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A Review of the Influence of the Ancient Silk Road on Ancient and Modern China

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Abstract

The Silk Road was a road connecting ancient civilizations between Europe and Asia. Its formation and development was a relatively long process. The birth of the Silk Road significantly promoted the trade and cultural exchanges between ancient Europe and Central Asia and the Central Plains of China. The ancient Silk Road, with its rich historical and cultural value, demonstrated the necessity and inevitability of the ancient integration of civilizations between Europe and Asia. It also revealed the historical track and historical rule of the exchanges between different civilizations in Europe and Asia. It still has a substantial learning value for the development of modern countries and personal growth. In the form of an overview, this paper analyzes the influence of the ancient Silk Road on ancient and modern Chinese society. This paper mainly studies the ancient Silk Road from three dimensions: culture, commerce, and politics, so as to draw a detailed summary and induction of the positive effects of the ancient Silk Road on ancient and modern China.

Keywords

The Silk Road, trade and cultural exchanges, history significance

Introduction

The ancient Silk Road was opened up by Zhang Qian, with a mission to the Western regions; started from Chang'an and Xi'an, went through Gansu and Xinjiang, to Central Asia and West Asia, and connected the Mediterranean countries. The road was given the name “the Silk Road” for silk products and had the most significant influence on the goods transported west. Its introductory course was set in the Han Dynasty, including three routes: South Road, Middle Road, and North Road.

In ancient times, trading routes have been established in the Middle East. The Persians and the Greeks have expanded these routes. However, it was not until the Han Dynasty of ancient China that a more systematic and famously known trading network was established. In 139 BC, an envoy named Zhang Qian was sent by Chinese Emperor Wu on an expedition to the West. The monarchy endeavored to unite Western empires and defeat Xiong Nu. In hindsight, this expedition had established routes for increased trading as well as cultural communication between Western and Eastern countries, and in the 19th century, these routes were given a name well known today—the Silk Road. Today, the Silk Road is known as a network of ancient trading routes that span across Eurasia, beginning from China and finishing roughly at the Roman Empire. The road, as mentioned, was a belt linking countries across the continent and had significant economic significance as merchants travelled along it selling goods to empires and city-states along the way. It still remains essential economically (Sembrika Nimaevna IVANOVA, 2020).

1. Social situation before the Silk Road

1.1 Trading

Centuries before Zhang Qian’s trip to the West in Han Dynasty, international trade existed across the Eastern and

Western parts of Asia. The Biography of King Mu introduces the journey of Emperor Mu of the Zhou Dynasty to see the queen mother of the West. On his journey, the king traveled from Shanxi across many provinces and the Yellow River to Xinjiang, through the Pamirs, and finally reached the Iranian Plateau in Western Asia. On his way, he gifted chiefs of tribes passed silk, bronze ware, and bei money and received in return cattle like cows and sheep as presents. This journey indicates the possibility of connecting the Eastern and Western parts of Eurasia through international trade, even in the early dynasties of China. However, governments did not take action to protect or encourage trading, so the safety of merchants on transportation routes is not guaranteed, and trading between China and the West is seen more as a non-governmental activity and may be considered unstable (Nair Harikrishna Kr, 2019).

1.2 Nongovernmental communication

Arguably, societal communication between China and the Western world began over 5,000 years ago. In tribal societies, as demonstrated by the everyday use of them among ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, scepters were essential items symbolizing power or suggesting a high social status. However, in ancient China, only scepters resembling those from ancient Egypt in shape and function were found in the Northwestern parts of China, with the oldest scepter head dating back to 5,500 years ago. Professor Li Shuicheng of Peking University believes that scepters are not products of Chinese culture but rather brought to China by nomads. It is likely that the nomads came and went through the Grassland Silk Road long before the Silk Road was officially established. Additionally, one occupant of a tomb's posture clearly indicates having held a scepter, further suggesting that nongovernmental communication through entities like scepters began before the Han Dynasty. Overall, there is not enough archeological evidence to suggest extensive cultural communication between China and the rest of Eurasia at the time (Orestis Schinas & Arnd Graf von Westarp, 2017).

1.3 Religion

During the Chunqiu and Warring States Periods, a period marked by a great variety of schools of thought and academic prosperity in China, many ideologies and beliefs about the world were formed, and each school contended with others in this regard. These schools of thought are parts of Chinese philosophy, and famous ones include Confucianism, the Taoist school, Legalism, and Mohism. However, no systematic religion prevailed at the time. The only religion that originated in China was Taoism, which stemmed from and was developed on the basis of the Taoist school in the later Han Dynasty. Taoism believes that "'Tao' is the origin and law of all things in the universe. Taoists believe people can become deities or live forever by practicing certain rituals and austerities". Other influential or existing religions in China, including Buddhism and Christianity and many others, did not exist prior to the establishment of the Silk Road (Li Li Zhang, Jing Lu, & Yun Fei Ai, 2014).

