

# *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Concept of an Economic Corridor along the Southern Silk Road*

Lin Wenxun\*

**Abstract:** The Belt and Road Initiative requires the urgent revival of the Southern Silk Road. This means a good understanding of its rich historical connotations and its comprehensive and mutual-beneficial functions. Starting from a very early period, the Southern Silk Road has played an important role in the history of Yunnan and has been characterized by using cowry as money. This paper proposes the development of a new economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road from Xi'an in the north, via Chengdu and Kunming, to South Asia and Southeast Asia thus linking the Silk Road Economic Belt to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This will bring about a new phase of all-around opening-up linking domestic and overseas markets via land and sea.

**Keywords:** The Belt and Road Initiative; the economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road; the role of Yunnan; the concept

China is among the world's major ancient civilizations. In ancient times, China, by virtue of its highly-developed economy and civilization, played a leading role in the global economic landscape. As a powerhouse of global economic development, China used to rely on the silk roads on its northwest and south and the Maritime Silk Road on the East and South China Sea to form an all-round opening-up system, boosting the joint development of relevant countries and making extraordinary contributions to the development of world economy and culture.

In the 21st century, with our new development and economic growth, China once again became a powerhouse of global economic development. In *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Andre Gunder Frank (2001), a world-renowned German

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\* Lin Wenxun, professor, Yunnan University.

historian, keenly pointed out that the 21st century surely belong to the East, particularly China. As an emerging driving force in the 21st century, the time-honored Silk Road surely be revived, will go global and will increase its presence in the international arena. Based in China and targeting the world, the Belt and Road Initiative conforms to historical trends, yet is future-oriented. Therefore, it will play an important role in the rejuvenation of China and the development of the global economy and multiple civilizations.

The Belt and Road Initiative belongs to the world, as well as China. It is an initiative targeting both present and the future. In nature, it is a driving-force strategy for China's rejuvenation. From such a perspective, this paper attempts to discuss the historical characteristics and implications of the Southern Silk Road.

## 1. The historical connotations of the Silk Road

### 1.1 The proposal of the Silk Road

The Silk Road was originally proposed by German geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen<sup>①</sup> (1980) in the late 19th century. He (1877) named "a network of silk trade routes connecting China, Transoxiana and India from 114 BC to 127 AD" Seidenstrassen, meaning "silk road" in English. The term mainly referred to the ancient outbound passages in northwestern China and was gradually accepted and recognized by academia. Echoing the Land Silk Road in northwestern China, Japanese scholar Takatoshi Misugi proposed the concept of a "Maritime Silk Road" in 1967. Since the 1980s, some scholars in Sichuan and Yunnan have been

promoting the concept of the Southern Silk Road (also known as the Southwestern Silk Road) (Ren, 1987).

According to the arguments held by scholars both in China and abroad, the network of land routes in northwestern China was named the Silk Road for three major reasons. First, local silk trade lasted for a long period of time and developed into a substantial business, playing a decisive role in the flow of other commodities. Second, as the primary bulk stock of that time, silk had a huge impact on the social and economic development of countries along the routes. Third, based on these two reasons, silk became a link between China and foreign countries. Thus, the key to correctly naming an outbound passage lies in identifying the commodity that tops all in terms of duration, trade scale, influence on social and economic development both in China and abroad, as well as its role as a link between China and foreign countries.

### 1.2 The different names of the Silk Road and related discussions

Relevant scholars pay increasingly more attention to the Silk Road research and keep expanding and deepening their research scope. In such a context, many of them have successively proposed a variety of views on the naming of the Silk Road.

Regarding the Land Silk Road in northwestern China, Japanese scholar Kei Okazaki (1973) and Chinese scholar Jiang Boqin (1994), proposed to name that Land Silk Road connecting China to the outside world "Silver Road" (p. 29). According to Chinese scholar Ye Shuxian (2013), the part of the road within the Chinese border should be named "Jade Road," holding that, "There is a dual

<sup>①</sup> Ferdinand von Richthofen was among the earliest Westerners to have conducted field research into the resources of geology, geography and economy in China. His China-related research findings include Letter from Richthofen (Shanghai, 1870-1872); "China: Ergebnisse eigener reisen und darauf gegründeter studien" in Robert Dickenson's *Founder of Modern Geology*, translated by Ge Yide, et al. published by the Commercial Press in 1980.

significance of the “Hexi Corridor” civilization, which means a silk road to the Western Civilization and a jade road to the Chinese Civilization.

On the Maritime Silk Road, Japanese scholar Tsugio Mikami (1983) stressed that in the Song Dynasty porcelain had replaced silk to become China’s number one export of bulk stock by sea. Given that, he proposed to name the Maritime Silk Road “Porcelain Road.” By contrast, according to other Japanese scholars (Yamada, Kentaro & Yoshimizu, Tsuneo et al., 1976), the Maritime Silk Road also facilitated significant imports of spices and glassware into China and thus promoted its social and economic development, for which it could be named “Spice Road” or “Glass Road.”

