



# *The Historical Basis for the Belt and Road Initiative*

Zhang Haipeng\*

**Abstract:** It has been proved by archaeological excavations that Sichuan brocade used to be an important commodity item along the ancient Silk Road. From a perspective of historical evolution, the entire history of the Silk Road can be divided into several stages, namely, the Silk Road 1.0 era (pre-Qin period — the Yuan Dynasty), the Silk Road 2.0 era (the Ming and Qing dynasties), the Silk Road 3.0 era (the Opium War — the Republic of China) and the Silk Road 4.0 era (the “Belt and Road” Initiative period). The “Silk Road” spirit of “taking the public interests into account” well demonstrates the Chinese way of thinking. The “Belt and Road” Initiative is a program of international cooperation which aims to promote joint development of China and the rest of the world under new circumstances. Fundamentally different from the development approaches of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism since the 16th century, this initiative does not rely on plundering the resources of other countries to achieve self-development. Instead, it is a new initiative designed for joint development and win-win cooperation.

**Keywords:** The Belt and Road Initiative; Silk Road; international cooperation

It is of great significance for Sichuan to hold an academic seminar on “The Land of Abundance and the Silk Road” and to invite scholars from home and abroad to participate in the event and discuss the historical significance of Sichuan which has long been acclaimed as the Land of Abundance and the Silk Road. I would like to share with you some of my thoughts on this topic.

The Belt and Road Initiative (B&R Initiative) is a great concept proposed during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China for further development of the country. It is also an initiative for promoting cooperation

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\* Zhang Haipeng, professor, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

between China and other countries in this new era. Essentially different from the development models of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism that appeared after the 16th century, it is a new initiative featuring joint development and win-win cooperation instead of exploiting other countries for one's own benefits.

With the proposal of the B&R Initiative, the academic circles, especially disciplines closely related to the real world, such as science of international relations, political science and economics, have seen many articles and seminars on the significance of the Initiative. It is important to elaborate on the realistic significance of the Initiative and it is also vital to study its historical basis, which is what ought to be done by historians.

To provide academic support for implementing the Initiative, various symposiums on the Silk Road have been held across China in recent years. Academic conferences were held in many cities including Xi'an, Lanzhou, Yinchuan, Quanzhou and Guilin to discuss the Initiative. During the academic seminar on "The Land of Abundance and the Silk Road" held in Chengdu, domestic and foreign scholars presented papers on the basis of historical materials to discuss and document the overland Silk Road stretching from Sichuan to Central Asia via the northern grassland, the southwest section of the Silk Road from Yunnan Province to India, and the maritime Silk Road starting from the Yangtze River to the southeastern coastal areas. These seminars have drawn extensive attention to Sichuan through concentrated discussions regarding the relationships between Sichuan and the Silk Road.

Generally speaking, Zhang Qian's efforts for channeling to Xiyu (the Western Regions) was regarded as a milestone in the formation of the Silk Road. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian · Treatise* on the Dawan, when Zhang Qian arrived in Dashi (now Afghanistan, Iran and

part of the Middle East), he saw Sichuan-made walking sticks and cloth sold to Dashi from India. This proves that the Silk Road from Sichuan to Central Asia via South Asian countries had already taken shape long before Zhang Qian was sent on a diplomatic mission to Xiyu. Many facts show that nongovernment trade channels had existed long before Zhang Qian opened the official route to Xiyu.

Archeological discoveries show that silk fabrics were available in China as early as the Neolithic Age. Ancestors living in Sichuan developed sericulture in the fishing and hunting age, i.e., the legendary Cancong Period. Scholars have identified that there was a character meaning silkworm in inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century BC). It is very likely that the Chinese character "Shu" (蜀) for Sichuan evolved from the character for "silkworm(蚕)." It is certain that Sichuan is one of the origins of sericulture and silk production. Shu brocade, also called Sichuan brocade, is the achievement of integrative production techniques and a milestone of civilization's development. Many historical documents have records about Shu brocade and archeological excavations also prove that it was an important material in the trade along the Silk Road.

The Silk Road starting from China and extending to different places of the world was a trade route that came into being naturally, just like the Ancient Tea Horse Road. Travelers along the Silk Road included merchants, monks, officials, soldiers and peregrinators for different purposes. It is not only a cargo passage, but also a channel for spreading different cultures. It is the carrier of fusion and learning among different nations and civilizations.

The history from time immemorial to the current Silk Road era can be classified as follows.

From the pre-Qin period to the Yuan Dynasty, it is the 1.0 era; the Ming and Qing dynasties represent the 2.0 era; the period after the Opium War till the Republic of China era is 3.0; and now with the B&R Initiative, it is the 4.0 era.

