

## **SILK ROAD AS AN ASPIRATION OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

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**Abstract:** Silk Road as a historical tale brings aspiration to current diplomacy. Through the history of conquest and suffering, as well as the geopolitics of colonialism and imperialism, the Silk Road resurrected with a new spirit, due to the “Belt-and-Road Initiative” proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Culture in particular would be highlighted in this diplomatic framework, in addition to trade. It defines who we are and how we understand each other. However, we should also understand cultural diplomacy with a distinctive cultural perspective. Either “clash of civilizations” or “soft power,” represents a political interpretation of cultures, and reduces cultural relationships to power relation. Silk Road means a mechanism of cultural diversity. With a historical legacy, it not only brings us away from the current reality to look beyond, but also encourages us to learn from history to go forward. The Chinese “renwen jiaoliu” (人文交流, people-to-people exchange) provides an example to develop in this way.

Culture, even defined in terms of soft power, is never as powerful as economy or military in diplomatic field. While living in a highly civilized world, we do need to integrate culture in every sphere of our life, including diplomacy; it defines who we are and how we act. It is not about “clash of civilizations.” Instead, cultures would be a bridge of dialogue and solidarity for human beings to face common challenges in this global age.

Silk Road is a historical tale to some extent, and becomes an aspiration of diplomacy at the dawn of 21st century. Historically, it means trade, conquest and counter-conquest, as well as cultural exchange. In modern times, Eurasia in place of Silk Road became a geopolitical field, represented by the “Great Game” between Britain and Russia. And it resurrected in the post-Cold War era with the U.S. as a leading factor.

China joined this discussion since 2013 when President Xi Jinping proposed the “Belt-and-Road Initiative,” with twin lectures in Kazakhstan and Indonesia. It suddenly became a popular term in China’s diplomatic discourse, and also represents China’s interpretation of diplomatic framework together with China’s rise in the global society. While paying the same attention to maritime Silk Road in addition to the overland of Eurasia, China also offers new perspectives to the Silk Road. Highlighting openness and inclusiveness, China calls on a community of shared future for

mankind, with Silk Road as a bridge of economic development, political trust, and cultural communication.

Sure, China has been a key player along the historical Silk Road, with silk itself as a legendary Chinese product. However, China was and could not be the sole player of Silk Road, either in the past or at the present. At the same time, Silk Road does not concentrate on silk itself. China was really an initiator of the Silk Road from one side, and it benefited all players along the Silk Road. While silk flew to the West as a precious product, China also welcomed Buddhism, Christianity and Islam from the other direction. China herself has been a victim of colonialism and imperialism. China also suffers from separatism and terrorism in the post-Cold War era, with Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a counter-mechanism together with Russia and the Central Asian countries. The “Belt-and-Road Initiative” proposed by China with its own diplomatic concerns, would develop a kind of public mechanism to contribute to the global society.

Among all, the cultural dimension of Silk Road should be highlighted. There has been a hot debate on “clash of civilizations,” with regard to world politics in the post-Cold War era. And culture is also defined as “soft power” in diplomatic terms. Here the question is: Are civilizations destined to be in conflict? How could culture be better defined in diplomatic terms? What Silk Road can contribute to this discussion?

Firstly, in contrast to “clash of civilizations,” there has always been “dialogue of civilizations” or “alliance of civilizations” as defined in the United Nations as well as by leading scholars such as Tu Weiming. The inevitability of conflict represents a political interpretation of cultural relationship. Diversity is a natural condition of cultures, which means co-existence and mutual-exchange. It is due to political interpretation that cultural difference becomes a tool of enmity and conflict. In a global society, diplomats have an obligation to explain out misunderstandings and prejudices regarding cultural difference, and to develop a bridge of cultural exchange and communication.

Secondly, following the first point, we should not define cultures in political terms, such as “soft power.” Culture means more than “power,” and cultural relationship is much more complex than “power relation.” Though in soft way, culture is trapped in the category of politics. Another related term is “public diplomacy,” which seems to distinct the “public” from the “official.” But in reality, they share the same interests; it is just to do the same thing with a different face. And the “public” always listens to the “official.” If we want to talk “cultural diplomacy” with culture as a distinctive factor, we must understand cultural relationship in its own terms.

The Chinese has tried to explore this issue from their own tradition. Inspired by the classic Book of Changes, they borrowed a term “ren wen” (人文) to describe cultural relationship. From the surface, it can be explained as “cultural exchange,” but the Chinese insist on its deep,



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comprehensive implications. It is coined as “renwen jiaoliu” (人文交流) in Chinese and “people-to-people exchange” in English. Only with a thorough understanding of Chinese culture, people can really catch its real meaning. Interestingly, the mechanism is put under the Ministry of Education instead of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And in cultural terms, it actually encompasses a full range of activities. Most importantly, it highlights a people-centered approach to international relations.

Last but not the least, Silk Road will inspire a new spirit of cultural relationship in this global age. As a historical tale, it brings us away from the current reality and offers us new perspectives to look beyond. Silk Road was not simply peaceful. It collects a rich source of exploration, interests, war, and suffering. And it instructs us to learn from history and to go further. Silk Road represents a long way of encounters and communications, covering very diverse cultures and peoples, which can reach a big future only with new perspectives and visions. Silk Road did not focus on one route, but developed as many routes. It can be initiated by one or several key actors, but opens to all players.

The “Belt-and-Road Initiative” defined in diplomatic terms resurrects the soul of Silk Road in cultural diplomacy. It will bring the people of Eurasia together, hand in hand and heart to heart, with the spirit of openness and inclusiveness, as well as connection and communication. We are looking forward to a community of shared future for mankind, either in global or in regional scales.