

## Ethno-Religious Ethos; the Silk Road's Teaching to the Modern World

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### Abstract

The paper examines on ethno-religious exhibition along the storied Trans-Eurasian Silk routes and attempts to identify how the people maintained peaceful relationships with an exchange and assimilation of one another's culture and religion. On this background, the Silk Road, which is identified to have thrived as a precursor to modern-day, advanced civilization, is surveyed to be a passage without threats to foster friendly relations among nations and people. Employing the document and narrative analysis methods of the qualitative study design, the paper also attempts to explore the historical context of the evolution of the Silk Road and its enduring contributions to the ancient human civilizations that existed during which times the Road provided critical links. The paper focuses on contact of different religions on the Silk Road, the diffusion of ideas, and the exchange of arts, artifacts and cultures. In addition, it also explores the phenomenon of travel culture history that linked different geographical locations together in a line and propelled the crucial connectivity among diverse people to interact along this epic land and water highway, which shall be exemplary to combat against the dissonance of present day world.

*Keywords:* Silk Road, Trans-Eurasian, diffusion, ancient, human civilization

### Introduction

The Silk Road was the trans-Eurasian trade conduit that served as an essential network of land and maritime routes that connected the world in ancient times. Originating in China, during the rule of the Han dynasty, the Silk Road served not only to facilitate trade and commerce but also aided as an extraordinary path of cultural connectivity and coexistence amongst nations and peoples during the time. This massive, historical caravan route flourished roughly from '100 B.C.E to around 1450' (Andrea, 2014) and reshaped the socio-religious, cultural and economic landscapes of Asia and Europe. Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German explorer and geologist gave the name the 'Silk Road' or the 'Silk Roads' to these routes in 1877 because the primary and the most important commodity that was transported along the road was silk. Nevertheless, there is debate on whether the term represents the characteristics of the land and sea routes of the Silk Road in entirety.

Historically, with the exploration of the Persian Gulf in the first century, the trade connectivity between China and Rome was created with a transit to the waters of ancient Persia. In 97 AD, the Chinese Han dynasty general sent Gan Ying as his envoy to Rome. However, he could not reach there because he was given false information by China's Parthian enemies who did not want China to be in direct contact with Rome, as that would jeopardize their profits from the lucrative silk trade (The First Contact between Rome and China, n.d.). However, with the accession of Marcus Aurelius as Emperor of Rome, his envoys in the year 166 initiated the first direct contact between the distant civilizations of China and that Rome which ultimately sowed the seeds of prosperity and the intercourse and growth of cultures, religions, and trade. And, since the first directcontact was made,

the Silk Road provided essential links to scale up interactions among the travelers of the varied and distant civilizations.

The trade routes that systematically began during Han dynasty got momentum under the Tang dynasty of China by resulting it to be a hub of exchange for both the socio-economic and cultural-religious activities. As noted supra, the routes connected Far East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Iranian and Anatolian plateaus, the Caucasus, the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean region and Europe (Sarbar, 2017). On this vast geographical tableau, the Silk Road served as historical sites of network for interplay and communications among travelers from different parts of the world and paved a new way of communication directly among foreign publics. Consequently, with its growth and momentum, it ultimately turned out to be a space of extraordinary vibrancy in the exchange of goods and also the mechanism for the profound diffusion of values, ideas, cultures, philosophies, scientific knowledge, and religions.

As one of the first, complicated, international trade routes, the Silk Road - 6462 km straight route from Xi'an (Chinese Province) in the east to Antioch (Greco-Roman City) in the west (Griffith, 2017, p.11) left many indelible implications to the modern world today. Despite multiple serpentine land passes composed of rough, arid stretches through deep and the numerous networks woven across oceanic geographies' of maritime routes, the Silk Routes brought the world closer during this period and served to bind people and nations together. Thus, the Silk Road served as a critical highway for globalization that spanned for more than 15 centuries, from "100 BCE to around 1450" (Andrea,). In addition, the Silk Road has a significant, positive history in the promotion of a global culture of dialogue, respect, communication, tolerance, negotiation and cooperation. The intermingling of peoples of diverse socio-cultural, linguistic backgrounds along the road and their shared values and support system for one another are recognized to be key components of global diplomatic cultures in modern times.