The 1.0 era mainly saw exchanges between the Central Plains and the four remote states, with the former having higher material and cultural levels than the latter. Goods made in the Central Plains, such as silk, porcelain, tea, spices and bronze and iron ware were sold to the four remote states which also had their commodities and culture spread to the Central Plains. The Silk Road played an important role in communications, exchange and fusion which included trade, intermarriage, official relations, marriage for political purposes, or conflicts and even wars among the different nations and races. The material culture of the Central Plains had an influence on the four remote areas and Shu brocade became special gifts between the kings or nobles of the four remote states. The material cultures of the four remote states also influenced the Central Plains and constituted part of its integrated yet diversified cultures.

The 2.0 era marked a period during which China took the initiative to communicate with

the outside world. Such communications went beyond the relationships between the Central Plains and the four remote states. At that time, China was a central area for world trade and economy. Zheng He's voyages to the western seas were the greatest maritime expeditions in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrating the highly advanced development of the material culture of China and the Chinese people's capabilities of exploring the world in that era. Unfortunately, such a developmental momentum was not sustained and was replaced by border-closing strategies adopted during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Following Zheng He's expeditionary voyages, it was Europeans who initiated the era of great explorations by sea. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese went eastward and arrived in Macao where they retained a foothold and formed a giant triangular trade circle with Nagasaki of Japan and Brazil in South America. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, numerous resources, mostly in the form of silver, flooded into mainland China from Macao, bringing China's economy to an era with sharp increases in quantity yet little improvement in quality. The tremendous inflow of silver accelerated the economic development of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River but such





*The Yumen Pass*

exchanges were dominated by Europeans and China did not acquire advanced foreign technologies through the trading activities. Meanwhile, it was the time when the capitalist mode of production emerged in Europe.

Starting in the 14th century, the land-based Silk Road was blocked in certain parts. From the 14th to the 17th centuries, the Ottoman Empire intercepted the Road and this was an important reason of its decline. In the early Ming Dynasty, efforts were made for over one hundred years to build the Jiayu Pass of the Great Wall, which was originally meant to be used for facilitating the reception and management of merchants coming from Xiyu. Due to the interruption of the Road by the Ottoman Empire, however, few merchants from Xiyu were able to come to China and many places along the Road within China, such as Dunhuang, Yangguan, the Yumen Pass and the Jiayu Pass became dilapidated. The blocking of the maritime

Silk Road after the 16th century was not only related to the ban on maritime trade in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, but also relevant to the rise of capitalism in Western countries which controlled the sea passages by hegemony so that the peaceful conduct of trade was suppressed. It is true that the banning of maritime trade in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was implemented to concentrate the imperial power and went against the historical trend. In the Qing Dynasty, although Emperor Qianlong repealed the ban, he closed the other three port cities and only allowed Guangzhou to be open for foreign trade. Therefore, the narrow vision of the rulers led to the continuing decline of the Silk Road.

During the 3.0 era, Western merchants managed to spread a colonial system with opium as their catalyst and cannons as their support. China was forced into a passive position and the maritime Silk Road was on the wane.



The current age is the 4.0 era of the Silk Road. While China's reform and opening-up needs to go further, the US and European countries still fail to reinvigorate after the 2008 financial crisis. This situation is also affecting the economic development of China. In 2010, China surpassed Japan and ranked second globally in economic aggregate. How to promote the continuing economic development of China and how to boost world economic recovery have become paramount issues for Chinese leaders. The B&R Initiative was proposed at just the right time.

The spirit of the Silk Road — a decent strategy for the benefit of people all over the world — is a typical Chinese mindset. Whether it is a region, a country or the whole world, they all need development. The way to exploit other countries for one's own benefit is a measure adopted by European countries and the US in their development of capitalism. It is a way to seek benefits for themselves at the expense of others. That is a western way of

thinking. From historical experience, such a way of thinking exerted negative influence and was unfavorable for the joint development of countries. The tough issues that perplex Europe and the US nowadays, such as sagging economies, immigration problems, terrorism, and Brexit, may possibly be the consequences of the capitalism-colonialism-imperialism eras. That "A decent strategy is for the benefit of people all over the world" is a mindset aimed at win-win and common prosperity, and is a way of thinking for individual development as well as joint development of countries. Joint development means people around the world should all enjoy the benefits of development and the well-being of all nations should be guaranteed. The B&R Initiative is such a way of thinking—to reach common prosperity through win-win cooperation. It is the reason why the proposal of the Initiative has been widely welcomed by countries around the world and more and more countries have become partners.

*(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Jia Fengrong )*