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The Silk Road: The Ancient Highway for Globalisation

Keyvan Tabari

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Abstract: There could be no greater wall between the two major civilizations of the ancient world: one in Persia and the other in China. The Pamir Mountains rose up to thousands of feet. Yet they were bridged by the sheer cooperative instinct of humanity. Last fall, I crossed the Irkeshtam Pass as I looked on both sides of the fabled Silk Road which I traveled from Xinjiang all the way to Beijing on the East and from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan all the way to Khiva on the West. I saw the genius of our common heritage long-ago exchanged in what remains of the once fabulous Samarkand, Bukhara, Osh, Kashgar, Turpan, Dunhaung, and Xian. They conjured up parables suitable for our times of need. I brought back memories which I would like to share with you here.

keywords: Silk Road* Globalization* Persia* China*

The wall separating the two great civilizations of the ancient world, Persia and China was real; it was physical. The Pamir Mountains are so called, meaning the "foot of Mitra", because they were so high: they were the closest that man got to the Sun God of Mithraism, the ancient Persian religion. Passage through these mountains is still extremely difficult. **(1)** I experienced this on the morning of September 12 of last year. I was at the Irkeshtam Pass. We had to cross the Kyrgyz Republic on a rutted segment of the Silk Road to get from China to Uzbekistan. Beyond the barbed wire that separated us, Kyrgyzstan looked forbidding. An unshaven young man with an automatic weapon slung on his shoulders was ruffling through the pages of my passport. He said a few words to another man standing next to him. My eyes were averted to the grey brown parka the latter was wearing. There were food stains on it. I did not understand what was spoken between them. There were two more young men. They were short and stocky. They were curious about us. There were 13 of us, tourists who had come from China. Our bus had left. We could not return to China, for we had gone through the Chinese immigration checkpoint. Our luggage was on the ground**.** We were waiting for our Kyrgyz guide without whom we could not enter this country. Inexplicably, there was no sign of him. The landscape was scraggy and barren - no trees. A dirt road led to the horizon.

That day we did make it to Sari Tash and then to Osh at the border of Uzbekistan and beyond. **(2)** The real miracle was that people had done it as early as centuries before Christ. A good evidence for this is the Manichaean manuscripts found in the ancient city of Goachang, near Turpan, Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan). They reveal the exodus from Iran of the followers of Mani, the ancient Persian prophet who challenged the official creed, Zoroastrianism. Goachang,

which I had visited just a few days before, was in a desert 260 feet below the sea level! **(3)** Note, however, the equally remarkable fact that from early on the exchange across these formidable barriers was not just of goods but also of ideas.

As it is in human history, the basic ideas have not changed that much; their applications have changed due to the change in the circumstances. Take the first insertion of Persian power to this area. It was to eliminate the terror caused by the marauding Sakas (Sycthians) that in 530 B.C brought Cyrus the Great here. Some two centuries later, Alexander the Great came this way in his relentless ambition to expand his empire. A hundred years after that, the Chinese Emperor Wudi sent his emissary, Zhang Qian, to Ferghana valley in present day Uzbekistan in a quest for alliance with the Yuezhi people against their common enemy, the Huns.

It was not only security, peace, and stability that preoccupied the travelers of the Silk Road. The territory they traversed in Central Asian was controlled by the Sogdians, who were Persian speaking and Zoroastrian. They were, however, tolerant of other creeds, and received in their midst the followers of other religions: Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, Nestorianism, and Buddhism. In Samarkand's Afrosiob History Museum I saw a series of magnificent 7th century Sogdian murals, more than six feet high, that covered a circular room. A bridal procession depicted a princess astride a white elephant who led several maids, camel-riders, horsemen, and swans. The ruler of Samarkand was in another panel, accepting offerings from foreigners: Chinese with gifts of silk, Turks with long hair, Koreans with pigtails, and villagers from the mountain of Pamir. In the next frame was a Chinese beauty sailing in a boat and, on the banks of the water, several horsemen hunting a leopard.