Today, the historical records and archaeological evidences from the excavations exhibit that the Silk Road became a space of connectivity between east and west, and brought world art, culture and religion closer, with beneficial cross –fertilization. And, thus, it helped break 'closed door' state of countries into a more 'open door' policy that fostered prosperity of that part of the world at that time. Hence, this historic road turned out to be a fascinating crossroad for the confluence of the varied cultures and religions. On this backdrop, this study paper attempts to offer a comprehensive analysis on how the Silk Road evolved over time and how the intersect of religious ideologies and practices, and the cultural exchange by itinerants led profound impact in the development of the societies and nations from second to mid fifteenth century.

## **Method**

This study focuses on the emergence of the historical trade routes-- 'the Silk Road'-- and the caravan routes' implications in fostering intercultural exchange and on the spread of the different religions in the lands of the Silk Road. Additionally, it also examines the history of the culture of travel in ancient times. Based on the identified evidences, through narrative analysis and literature reviews, the author prepares a comprehensive study essay. By employing the tools of comparison and contrast, critical analysis and integration of prior knowledge appraisal of qualitative research, this study paper delves into the scope of ethno-religious harmony that gained momentum with the evolution of this ancient singular trade and travel network.

In addition, for the study of the history of the routes, its historical significance and its connections among different cultures, the intensive consultation of the relevant books, dictionaries, and the research articles published in Research Gate, Google scholar and Academia are made.

## Result and Discussion

### Religious Inheritance from Silk Road to the Modern World

It is accepted that the Silk Road was not only the principal, economic corridor but it was also a melting pot of the people of different cultures, traditions and religions. On this surrounding, it proves out to be a significant site of study through religious praxis. The diffusion of different faiths resulted in religious syncretism along the Silk Road. In addition, the religious diversity of the travelers and their contact with local inhabitants of the communities and cities along the Silk Road aided in fostering fusion of different religions and cultures that lead to greater respect and acceptance of multiculturalism and multi religiosity. Chang Liu (2024) argues that the religious values such as the, 'Hindu tradition of not consuming beef, the Muslim prohibition against pork, the vegetarian practices of Buddhists, and the Jain aversion to root vegetables' passed through these routes throughout its history. And, significantly this practice has got a global recognition till today's time.

Besides, the Silk Road remained vibrantly active to promote religious tolerance and fraternity by availing profound scope for the exchange of religious values and beliefs. The intangible impact that the Silk Road brought along with travel civilization—the narratives of the ancient travelers-- was the space of dialogue among the diverse range of people who journeyed through it, which paved a way for the dissemination of knowledge and philosophy. For an instance, 'Arabs travelled to India and China, Chinese to Central Asia, India, and Iran. Buddhism itself was carried along these roads from India through central Asia to Tibet, China, and Japan. Islam was carried by Sufi teachers, and by armies' (Kurin, 2002). This justifies that the different religious values and belief systems along the road had essentially created incredible experiences and advanced civilization then.

Many complex Caves of Buddhism in Dunhuang that show the 'flying Apsaras on murals' (Xia, 2024) and the artifacts obtained there are instructive to understand that Buddhism spread in China from its origination in India. And whence, it spread onward to Korea and Japan. This dispersion is likewise encountered with Daoism and Confucianism and the road helped establish its deep roots among the people throughout East Asia. Thus, the religious and spiritual presence of Buddhism along the Silk Road served as an instrument to link Europe with Asia.

Likewise, Mohammedanism (Islamism) was another, major religion that spread through the Silk Road. The Muslim travelers, preachers, mystics, Sufi teachers and the merchants served as mediators by propagating these religious beliefs in different parts of central Asia and Europe; both by the land and by the sea (Nanji & Niyozov, 2002). Nanji & Niyozov also claims that the Sufi leaders like 'Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166)' and 'Bahauddin Naqshband (1318-89)' built communities that nurtured vernacular tradition and languages along the routes. Moreover, many chronicles show that the Muslim law, theology, culture, arts, and architecture spread across the Silk Road with greater influence in Spain, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Besides the spread of Islamism from land, the maritime travel also enabled this religion to expand its presence into the coastal cities of Southeast Asian nations, China and the Indian Subcontinent. Thus, by the end of the 9th century, 'Baghdad turned out to be the magnetic city' (de Freitas, n.d) as international trade center, which cater in spread of this religious ideologies across the continents. Consequently, the Silk Road connectivity aided to help the Muslim tradition and school of thought flourish across the world.