Similarly, the diversity of names given to the Silk Road in northwestern China and the Maritime Silk Road, a variety of names have been given by scholars to the Southern Silk Road. For example, believing that Shu cloth (cloth made in Sichuan) was the earliest commodity transported via the Southern Silk Road, Ren Naiqiang (1987) called this outbound passage “Shu-cloth Road.” Mu Jihong (2001) proposed to name this passage “Tea Road,” as tea has been exported to South Asia and Southeast Asia via this passage in southwestern China since the Tang Dynasty. Based on a thorough investigation into the duration, scale and influence of commodities transported via the Southern Silk Road, this paper concludes that cowry money is undoubtedly the very item worth the most attention, for which the concept of “Cowry-Money Road” is presented (Lin, 2001).

### **1.3 The diversity, inclusiveness and openness manifested by different proposals for naming the Silk Road**

The reason for the variety of naming proposals from scholars lies in the fact that there used to be numerous items transported via the abovementioned three major outbound passages. Besides, there is more than one item exerting significant influence

both on the East and the West. A thorough analysis reveals that the different naming proposals, though with their own emphasis (i.e. highlighting an item’s importance to an outbound passage), have reached a consensus that the three major outbound passages of China (the Land Silk Road in northwestern China, the Maritime Silk Road on the East and South China Sea and the Land Silk Road in south China) feature multi-element coexistence, strong inclusiveness and great openness.

First, relevant historical records have proven the existence of diversity in all three outbound passages.

As Japanese scholar Kazutoshi Nagasawa (1990) depicted, the items transported via the Land Silk Road in northwestern China included Han brocade, paper and pottery made in China, glass made in Rome, silver products made in Iran, Buddhist artwork made in Gandhara, patterns designed in Greece, brocade made in Persia, among many others which as a whole formed a vivid portrayal of that grand history and culture. A wide range of items were transported between the East and West via the Maritime Silk Road. Just like Professor Chen Yan (2006) at Peking University concluded, via the Maritime Silk Road, China exported its specialties, such as silk, the four great inventions, porcelain, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Chinese herbs to the rest of the world and at the same time imported foreign items like pearls, ivory, spices, minerals (gold, silver, copper, etc.), commercial crops, as well as new species of animals and plants (p.675). Also, there was no shortage of items transported via the Southern Silk Road. For example, China exported its Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo rods (bamboo rods made in Qionglai) in exchange for rare treasures, salt, brocade, cowry-money and other items (Sima, 1963, pp.2995-2996) from countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and India (Zhang, 1985, p.9).

Second, the Silk Road features great diversity

and inclusiveness.

Richthofen named the network of outbound land passages the Silk Road on the grounds that this ancient network could absolutely be called Silk Trade Road. Chinese silk has been well-known across the world and silk was China's earliest major export to the West. Some Greek classical works dating back to the 4th Century BC called China "Seres," meaning "kingdom of silk" (Zhang, 1977, p.17). It is based on this historical fact that the Silk Road or the Silk Trade Road was widely adopted by scholars in their relevant studies. (Hermann, 1910; Hudson, 1931) Under such an influence, more and more scholars proposed to name the network of outbound routes on the East and South China Sea the "Maritime Silk Road" and the network of outbound routes in southwestern China the "Southern Silk Road." This indicates that scholars both in the East and West have realized the inclusiveness of the Silk Road and agreed to use it as a general term to refer to all of China's outbound passages. In other words, although a succession of new concepts such as "Silver Road," "Jade Road," "Porcelain Road," "Cowry-money Road," "Shu-cloth Road" and "Tea Road" were proposed by different scholars, they merely revealed the historical characteristics and rich connotations of the three ancient Silk Roads from different perspectives. Given the great variety of items transported via the three passages and the co-existence of multiple cultures along routes, the three Silk Roads fall into the category of compound roads. The word "silk" in the Silk Road should not be rashly interpreted as the name of a particular item. Instead, the Silk Road should be understood as a road of China.

Last, the start and historical development of the Silk Road both suggest its openness.

We should regard the start of the Silk Road as an outcome of China's opening-up. According to Japanese scholar Kazutoshi Nagasawa (1990), "The

Silk Road, as an artery spanning the continents of Asia and Africa, lies at the center of the development of world history" (p. 3). His view is the best possible interpretation of the Silk Road's openness. Chinese scholar Chen Yan (2006) held that, "The Maritime Silk Road in nature is an outcome of an opening-up policy" (p.1477). In his studies, Chen also closely associated the rise and decline of the Silk Road with the degree of openness. Since the 21st century, some scholars have argued that Silk Road related research should view Yunnan and Southeast Asia as an integrated whole and attach importance to the historical bonds between Yunnan and regions like Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal (Sun, 2000; Yang, 2008). Such a global perspective on the historical development of Yunnan is exactly based on the fact that the Southern Silk Road is in nature an opening-up road in southwestern China and that Yunnan has been a gateway and open region along the Southern Silk Road.