The Sogdians were pivotal as the channel for the transmission of Buddhism to China from the Kushans in India. In Dunhaung **(4)**, west of Xinjiang in China, I visited caves that have yielded invaluable manuscripts about this phenomenon. Due to shortage of paper, these Buddhist religious texts were written on whatever scarps which could be found, including the reverse side of ordinary commercial and personal correspondence. Based on these documents, Dunhuangology has become a special field that has revealed as much about Chinese Buddhism as it has about the social and economic history of the globalizing highway that passed through here. Many of these documents are in the old Persian language of the Sogdians. In the fifth and sixth centuries, glass, horses, and perfumes were imported here from the West and raw silk was exported from China. **(5-1 and 5-2)** In other parts of the Silk Road, westbound caravans brought furs, ceramics, cinnamon bark, rhubarb, and bronze weapons; while the eastbound traffic contained gold, precious metals and stones, textiles, ivory, and coral.

By the 8th century the Persians had learned the art of sericulture from the Chinese. They, in turn, transferred a most valuable technology of their own to China, the irrigation system of *karez* **(6)** which I saw in the outskirts of Turpan. A succession of wells connected by underground channels which used gravity to bring water from high elevations, *karez* (a Persian word, interchangeable with *qanat*) was vital for the agrarian society of these arid lands.

The Silk Road continued to be the main channel for Globalization even after the sea routes gradually eroded its commercial role. By the end of the 8th century ships from the Middle East were regularly calling on the Chinese city of

Guangzhou (Canton). The spread of Islam, however, came by land. After the battle of Talas in 751 sealed its domination of Central Asia, Islam introduced a complex mix of religion, art, and architecture, imbued with local elements, which spread to the frontiers of Xian **(7-1 and 7-2)**, the ancient capital of China. For many centauries, the polyglot and multiethnic peoples of Turkestan, a vast territory that extended west from Xian to the Caspian Sea, identified themselves simply as Muslims. With Samarkand **(8)** and Bukhara **(9-1 and 9-2)** as their pivot, from the 10th century to the mid 15th century they established the most advanced civilization of the time, the Persian Islamic civilization. With the exception of the Persian Samanids, the rulers were mostly Mongol and Turks -- nomads who adopted Persian culture and language. The scope of their ambition was universal. Genghis Khan's descendants -- who even ruled China for sometime -- were succeeded by Tamerlane and his descendants, and then the chiefs of various Turkic tribes.

The luminaries who had major roles in developing that glorious civilization are now claimed by disparate groups in this fragmented region. I noted in the Museums of Tashkent and Samarkand that Uzbekistan has appropriated the legacy of many as its own. Thus, among its favorite sons **(10)** are: Rudaki who is considered to be "the founding father" of Persian poetry; Al-Khorezmi" who invented algorithm, which is his namesake; "Avicenna" whose *Qanun* had been the standard medical textbook in Europe for half a millennium until the 19th century; and Farabi, the greatest of all Muslim philosophers, who was *the* channel for transmitting the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle to the modern world.

These same luminaries, however, are claimed by Iran because they were from Persian families and spoke Persian; they were indeed the principles in Iran's "Golden Century" under the Samanids. On the other hand, the scientists Farabi and Avicenna mostly wrote in Arabic -- because it was the official language of the realm, and the creation of Persian as a technical language was still taking shape. That fact has given the Arabs a reason to also claim these luminaries.

How does one resolve the dispute that follows when several nations assert an exclusive right to the legacy of these men? The only solution may be to describe them as the heritage of (all) humanity, to paraphrase UNESCO's appellation given to so many monuments on the old Silk Road.

Let us now pause a moment and ponder the word globalization, the broader subject of this presentation. It evokes the shape of the globe. Depending on where you are on that globe, the rest of the globe looks different: it is on your right, or left, or above or below you. This metaphor gains huge significance when regarded as the phenomenon of ethnocentricity. In that light, it is noteworthy that the Silk Road did not really exist until it was coined by the German explorer Richthofen in 1877, as *Seidenstrasse.* The ancient superhighways, with their multitude of tributaries **(11),** which were the conduit of many exchanges of goods and ideas between the Persian and Chinese civilizations, did not have any specific name. The silk that went to Rome was not, in fact, a very significant part of this process of globalization. For the European scholars of the 19th century, however, it was the focus of attention. In that sense, theirs was a warped view. On the other hand, in the books on China, the attention is focused on the significance of the Silk Road for that country. The difference is understandable. So is the reason for the claims by various Islamic nations to this region's luminaries as noted above. What all these perspectives suffer from is the fragmented vision of the one earth we all share. What is needed -- for the

common good -- is the integration of those visions.

About the Author

Keyvan Tabari is an international lawyer in San Francisco. He holds a PhD and a JD, and has taught at Colby College, the University of Colorado, and the University of Tehran.

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