Hinduism, unlike to Buddhism, did not spread wide beyond India and South East Asia during this period. However, this religion was introduced into Indonesia and Malaysia by Silk Roads merchant travelling the maritime trade routes (UNESCO, n.d.). The invocation of the Hindu deities and spirits:

Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, Mahe'svara, Skandha-Kumāra, Kapila and Manibhadra in the religious texts and arts of Buddhism and Manichaeism (Klimkeit, Meserve, Karimov, & Shackle, n.d.) indicate that there was contact, influence and exchange of Hinduism with other active religions of the time that existed along the Silk Road.

Above and beyond these all, the ancient Iranian traders made their strong presence felt in China during early 4th century CE. These Sogdian immigrants transported their distinct arts, religion, ideas, and technologies with them while they travelled along this road. Being a follower of Zoroastrianism, named after the ancient Persian prophet Zarathustra, they spread this religion to India and China (Kotyk, 2024). And, these Sogdians, in China, are the best example of the proselytized group of people who had the opportunity to interact with a range of other religions like Buddhism, Hindu and Muslim along the diversified Silk Road and thus, they conversed with different other religions for adaptation.

Sogdians, the ancient Iranians, the most vibrant traders along Silk Road, spread Manichaeism beliefs in China, across Eurasia and in the Roman Empire. The influence of trade across transcontinental regions and their success to exert influence upon them spurred the Sogdians' religious spread.

Likewise, Judaism, in another hand, was the religion that traveled along the Silk Road and enriched its original version with contact to the people along the Silk Road. When Babylonians conquered the Southern part of an Israelite kingdom in 586 B.C.E, many Jews were exiled. They traveled along the Silk Road and developed their own settlements there, especially in the cities like Bukhara and Samarkhand of Uzbekistan, the gateway to east and west connectivity of Silk Road travel.

Similarly, the members of the breakaway faith from Byzantine Christianity, the Nestorians, journeyed along the road and spread Christianity in central Asia, Mongolia, Turkestan, Japan and China. Steward claims teaching of their art and culture, the Nestorians became able to set establish Christian communities along the Silk Road. They even were able to be 'Christian kings and Christian generals in China and in the adjacent countries before the middle of the 7th century' (Steward, 1928. p. XXXI). Travelling through the same passage, these missionaries established strong communities in Central Asia, China, and India and established churches and monasteries in the regions. As of impact, the Syriac language and script of Nestorians has become the basis of the writings of many central Asian languages today.

Hence, in a nutshell, the Silk Road played a pivotal role in flourishing religious ideologies, faiths, and belief systems, and resulted in the proliferation of many religions. By embracing the religious diversities, this road has left an inextinguishable legacy to be acknowledged by the people of modern day civilization. Since the evolution of the Silk Road, it not only promoted trade but also many religious ideologies and practices. Religious tolerance and acceptance of diversity were the key features which aided in cooperation and mutual trust among the travelers and local inhabitants along the routes, which are the true insights to be learned in present time.

### **The Rhetoric of Art, Culture and Language along the Silk Road:**

Since the beginning and ongoing flourishing of the Silk Road, the road served as a channel for the cultural and artistic exchange. Through promoting contact and building connections among the disparate states and people, the ancient Silk Road greatly contributed to the human civilization. In addition to the transportation of precious, tangible goods from the east to the west and the other way around, many intangible values, practices, and beliefs made their way through this wider network

of travel routes. In that context, the Silk Road endured as the route of communication, exchange, and interaction among diverse cultures of the east and west. Thus, besides the movement of silk, porcelain, spices and many other precious items, the Silk Road resulted in dispersal of arts, languages and knowledge resulting in the advancement of world, cultural variety.

The pottery and textiles and images of the different deities and manuscripts, revealed through exploration and studies, are striking evidences that the Silk Road's history is rich in respect to its cultural depth. To cite an example, 'the potential interaction between the representatives of Hellenistic culture and the Qin Dynasty in the late 3rd century B.C.E can be observed as a prototype of the cultural affluence' (Samoylovskiy & Samoylovskiy, 2024, p.27)'. This demonstrates how the crisscross of cultures prospered between two distant cultures in at the nascent period of the road's existence.