2. Social situation after the establishment of the Silk Road

2.1 Trading after Han

Unsurprisingly, a significant good exported from China after the establishment of the Silk Road in Han Dynasty is silk. Early during the Shang Dynasty, records of oracle bone script of characters like "Si" (natural silk), "Sang" (white mulberry, whose leaves are food to silkworms), and "Bo" (silk-related products) have been discovered, suggesting an essential role of silk in ancient China. Upon entering the Han Dynasty, the first emperor Liu Bang introduced policies to recuperate and build strength. This allowed the growth of the state-ran silk industry. The development of embroidery has enhanced silk-related art crafts and clothing. When trading, the Western world has not seen a product of such kind before and deemed it a luxury good. Exporting silk brought the Han government an immense amount of fortunes and became an essential economic good for China. Besides silk, Gold, silver, and bronze ware also constitute exports of China. Products traded and imported from Western countries include fruits and vegetables like grapes, carrots, and spinach. To fight against the invasion of Xiongnu, a type of horse famous for its speed, endurance, and metallic shine called Akhal-Teke was imported from Fergana in the time of Emperor Wu (for him). This type of horse is recorded in Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* and is later famously known in China as the "horse that sweats blood", indicating the red color of the horse's sweat. The growing variety and significance of products traded after the Silk Road was more fully established indicates how trade has increased between China and the Western world and implies that the Silk Road was of great economic and social importance to the Han Emperor and China later on. The official expedition of Zhang Qian and the role of Emperor Wu in trade suggest a growing

governmental participation in cross-continental trade (The Research on Wenshushan Grottoes, 2022).

2.2 Governmental actions

Naturally, when trading increased on the Silk Road, the Han government acted simultaneously to support communications between China and the rest of Eurasia. To ensure food supplies for envoys traveling along the Silk Road, the government opened up wastelands in several Western Regions (known as 'Xiyu' in China), spreading ideas of technology, specifically of Han's irrigation system over time. Posts are also set on the Hexi Corridor, allowing passing envoys and merchants to replenish food supplies, rest, and ensure their transportation tools (e.g. horses) are in adequate condition. Handcraft techniques like smelting and painting ('xiu qi') have influenced Western countries as government-supported trade and communication increased. It is evident that when trade across countries increased after Zhang Qian's trip to the West, the Han government took actions to ensure the security of merchants and envoys traveling through the Silk Road, which encouraged technological and cultural communications to experience unprecedented growth—much more than before the Silk Road's establishment.

2.3 Religion

Numerous different religions have been passed into China since Han. These include Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Catholicism, and Nestorianism. The most influential religion in China is Buddhism, which is widely believed to have entered China during the late Western Han Dynasty through the Silk Road. From then on, the religion was accepted and adopted and even entered other countries like Goguryeo and Japan through the Silk Road and China. Buddhism eventually became a prevailing religion, and around two hundred million people in China are estimated to believe in Buddhism in the 2000s. The significance of Buddhism can be seen in one of the Four Great Classical Novels of China, The Journey to the West. The journey that makes up the plot of the book is motivated by the main characters' wish to learn Buddhism in the West. This piece of literature later became the inspiration for many TV productions, movies, and cartoons. The prevalence of Buddhism in China manifests the long-lasting impact of the Silk Road on religions, as it brings significant beliefs and ideas from Southern and Central Asia (Jing Fan, 2022).

3. The influence of the Silk Road on today's development

3.1 National aspect

Today, Eurasian countries are fully exploiting the historical and cultural value of the ancient Silk Road and promoting the fundamental values of exchange, integration, cooperation, and win-win cooperation that the ancient Silk Road embodied. It can make dialogue between civilizations smoother and more convenient in the Eurasian space in the 21st century. Now, China has put forward the strategic initiative of building the Silk Road Economic Belt, which demonstrates China's broad feelings for deep exchanges and cooperation in the Eurasian space. It shows the rising China's sense of responsibility and mission for the development and cooperation in the Eurasian strategic space. China has proposed that "One Belt, One Road" has rich historical accumulation and continuity, and this historical accumulation and continuity further prove the historical logic of China's new Silk Road strategy. With the rapid development of the digital economy and technology, the Digital Silk Road was born. Its basic content is to deepen international cooperation in the digital economy. The initiative aims to jointly build a "community of shared future in cyberspace" by building information infrastructure with relevant countries and regions, promoting information technology cooperation, promoting Internet economic and trade services, and strengthening people-to-people exchanges. The Digital Silk Road has added new meaning to the Belt and Road Initiative and become an important engine for high-quality development of the Belt and Road. History is the best teacher. We should draw on the excellent historical and cultural heritage of the ancient Silk Road to lay a solid foundation for the Belt and Road Initiative (SÝKORA Jan, 2022).

3.2 Individual aspect

Throughout history, it is not hard to find that the Silk Road was not just a trade route. The spirit it transmitted is worth learning from and carrying forward among the peoples of our countries and regions. For thousands of years, different cultures have intermingled with each other along the Silk Road, forming the spirit of the Silk Road and giving it the connotation of The Times. The spirit of adventure, tolerance, hard work, commerce, and civilization is worth remembering. The Silk Road Spirit is a summation of the experience and wisdom accumulated by Asian and

European countries in the course of historical exchanges. The Silk Road was not a group of money-hungry people walking in the desert to trade with each other for commercial gain, but a spiritual idea that still has great power today. In today's world of easier transportation and more extensive communication. It is still necessary to carry forward the spirit advocated by the Silk Road. This is a major contribution to human civilization and must be carried forward (Bliss Carolyn, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Before the Han Dynasty, the ancient Silk Road was officially opened up for military strategy. After the Han Dynasty, the Silk Road has become more systematic and official. With this change, trade increased in types and significance of goods between China and other countries, and increased government participation has ensured and encouraged economic and cultural exchanges. Moreover, different types of religions including Buddhism, the dominant religion in China today, have influenced and become part of China's history and present. The impact of the Silk Road remains significant as shown by the diverse culture and extensive cross-continental today, and ideas like the Belt and Road Initiative continue to show its importance to China. Its significance is not only to promote production capacity cooperation and connectivity among countries but also to build a global, open, and inclusive system for global development. We look forward to China sharing more experience and wisdom with the world and making a greater contribution to the sustainable development of human civilization.

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