

# The Misread "One Belt, One Road"

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## *The historical-geographical background and modern significance of the Silk Road*

- Historically, the initiative to construct and maintain the Silk Road came from the external countries rather than China. The road was not mainly constructed by Han people, but by central Asians, western Asians and Europeans, so it were they who promoted the Silk Road.
- Reviewing the past does not mean that China want to regain its control over central Asia, but to admit that the smooth transportation of the Silk Road is guaranteed by China's control over mid-Asia.
- As for the construction of the economic belt, the other countries will consider their own economic benefits, so their oil, gas and cotton would not be necessarily sold to China.
- Being our important interface, Kazakhstan and China do have some benefit conflicts, such as the distribution of Yili River, which is the primary water source for both Kazakhstan and Xinjiang Province.
- We do not intervene in each other's internal affairs. But what are internal affairs? And what should we do if their internal affairs affect our country's benefits?



*The route map of "One Belt, One Road"*

## Introduction>>

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“One Belt, One Road” is closely related to the historical concept of the Silk Road, and the economic ties and traffic routes between China and foreign countries. Our incomprehension and misunderstanding of history tends to mistaken historical lessons for experience, or even affect the construction of “One Belt, One Road”. If you carefully read general secretary Xi Jinping’s talk at Boao Asia Forum, you can find that he is very rational, to some extent at a low stance. He stresses on the community of interest in the construction of “One Belt, One Road”, rather than the Chinese version of a new “Marshall Plan” hyped by some people recently.

Some people consider the success of “One Belt, One Road” as “tributes paid by numerous countries”, which would lead to bad consequences. Such misunderstanding results from their incomprehension of the history of the Silk Road.

### ***1. Historical-geographical background of “One Belt, One Road”***

#### **(1) Change in concepts of the Silk Road**

Today, the Silk Road is greatly different from its initial meaning. It’s generally referred as Figure 1 above. But in fact, when the German geographer and geologist Richthofen named “Silk Road”, it meant a particular route at specific time. The present meaning has deviated from Richthofen’s definition. Actually, the sea trade (content of the “Silk Road” trade) is no longer silk-based. Some of them are simply traffic route instead of commercial road focusing on silk.

We saw more the influence the Central Plains made to today’s Xinjiang, central Asia, or Chinese Ethnic Groups (ie, Han, agricultural nation). The truth is far beyond this. Europe began to influence this area long ago..

For example, Alexander the Macedonian Empire has extended to India and Pakistan, spreading Greek culture along. Many mummies of 2000 years old in ancient tombs in Astana, Xinjiang Province were European Caucasians. Besides, more than 3000 years ago, people from Caucasia to central Asia were the first to tame the horse and master riding skills.

In mainland China, the ancestors of Han people did not learn to ride until early Warring States period. In Confucius’s age, horses in the Central Plains were used to pull the cart rather than to be ridden on. Thus, one of the six arts Confucius taught to his students is carriage-driving. After

people learned how to ride, their costumes changed. The Nomads in Caucasia invented trousers. Chinese archaeologists have found China's earliest pants in Xinjiang province, with a history of more than 3000 years.

Another example of Chinese Buddhism, which was brought through one of the three Silk Roads, and then spread to the Central Plains across Hexi corridor, while the Buddhism directly spread to Tibet from India and Nepal is Tibetan Buddhism. With Arabia getting stronger, Islam expanded to Xinjiang, and the whole province, especially the southern part, all converted to Islam.

Some people think that Xinjiang culture seems to be passed over from mainland China. This is not true for Xinjiang culture consists of both Han culture and other culture and religions whose influence often preceded the transmission of Han culture.

The communication between this area and the Central Plains started from a very early stage, where people loved to communicate with others, There is also evidence. Jades unearthed in Haofu tomb of Shang Dynasty in Anyang, Henan province and other Shang tombs were identified as Hetian jades from Xinjiang Province. This means that Hetian jades could be transported to the Central Plains and beyond 3000 years ago. Take Zhang Qian for example. He came from Shaanxi Province, and followed some directions to link the western regions with Han, proving that contacts had been made long ago.

However, the Silk Road is defined with special meaning, involving the major trade means and existing period.

(2)The maintenance motivation of the Silk Road came from the external.

From the above perspective, I find the motivation to construct and maintain the Silk Road came from the external countries rather than mainland China. The road was not primarily constructed by Han people, but by Central Asians, Western Asians and Europeans, so it were they who had promoted the Silk Road. In the "One belt, One Road" white paper, general secretary Xi Jinping states that the Silk Road was built by the mutual efforts of various countries. The argument is relatively objective. But I want to stress that Han dynasty did not have the initiative to construct the Silk Road.



