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Silk roads again: Revisiting roads connecting Eurasia



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1. Abstract

This special section developed out of an international, interdisciplinary conference entitled *Silk Roads Again: Revisiting Roads Connecting Eurasia* organized in 2016 by the Asia-Pacific Research Center at Hanyang University in collaboration with the Korean Association for Central Asian Studies. The papers included in this *Silk Roads Again* special section add to the discussion of Eurasian re-integration by sketching out the historical process and context that gave rise to our conceptualization of the Silk Road as a metaphor for Eurasian interconnection. Furthermore, the papers introduce cultural aspects of the present-day revival of the Silk Road and reveal everyday-life implications of the 'lived' Silk Road that is often overlooked by the Silk Road policy makers.

This special section developed out of an international, interdisciplinary conference entitled *Silk Roads Again: Revisiting Roads Connecting Eurasia* organized in 2016 by the Asia-Pacific Research Center at Hanyang University in collaboration with the Korean Association for Central Asian Studies. The conference provided a rare opportunity to bring together scholars of widely diverse fields ranging from archeology to anthropology, from art history to political science, and from history to film studies, who explore various aspects and legacies of the Silk Road. The conference's aim was to connect the Silk Road's past, present, and future by investigating history and historiography constructed around and along the Silk Road. The conference was born out of an old recognition that without bringing Eurasia's centuries-old history of interconnectedness to current relevance, our understanding of the region Eurasia would inevitably be limited. Approaching the Silk Road from a global studies perspective, the conference also attempted to explore how Central Eurasia has shaped our understanding of local, re-

gional, and global forces that have connected the world. The papers included in this special section were presented during the conference. Each paper engages with both history and historiography of the real and imagined Silk Road(s).

The Silk Road was a network of routes that moved peoples, goods, and ideas across Eurasia. This network was used regularly from 1st century BCE, when the Han Dynasty of China officially opened trade with the west, to the 13th century CE, when overland trade began to gradually decline while maritime trade began to flourish. For centuries since the ancient times, the Silk Road played a significant role in the emergence of the civilizations of China, Persia, Arabia, the Indian Subcontinent, Northern Africa, and Europe. The name 'Silk Road', however, was given in 1877 by Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geographer, after one of the most valued commodities that travelled between China and Rome. Even though there is no record of regular travelers of the routes referring to them by Richthofen's term, the 'Silk Road' has become a popular metaphor for East-West exchanges and continued to feed our imagination until the present day.

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the Silk Road. The term and the concept of 'Silk Road' have come to represent increasing trans-Eurasian interactions and interconnectedness that we witness today. The fall of the Soviet Union 25 years ago brought down the barrier that had once blocked Central Eurasia from the rest of the world. Newly independent Central Asian states have diverted their attention eastward as a part of their multi-vector foreign policies, creating more and more trans-regional ties linking them to Asian sub-regions (East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East). For East, South, and West Asian countries, on the other hand, Central Eurasia presents new opportunities for diplomatic partnership, source of energy, and access to new markets. As a result, there have been numerous initiatives to reconnect Eurasia through transport and energy corridors in the recent years. Most notably, China has adopted *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR) also

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known as the *Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative* whose goal is to construct an overland corridor stretching from Xi'an or Chang'an of the ancient Silk Road through Central Asia to ultimately Germany and a maritime route from Guangzhou through the Suez Canal to Venice. This ambitious project that would be funded by a \$ 40 billion Silk Road Fund would lead to a revival of the historical Silk Road in the modern time. China, however, is not the only country that has tied its vision of an integrated future to the historically-significant Silk Road. The United States has also named its program for connecting Central and South Asia via energy and transport networks the *New Silk Road Initiative* while Japan from earlier on called its Central Asian policy the 'Silk Road Diplomacy'.

The 'Silk Road' has thus been adopted as a trope for Central Asian and Eurasian policies. It has also come to represent historical and cultural links that are being revisited today. A number of public and private Silk Road-related cultural organizations have been established since the Soviet collapse. Their shared goal is to expand cultural and educational exchanges across Eurasia and to preserve Silk Road heritage. Academic conferences, exhibitions, and cultural events on Silk Road-related themes are also organized more frequently, reflecting the increased public interest in Silk Road history. Here in South Korea alone, a major Silk Road Festival is organized annually by the provincial government of Gyeongju, the capital city of the Silla Kingdom (57 BCE-935 CE) that was once a flourishing Silk Road trade post.

The *Journal of Eurasian Studies* has recently published a special section entitled *Central Asia in Asia: Emerging Links, Rivalries, and Opportunities* that sums up Asia's Silk Road policies in Central Eurasia and their regional and global implications. The papers included in this *Silk Roads Again* special section add to the discussion of Eurasian re-integration by sketching out the historical process and context that gave rise to our conceptualization of the Silk Road as a metaphor for Eurasian interconnection. Furthermore, the papers introduce cultural aspects of the present-day revival of the Silk Road and reveal everyday-life implications of the 'lived' Silk Road that is not accounted by the Silk Road policy makers.

The first paper, which is the Italian archaeologist Marco Galli's contribution focuses on both history and historiography of the Silk Road. Galli first engages with how history of the Sino-Roman relationship and the East-West Silk Road trade were written in the 19th century by European archaeologists and geographers. Then he attempts to reconstruct the Silk Road using both Roman and Chinese sources in order to investigate the impacts of the Silk Road trade on Roman economy.

The second paper by Daniel Waugh explores the impact of Mongol conquest across Eurasia which has often been described as destructive. Waugh proposes that, on the contrary

to the commonly-held perception, a more complex picture of Mongol rule emerges when exploring the written sources and archeological evidence from Central Asia and Eastern Europe. After demonstrating that the Mongols were "owl of misfortune" at one time and one place and the "phoenix of prosperity" at another time and another place, Waugh suggests that a more critical analysis that brings history and archeology into a conversation is necessary for a more balanced assessment of the impact of Mongol rule in Central Eurasia.

The two last contributions by Magnus Marsden and Diana Kudaibergenova engage with the 'actually existing silk roads' that are affecting lives of Central Asians today. Marsden's paper explores the relevance of the concept of Silk Road for understanding the patterns of trade and exchange between China, Eurasia, and the Middle East. In the paper, Marsden follows the journey of Afghan traders from the Chinese city of Yiwu to markets in East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The paper asks: "Why sell the dream of a 'New Silk Road' when a multiplicity of silk – or perhaps more aptly nylon-roads already exist?" and "Why are communities that obviously have so much to offer into understanding the role played by trade in connecting Asia and Europe absent from the discourse of the New Silk Road?"

Diana Kudaibergenova approaches similar questions from the perspectives of Central Asian contemporary artists. She suggests that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian artists began to re-imagine the concept of 'Self' in relation to the rigid geographical and historical 'markers' that labeled their places of origin in certain ways. The historical and contemporary Silk Roads that at times represent hope and at other times a threat, is the topic that the artists continue to work with in their search for a 'Self.' In the paper, Kudaibergenova evaluates the artists' expression of the Silk Road heritage through the themes of imagined geography, routes, roads, and mobility.

In the next coming issues, the *Journal of Eurasian Studies* will continue to publish selected papers that explore different aspects of the historical and contemporary Silk Road and its legacy in today's Eurasia under the heading of *Silk Roads Again*. The editors hope that by bringing history and current affairs into a conversation, the *JES* would be able to contribute in connecting Eurasia's past, present, and future. Lastly, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the National Research Foundation of South Korea for its generous support of the conference.

Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.