#### **1.4 Rich connotations valuable to the study of the Silk Road**

Judging from its historical development, the Silk Road is a road of economy, culture and friendship with rich connotations.

First, the Silk Road is a road of economy. Being a compound road, the Silk Road is also characterized by numerous merchants and world-renowned commodities traveling across the way. After all, it is a trade road in the first place. In fact, this is the very reason for academia to name the three major outbound passages the Silk Road.

Second, the Silk Road is also a road of culture. Effectively linking major ancient civilizations such as China, India and Egypt, the Silk Road significantly boosted the exchanges between the East and the West in ancient times. It is fair to say that the Silk Road is a driving force of the world's major civilizations and a crucial channel to export Chinese culture.

Third, it is also a road of friendship. Via the Silk Road, trade caravans and envoys extended the hand of friendship to countries far and near. According to Chen Yan (2006), the Silk Road is more than a bridge and link of economic and cultural exchanges between the East and the West. It is also, “A road of friendship enabling the Chinese people to go global in a peaceful and friendly way” (p.1477).

Its diversity, inclusiveness and openness strongly prove the Silk Road to be a compound road. This requires more attention to its “nature” and exploration of its rich connotations when we study the functions of the Silk Road. Meanwhile, given that it is a crucial channel to facilitate economic and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, we should also pay due attention to its two-way nature when giving full play to its capacity and function. Via the Silk Road, China has exerted its influence on the world, and welcomed the world to China.

## 2. The historical characteristics of the Southern Silk Road

In southwestern China, transport routes via the hinterland of Yunnan to South Asia and Southeast Asia were already developed in the early period of Chinese history. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, in the first year of the Yuanshou period of the Western Han Dynasty (122 BC), imperial envoy Zhang Qian saw the exports of Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo rods trans-shipped from Sindhu (India) on his way to Tokhgra on a diplomatic mission. It has been shown by some experts that the abovementioned outbound passage started from Chengdu, with “two arteries running respectively westward and eastward. The westbound artery (ancient Yark Road) started from Chengdu, via Ya’an and Xichang, through the Jinsha River, to Dayao and Dali. The eastbound route started from

Chengdu and ran southward, via Leshan and Yibin along the Min River and the Wuchi Road (Wuchidao) built in the Qin Dynasty, to Yunnan, and then via Zhaotong, Qujing, Kunming and Chuxiong to Dali. The two arteries converged at Dali and continued to extend westward via Baoshan, Tengchong and Myanmar to India” (Li, 1994, p.38). Given that the network of outward passages in northwestern China were named the Silk Road, many scholars proposed to name the two passage the Southern Silk Road, Southwestern Silk Road or Southern Land Silk Road.

Compared with the Land Silk Road in northwestern China and the Maritime Silk Road in the East and South China Sea, the Southern Silk Road has attracted far less academic attention, which is in contrast with its significant historical role. In fact, the Southern Silk Road has been endowed with rich historical connotations and unique historical characteristics. Its great academic value and realistic significance needs to be further explored. Famous historian Li Xueqin (2012) used to claim that, “Of all the Silk Roads, the one in southwestern China is most worthy of research” (p.11).

### 2.1 Historical origin

Although the term “Southern Silk Road” did not appear until the 1980s, the emergence of this trade route can be traced back to a very early period. According to the “Biographies of Tribal Leaders in Southwestern China” in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, this trade route had already been accessible prior to the first year of the Yuanshou period of the Western Han Dynasty (122 BC). Xiong Yongzhong (1986) even held that, “Back to the Warring States period, there were merchants from regions like India and Myanmar taking cowries to Yunnan via a ‘silk road in the south’” (p. 20). In terms of historical origin, such a claim brings the South Silk Road ahead of the Silk Road in northwestern China, which was launched in the Han



Dynasty, and the Maritime Silk Road, which was launched in the Tang Dynasty.

## 2.2 Significant role in the historical development of Yunnan

When it comes to the history of Yunnan, people tend to view this land as a closed system and even consider the word “Yunnan” as synonym for “closed.” Such a stereotyped view, however, is challenged by the very existence of the Southern Silk Road, which suggests that Yunnan has been an open system since the very early period of Chinese history. In fact, since ancient times, Yunnan has formed a currency circulation system and an integrated market with South Asia and Southeast Asia. This can be exemplified by the circulation of cowry-money.