*Ancient Silk Road consists northern, central and southern routes.*

Firstly, look at the origin of the name. The “Silk Road” could not be found in the thirteen classic works, the twenty-four histories, or the Imperial Collection of Four. Around 1870, the German geographer Richthofen carried out a three-year research in central Asia and wrote a book, officially presenting “Silk Road”, which refers to a silk-based commercial road formed B.C. 2nd century ago, from Luoyang, Chang’an to Samarkand, central Asia. Gradually, the term was accepted by geographers and historians, and naming traffic route after “Silk Road” came afterwards.

Zhangqian’s efforts to link the western region with China makes on effect on the naming of “Silk Road”. But it was acted out of military and political purpose rather than trade. In the early years of Han dynasty, the Huns posed a severe threat. After 70 years of accumulation to Emperor Han Wu, Han dynasty got stronger, defeated the Huns in succession and comprehensively drove them back to the west of the Great Wall of Qin Dynasty. While considering how to take the Huns down for good, Emperor Han Wu was informed that Wusu and Yueshi people who originally lived in Qilian mountain and Hexi Corridor were forced to migrate to the west due to the Huns’ oppression. And Yueshi people moved to Daxia (Afghanistan area). Since Daxia had been feuding with Huns for generations, Emperor Han Wu dispatched messengers there, wishing to rally Yueshi people to attack Huns. Nevertheless, it’s difficult due to the long distance on the map.

When Zhangqian arrived, the monarch of Daxia had enjoyed himself very

much, unwilling to fight against Huns. Thus, Zhangqian failed in finishing his mission.

Zhangqian had undergone many hardships during his journey to the west. After having been detained by the Huns for ten years, he seized the chance to flee from the Hun kingdom to Daxia, but he was kept again for one more year by the Huns. After he came back to Han, situation changed and Han had already defeated Huns and controlled Hexi Corridor, opening the gate to the west. Although Zhangqian's journey to the west did not meet its initial purpose, what he brought back (plentiful things along the route) deeply attracted Emperor Han Wu's attention. Thinking that Han's influence should be spread there, the Emperor dispatched Zhangqian on his second visit with organized diplomatic corps and brought quantities of silk, gold, art crafts and so on to award small countries along the route, which enlarged the influence of silk in central Asia.

However, silk output was not the product of Zhangqian's journey, and the actual time was much earlier. There is two interpretation about Latin and English calling our country China. One saying goes that Persians named our country after "the kingdom of silk", the pronunciation of which slowly evolved into that of China. The other argues that the pronunciation is similar to "Qin". As for calling porcelains China, it's a reversed matter because they come from China. Before Zhangqian's journey, foreign countries, especially Persia, had already known that China was rich in porcelains.

Unconscious and casual circulation is totally different from conscious trade. Zhangqian's journey to the west has expanded the influence of Chinese silk in central Asia, arousing interests of people in the longer distance. An importance reason of the formation of commodity economy is Roman Empire's needs for Chinese products. Being a powerful empire, Roman had a strong demand for silk, as the aristocrats took pride in wearing silk. Later, silk even became more expensive than gold, and Han was the only source of silk. Thanks to its light weight, silk is very suitable for long-distance transportation and could withstand hot and cold weather. What's more important was that the high profits could compensate the expensive transportation fee, or even cost of their lives.

Every single route of the Silk Road is imbued with hardships. The southern route has to cross the Pamirs, while the northern prairie covers a

longer distance and could not escape the lifeless Gobi. In the absence of navigation or mechanic transportation, it would take a high cost to rely on camels, cattle, horses and man power, and this could not succeed without the support of strong demand.

(3)Historically, China had no incentive to conduct silk trade.

Han dynasty had an effective ruling area of 3 or 4 million square kilometers, and a population of more than 60 million. Many people objected to Han exploiting land, because this would ruin fertile farming land and bring forth drought and coldness. But Hexi Corridor is an exception with vast oasis, Mountain Qinlian and stable water source.

China has no incentive to expand outwards. Although common Chinese did not wear silk which was not a luxury, people just didn't think about making profits out of silk.

Claiming itself as “the center of the world”, China had always been abundant in everything and self-sufficient, with no external need or the concept of foreign trade. Emperors of Han dynasty forbid crossing the custom freely. Historically, merchants were people's last choice of occupation with a low social position. China didn't actively use the Silk Road and rarely benefit from it.

The present is different as we're going to construct “the Silk Road Economic Belt”. This is our initiative, but it could not be built without others' active response. Therefore, general secretary Xi Jinping repeatedly stresses on mutual benefits, denies zero-sum, and encourages the construction of economic community. As for some countries on the other end of the belt, China is not their only option.

Constructing “One belt, One Road” is China's initiative, how to make the others respond positive and continue needs some corresponding measures.

In terms of business, while constructing the Silk Road Economic Belt, we should consider how to motivate other countries. We should not think that it will definitely succeed as we wish, and the others would be grateful.