In fact, the cultural cross-fertilization played an important role to connect multiple civilizations. The tea that originated in China developed in Europe as famous aspect of diet and food culture during 16th and 17th centuries (Bin, 2023). Likewise, the extensive carpets with rich golden fabric, sea silk, as well as glassware and similar items were brought into Asia, especially in China from Rome and Persia along this road. A gilded silver plate that dated back to 2nd century with an image of Greco-Roman god Dionysus discovered in Gansu province (China) is an example of how the road served as instrument to the exchange of art (Samoylovskiya & Samoylovskiya, 2024, p. 9). This process of exchange not only promoted trade and commerce but also served as catalyst to nurture cultural symbols, beliefs systems, and shared experiences along the Silk Road. The exchange of the art works and decorative items containing images of the deities of the time are rich evidence that this road was a unique contact zone for interaction, communication, and negotiation amongst nations and people that, in sum, can be claimed to be the key contribution to the cultural diplomacy during the time.

Leaving a strong legacy, the Silk Road served as a facilitator to intercultural exchange and the spread of cultural ideologies and the practices among on the overlapping and wide ranging roads and seaways. The Meeting of travelers with distinctly diverse socio-cultural, linguistics, and religious backgrounds along the routes not only made it possible for the exchange of goods but that also resulted in 'unprecedented transmission and exchange of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, customs and traditions over three millennia (Andrea, 2014). Cultural exchange and mutual trust among the travelers enabled them to make great strides in civilizational prosperity and harmony of the globe.

On this entire process of the diversification of human civilization, the dialogue and communication were at backbone which brought the languages in interaction along the Silk Road. Dissemination of the significant beliefs was made through visual and verbal communication. Besides the use of iconography on the art and artifacts, the diffusion of languages happened along the Silk Road. Dough Hitch, historical linguistics, has counted twenty languages written in at least twenty scripts in first millennium CE in Turfan only (Mair, 2021, p.5). The fact indicates that linguistically, Silk Road was remarkably diversified as a global language exchange basket. All the major languages of the time: Old Turkic, Chinese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Middle Persian, New Persian, Parthian, Tibetan, Mongolian, Prakrit, Tumshuqese, Tocharian A and B, Bactrian, Khotanese, Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Tangut, Greek, and Khitan ((Mair, 2021, p.5) were in interactions for cross-cultural communication, generally all along the routes and in particular at and around Tarim Basin. Consequently, this ultimately turned sport hall for the interaction and fusion of ideas, knowledge, culture and the histories.

Thus, the Silk Road contributed to the development of richer heritages with the exchange of art and culture. The transcontinental features of the Road created flourishing opportunities for cultural richness and the development of art. It was along the Silk Road that 'Hellenistic ideas and cultural traditions of Persia, mixedwith central Asia which were transmitted from East to India and China by enriching the diversity of world arts and culture (UNESCO Silk Roads Project, 1988). In addition, the unique Islamic art, clothing and architectural style, Chinese calligraphy, paintings, textiles, ceramics, metalwork and wide varieties of art

works spread along the road during its many centuries have been a tremendous legacy to the modern world's civilization.

## Conclusion

Silk Road history celebrates the glories of the ancient world between the second centuries B.C.E. to the mid-fifteenth century. It was instrumental in flourishing of the civilizations, through diversity, religious interdependence, and globalized trade. It connected East with West and left a wide range of influences and achievements in world history. Beyond trade, the Silk Road connected multiple, ancient civilizations of different religious and cultural backgrounds. The hybridization of the cultures along the Road is an enduring lesson that the modern world shall learn to address the observed discord around us today, so much of it in the name of religion and culture. Existing for around 1400 years and the harmony, which the Silk Road maintained, remains to be lasting testament of the ethno-religious diplomacy. The road served arteries for cultural diversity, religious interdependence and globalized trade. It connected East with West and left a wide range of influence and significance upon world history. Beyond trade, the Silk Road connected multiple ancient civilizations of different religions and cultural backgrounds. Hence, the hybridization of the cultures and the religious syncretism were the seminal features of the Silk Road that proved it to be an antique version of our modern era's globalization, and that holds special significance in the world history today. The ethno-religious approach to reconciliation and the enduring practices of the harmony within diversity and the religious and cultural characteristics of this road are the evidences to learn on addressing the dissonance that is resulted due to the clashes of civilization in today's globe.

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