agriculture and livestock farming were developed amongst vast grasslands and deserts. It was also the region where domestication of horses began. This made it possible to have chariots, and then troops of cavalry emerged. After 1000 BC in Central Eurasia, ironware and cavalry corps were the driving forces in the development of history, until the era when Western European nations became major powers with their superior weaponry and their inventions in marine navigation, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries. Dr. Moriyasu calls this age the "Central Eurasian States Ruling Period". The key to the prosperity of those "horseback" states was the dominant racial group's rise and decline over the region. Changes of powers were often and rapid. But even if one country disappeared, the dominant racial group in that country survived in another country. Changes of power occurred on a racial

basis rather than a nation basis.

The Uyghurs in this region are a good example of this; they played a key role in the prosperity and decline of Central Eurasia. The Uyghurs are defined as Turkic ethnic group that were active as the core group in the Eastern part of Central Eurasia (Chart). They gained rulership in this area and founded the Empire of the Eastern Uyghurs in 744, which survived until 840, when it was attacked by another Turkic tribe from what is now Kyrgyzstan. Some of the Uyghurs moved to the Tarim Basin and founded the Empire of the Western Uyghurs, which prospered for around 350 years until the beginning of the 13th century when it became subject to the rule of Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire.

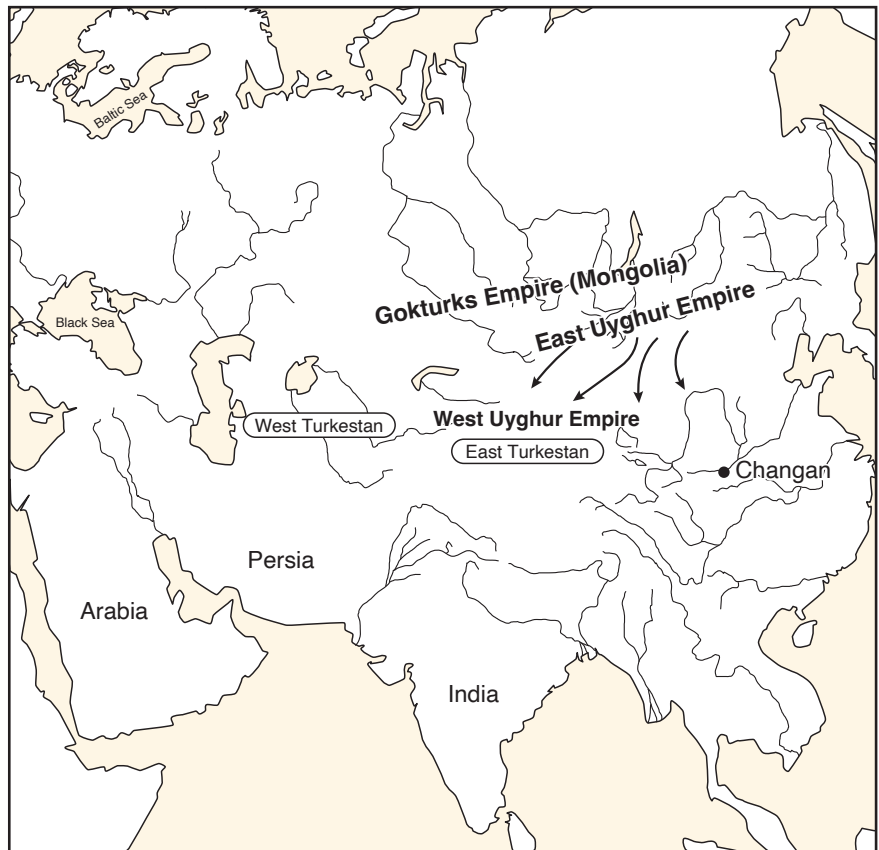
Nations at that time did not necessarily consist of a single race. In these ancient Uyghur regions, there were other races such as Chinese, the Sogd (ancient Iranians), Tocharians (ancient Central Asians) and others. Racial diversity was the key characteristic of the nations in Central Eurasia. Those Uyghurs then merged with the original residents of the Tarim Basin, the Caucasians. Another Turkic group moved to the south of Central Eurasia and founded some other nations of which East and West Turkestan were the most powerful. They were nations where the old Turkic people, originally Mongoloid, and the new Turks, mainly Caucasians, were mixed. Some of these people became powerful soldiers or politicians even within the Mongol Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The Pre-Modern World System