They have their own consideration. For example, a China-Kazakhstan border trade city was to be constructed. While China has finished its work, Kazakhstan didn't even start. Their low motivation was caused by geographical limits that no people lived in their border, which is different

from the cases of Vietnam and north Korea. There only lies a river between China and Vietnam, so it's impossible to forbid border trade. Geography is different in terms of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As for the construction of the economic belt, other countries will consider their own economic benefits, so their oil, gas and cotton won't be necessarily sold to China.

We must become aware of the premise above.

***2.(Historically) China's control over central Asia is the guarantee of the smooth passage of the Silk Road.***

The Silk Road encounters more breaks than smooth passage. While massive smooth passage is rare, civil scattered passage is more common.

After AD 9th century, shipping flourished, turning the "Silk Road" more into the traffic line inside central Asia, such as from Kashgar, Xinjiang Province to central Asia, rather than from mainland China to central Asia. This process is often overlooked.

In BC 60, the Western Han Dynasty set up Protectorate of the Western Regions in Xinjiang Province. As Xinjiang had various oasis which was difficult to manage, the protectorate carried out loose and guardianship administration, and solved local problems. Troops sent by the central government would use central authority to guard the area. Small countries there only needed to register residence each year and obeyed the ruling.

Chen Tang, a prominent figure in late western Han dynasty, found that Chan Yu, a Hun defeated by him, had fled to Kazakhstan, so he arbitrarily mobilized the troops of six small countries to destroy Chan Yu. Dispute occurred in Han, for some believed that he had made a great achievement without losing any soldier; while others thought he faked the command without any report. This reflected the difficulties Han encountered in the remote western area. Han's ruling of the west remained unstable and finally only lasted to the end of the western Han dynasty. During Wang Meng's governance, Protectorate of the Western Regions was eventually dismissed.

The eastern Han dynasty implemented the policy of "three links and three breaks" to the west, which went on and off.

The Silk Road was resumed and broken for three times each. Sometimes

the preservation of the road completely relied on outstanding individuals, such as Ban Chao, as well as the left prestige of western Han dynasty. When the country failed to continue flourishing, the imperial court would command the retreat. Since the eastern Han dynasty, the Silk Road ceased to exist in name only. The northern Wei dynasty was very powerful. It was recorded that merchants from Daqin came to central China, but when the central part suffered warfare, normal trade and communication would break up. Only when the central regime could tightly control central Asia would the Silk Road keep smooth transportation and could China take the initiative.

In the early years of Tang Dynasty, the territory expanded to today's Weihai. Tang controlled Xi'er river and A'mo river, with the western border reaching Afghanistan and a military-administrative center Suiye City on the west, which was near to Tokamak, Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the Silk Road became the internal traffic line of Tang dynasty. After the break-out of the rebellion of An and Shi, the west was out of control, and Tubo, ancestor of Tibetans expanded to Dabu, Xinjiang. Later, when the western border only reached Gansu Province, Tang dynasty could no longer control the west, and the prosperity of early Silk Road was gone.

In AD 9th century, having already found the vital maritime traffic line, a number of Arabians went to Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Ningbo, and Yangzhou. With maritime traffic replacing land transportation, the inland Silk Road had been reduced to the traffic route inside central China, and lost its original significance.

The early Ming dynasty had controlled Kumul for a while, but the western side was out of control. The border retreated to Jia Yuguan in the middle years, losing Dunhuang to the western regions, not to mention the Silk Road.

The linking of sea transportation spared the efforts to cross lofty mountains and high ranges along the Silk Road. Tea, spices and porcelains were also shipped, making silk no longer the primary product, which was a major change.

### ***3. Why do we need to emphasize the historical and geographical background of "One Belt, One Road"?***

We should not think that the Silk Road had maintained smooth since



Zhangqian linked the western regions. This is the reason why Chairman Xi Jinping emphasized that Xinjiang issue was secular and complicated. We should squarely confront historical problems.

Reviewing history does not mean that China wants to regain its control over central Asia, but to acknowledge that the smooth transportation of the Silk Road is guaranteed by China's control over central Asia. Since the stable situation of central Asia is essential to the safety of the Silk Road, we should carry out corresponding measures against possible disadvantages, such as the influence of America and Russia, religion, ethnicity (Turkic language), water resource and so on.

Central Asia is the important direction in the construction of inland Silk Road economic belt, but there are some situations we have to confront. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, America has been playing an increasingly powerful role in central Asia. The U.S. hired the military airport in Kyrgyzstan to send troops to Afghanistan. We do not know that the friendship bridge is the crucial passage for NATO to deliver materials to Afghanistan until we entered Afghanistan through Uzbekistan in 2006. Since Soviet collapsed, Kazakhstan has more Russians than Kazakhs, which is the consequence of Stalin's secular immigration policy. Great changes took place in these countries, as some became pro-U.S., some pro-Russia, and some focused on national independence. Being our important interface, Kazakhstan and China do have some benefit conflicts, such as the allocation of Yili River, which is the primary water source of both Kazakhstan and Xinjiang Province. How should China construct a friendly relationship with Kazakhstan after the Nazarbayev government.

We do not intervene in each other's internal affairs. But what are internal affairs? And what should we do if their internal affairs affect our country's benefits? We have faced similar problems with our neighboring countries, such as changes of regime, president, and ruling party, and how do we abide the previous agreement?

The safety of maritime Silk Road involves the Strait of Malacca, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Suez Canal, Central American Isthmus and so on. Malacca Strait is our current major transportation passage. Pakistan is China's good friend. As the situation in Myanmar is very subtle, we should go back and think about whether we can do better with Myanmar? I thought why Hillary Clinton is the first person to meet Aung San Suu



Kyi, for China should take the initiative to mediate between Aung San Suu Kyi and the junta, so the situation could be different now.

When constructing "one belt, one road", we must consider the way we should take in these places and how to protect China's strategical interest.

#### ***4. We tend to hold misunderstandings on maritime Silk Road***

Now we are used to take the Western ocean view of the ocean. This is wrong because their ocean view comes from the unique Mediterranean, which is very special with basically inland sea where there are many islands and bays. The geographical advantage made ancient sailing very convenient. Being the most similar region to the Mediterranean, Bohai Sea rim was quite open in ancient China for its convenient transportation.

But China does not own the brilliant civilizations surrounding the Mediterranean, such as Greece, Rome, Asia Minor, the Azov, the Two Rivers Civilization and so on, creating the constant cultural exchange and communication. However, the Bohai Sea is surrounded by Korean peninsula and Japanese island, which are relatively lagging behind in history. They are highly motivated to learn from China, but China had no initiative and necessity to learn from them.

But the ocean is just a carrier, the essence is the shipping end, what can be

taken out and what can be brought in. We should view the Maritime Silk Road in the context of the cultures involved along the road, and the mode of production.

But the Maritime Silk Road is not opened and controlled by China. In the Chinese conception, sea is the edge. Sayings like within the four seas, ends of the mountain and sea, and ends of the earth are reflect this idea. In the western Han dynasty, the furthest maritime exploration had reached today's Sri Lanka and central India. Han also set up official responsible for translation. But after the initial exploration, they found other countries were poorer, so they gave up, and their marine technology fell back.

Therefore, Maritime Silk Road is entirely opened and controlled by Arabians. In South Song dynasty, there were a lot of Arabians in Quanzhou, Fanfang and Fanchang in Guangzhou. When Zhenghe set out shipping south, he did not exceed the Arabian route. Instead, he took in their experience and techniques (needle path, crossing sea led by stars), aiming at promoting national prestige without any economic purpose, establishing imperial political legitimacy through political activities, and calling small countries along the route to pay tribute to Ming.

Usually, the official external maritime activities only focus on political purposes while light economic benefits. Thus, the maintenance of the Silk Road lacked motivation. Prohibitions and restrictions on private trade further undermined China's real interests. So, historically, China did not acknowledge the need for normal trade, only wanting foreigners to pay tribute. But the foreign countries obtained more benefits through paying tribute than trade, so they were willing to do this. Qing dynasty once banned Japan to pay tribute, and Japan pretended to be Okinawans in order to pay tribute. Tribute is not exploitation, but a disguised political investment. Generally, it does not care about the economic benefits but politics only.

Nevertheless, the excessive rewarding resulted in increasingly high expectations of foreign countries, loss of national wealth and complaining of officials and the public. While the government did not actively engage in foreign trade, losing the main benefit to foreign countries, the imperial continued to restrict, even prohibit private trade, or heavily taxed them, so other than smuggling, none of the private trades could make profits. These are the lessons of history.

Today, in our construction of the Maritime Silk Road, if we only see vanity projects without considering the economic benefits, and entirely rely on the government and tax-exemption policy, instead of relying on non-governmental economic exchanges, we will not achieve our goals but increase the outside's resistance to China. In contrast, the normal non-governmental exchanges and trade actually tends to benefit both parties.

Besides, we should make cultural, ethic and religious preparations, and learn the external situation.

Frankly, in the past, our understanding of the outside world and our own history was basically remained at the stage of self-entertainment. Now, while we are constructing "One belt, One road", we should study hard the relationship between Chinese culture and world culture , and the local culture. Culturally, we should achieve what Fei Xiaotong said, "Each beauty could display its beauty, and be pleased with others' beauty. The mutual beauty can bring forth a harmonious world". We must not only cherish our own culture, but also understand, appreciate and praise others' culture. If "One belt, One road" construction only considers economic factors without cultural, ethnic and other factors, it is also difficult to achieve our goals.

*Translated by Wu Xiaoyu*