The late American sociologist and historian Immanuel Wallerstein founded a theory of a world system, perceiving the whole world history and society as “a single system” from a macroscopic angle. According to his theory, with the global expansion of capitalism, an artificial system of the division of labor, the modern world since the 16th century has been divided into nations at the core of capitalism, those on the semi-periphery of capitalism, and those on the periphery of capitalism. And there developed an imbalance in relations between the rulers and the ruled, such as the developed and the underdeveloped nations. Many historians today have applied this theory to the pre-modern world and noted that there would have been some similar world system with distinctive divisions of labor even in the pre-modern world. One such example would have been in Central Eurasia in 1000 BC, with the structural confrontation between stock farming in the North and agriculture in the South, and with the

CHART

Great movement of the Turkish people after the 6th century



Notes: 1. All nations on the map were founded in Eurasia by various kinds of Turkish races moving from the Mongolian Plateau, and did not necessarily co-exist at the same time; 2. Arrows show movement routes of the Uyghurs in the middle of the 9th century.

Source: Takao Moriyasu, *World History of the Silk Road*, p. 87 (Kodansha, 2020). (Japan SPOTLIGHT translated the original map in Japanese into English).

northern cavalry people and Chinese empires like the Qin and the Han, and the Persian or Greek and Roman empires in the South.

The latter, convinced of their excellence, discriminated against the former. These nomadic people were vulnerable economically, as livestock, the source of their livelihood, were always exposed to a high risk of shortage due to natural disasters like droughts or famines. Given this risk and the overall instability of resources in nomadic life, these peoples needed to continue to exploit the wealth of the agricultural nations by invasions. These wars were productive for the survival of the nomadic nations in Central Eurasia, and coalitions among the low-productivity nomadic peoples were aimed precisely at their survival by looting the agricultural nations.

Wallerstein's theory of the modern world system can be summarized as one in which the Western powers were successfully developed by depriving the North and South Americas and Africa of their resources and wealth through their superior firearms and weaponry. According to Dr. Moriyasu, by applying this to pre-modern era we can call the situation where nomadic nations in northern Eurasia maintained their power by exploiting the wealth of southern Eurasia through their cavalry a “pre-modern world system”. The

nomadic nations in the North of Central Eurasia thus built-up a wealth redistribution system in relation to the South.

In addition to military invasion, those nomadic nations created three ways to exploit the agricultural nations' wealth, namely tributes, taxes, and trade with the subjected peoples. In trade, luxury goods like silk textiles from China were transported by the Sogd through East and West Turkistan to Western Asia and the Eastern Roman Empire, and in return the nomadic nations got luxury goods produced in Europe. Thus the pre-modern world system is closely connected with the Silk Road, a network of luxury goods exchange.

In the era of globalization, each regional history would be subsumed into world history. There are some arguments that globalization in this regard started in the 15th or 16th century when Western nations began moving into the Pacific region, or even that the Mongol Empire in the 13th century was its origin. But according to Dr. Moriyasu, globalization started along the Silk Road several hundred years BC when the Chinese Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire co-existed, long before the Mongol Empire. The trade in luxury goods along the Silk Road must have impacted the economic life of ordinary people as well, since many people made long journeys in order to trade and such travels stimulated businesses like accommodation and restaurants, which enriched local economies.

The Silk Road & Diffusion of Religion

The Silk Road was the route not only for the trade in luxury goods but also for the diffusion of ideas. Above all, religions were spread through the Silk Road. Manichaeism was founded in the third century by Mani, who was born in 216 in Babylonia. It was an eclectic religion based on dualism, consisting of elements of four earlier religions – Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism. It was characterized by various dualistic concepts: heaven and hell, monks and laymen, killing and non-killing. Other basic concepts were those of reincarnation and a messiah. It reached its peak in the fourth and fifth centuries and was considered the most powerful rival to Christianity. Manichaeism's influence on Christianity was quite profound and can still be seen in some modern aspects of Christian life, such as the displaying of Sundays in red on calendars.

Manichaeism then reached the Tang Dynasty in China around the end of the seventh century, brought along the Silk Road by the Sogd, ancient Iranians who played a key role in the trade of luxury goods in the pre-modern world system. The Sogd also brought Manichaeism to the Uyghur empires, first to the eastern Uyghurs in the eighth and ninth centuries, and then to the western Uyghurs in the 10th and 11th centuries. It was acknowledged as the national religion in those times.

Manichaeism also strongly influenced Buddhism. Their monks were living on donations and it was considered important to have phytophotons as a source of nutrition, and thus vegetarianism was at the core of its beliefs. Melons, cucumbers, grapes and watermelons were considered key foods for these monks, and this continues among Buddhists today. Buddhism among the ancient Uyghurs was characterized as a belief in Amitabha Buddha, a symbol of radiation, and respect for the confession of sins. Both were also considered critical by Manichaeism.

Then as the differences between the two religions became smaller,

in the 10th and 11th centuries among the western Uyghurs Manichaeism was merged with Buddhism. This process of merging has not been clearly identified, but Tocharians and Chinese, then Buddhists living in the western Uyghur region, used their influence on the rulers and gradually Buddhism must have gained predominance.

So the Silk Road played a key role in the transformation of religious ideas and beliefs, which would have been a critical element of civilizations at that time.

Conclusion

The current world faces a high risk of supply chain disruption caused by political divisions. Yet this is not the first time that globalization has been exposed to disruption. In the pre-modern world system that began along the Silk Road, the supply chain for luxury goods must have always faced high risks from natural disasters and wars, greater than the risks we face today. But that did not stop globalization, as history tells us, nor even the free flow of ideas. This suggests that impediments to globalization are only temporary and that the permanent benefits of globalization exceed its temporary demerits.

Today's anti-globalization political movements mostly stem from both nationalistic sentiments and from concerns about job losses to immigrant labor. National governments need to pursue a high economic growth strategy to expand job opportunities. Even if their fiscal capacity to encourage growth is limited, they may be able to achieve it by promoting innovation. Innovation can be labor saving, but the increase in demand it stimulates could create more jobs. We can find the seeds of innovation today in such areas as computing technology, biotechnology, AI, and new energy sources. Such seeds can be found in diverse areas.

Concerns based on nationalism or discrimination against immigrant cultures could be allayed by a reconsideration of history. As the story of the Silk Road tells us, no single culture prevails over any other. All nations and cultures are products of the mingling of many cultures and their mutual influence. Though world history in the last 400-500 years has been dominated by Western nations, the basis of their civilizations can be found in the roots of Central Eurasia. National cultures are born of diversity. Belief in excellence of a certain nation's culture over any other is groundless.

Today we are seeing the end of the predominance of Western nations in the global system, as their economic development reaches saturation point. We should reflect on the pre-modern world system and start thinking about mingled leadership among Western nations and the Global South, a group of nations underdeveloped in terms of Western-style criteria but occasionally with long histories rooted in Central Eurasia. To achieve this, it would be a good idea to learn about the history of the Global South nations to deepen understanding of their historical background and potential wisdom. Central Eurasia would be a good starting point, and we could begin looking at the modern world with fresh eyes, leaving the preoccupations with leading Westerners in the world.

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