According to some ancient Chinese documents, as early as the mid 7th century, when Xuan Zang (1985), a renowned Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty, was traveling in India, he saw local people do business in cowry-money (p. 217). This record corresponds to the description in the *New Book of Tang* that India “exchanged cowries for goods” (Ouyang & Song, 1975, p. 6237). Apart from that, the circulation of cowry-money in countries and regions across South Asia and Southeast Asia was also recorded in the *Records of Foreign Countries* by Zhao Rukuo (1996) in the Song Dynasty (p. 86), the *Records of Overseas Islands* by Wang Dayuan (2000) in the Yuan Dynasty (p. 155), and the *Records of Foreign Countries in the Western Ocean* by Gong Zhen (1962) in the Ming Dynasty (p. 33). Moreover, local circulation of cowry-money was also mentioned in the books written by many Western travelers and scholars. In the 14th century, famous Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta (1983) traveled to Maldives, where he witnessed cowry-based trade between Maldives and Bangladesh (p. 243). Marco Polo, a

famous traveler familiar to the Chinese people, also mentioned cowry-money circulation in Bangladesh and Lochac (Siam) (Paul, 1959, p.552). German Sinologist Hans Ulrich Vogel (1993) discovered that even an inland country like Laos would use cowry<sup>①</sup> as its currency in the 17th century (p.230).

It happens that for a long period of time in history, Yunnan used cowry as its currency. The cowry-money circulated in Yunnan mainly came from South Asia and Southeast Asia. In *The Travels of Marco Polo*, there is a description of cowry-money circulation in Dali, Yunnan, “The cowry-money used by locals was originally from India, not native made.” This description has been verified by many other historical records and modern archaeological findings.

Evidently, Yunnan once shared the same trade circle, as well as the same currency system with countries and regions in South Asia and Southeast Asia. In this sense, it is precisely the Southern Silk Road that made Yunnan an open system in the early period of Chinese history. For the historical development of Yunnan, openness is a key feature and an inevitable choice. At present, Yunnan is expected to play an important role in implementing China’s Western Development strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative.

## 2.3 The forming of regional characteristics based on the Cowry-money Road

Both in terms of scale and influence, the silk trade via the Southern Silk Road simply could not compare with that via the Silk Road in northwestern China, or that via the Maritime Silk Road. In stark contrast with its less impressive silk trade, the Southern Silk Road witnessed a cowry boom, with large amounts of cowries transported from South Asia and Southeast Asia via this passage into Yunnan. These imported cowries, from the

① Small seashell was called cowry in India.



cowry-money

Spring and Autumn periods and the Warring States Period to the Ming and Qing dynasties, remained a dominant legal tender in Yunnan. In circulation for over 2,000 years, they had a significant impact on the social and economic development there.

Wang Dadao (1987), an expert at Yunnan Provincial Museum, studied the cowries found in local archaeological digs and drew a map of cowry-money distribution in Yunnan. This map shows that a small amount of money cowries were found in Jinghong, Mojiang, Lvchun, and other cities and counties in southern Yunnan, while the majority were distributed in an east-west axis from Tengchong, via Dali, Chuxiong, Lufeng, Jinning, Kunming and Qujing, to Duguan (p.22). Those cowries were identified by the Qingdao-based Institute of Oceanology, Chinese Academy of Sciences to “have originally come from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, including waters near India, the Philippines, Taiwan Island, Hainan Island, the Xisha Islands, as well as other South China Sea islands” (Li, 1981, p.30). It is worth mentioning that most cowries found in Yunnan were from the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. From such a map of cowry-money distribution we can conclude a cowry-money road.

It is beyond any doubt that the 2,000-year history of cowry-money circulation, from the

Warring States Period to the early Qing Dynasty is also a 2,000-year history of trade between Yunnan and countries and regions in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Given that, cowry-money is definitely a most representative, characteristic and influential commodity imported via the Southern Silk Road. This Cowry-money Road witnessed the historical development of the Southern Silk Road and promoted local prosperity. More importantly, it associated the historical development of Yunnan closely with that of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Therefore, the Cowry-money Road is the most important historical characteristic of the Southern Silk Road unique to Yunnan.

### 3. The concept of an economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road

Today, to thoroughly implement the Belt and Road Initiative and advance the building of an all-round opening-up system, China urgently needs to rejuvenate the Southern Silk Road. To this end, we propose to build a new economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road. This corridor will start from Xi'an, via Chengdu and Kunming, to South Asia and Southeast Asia, becoming a driving force for China's opening-up and Western Development strategy. It will link the Silk Road Economic Belt to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to bring about a new phase of all-around opening-up, with links to domestic and overseas markets over land and sea.

The development of an economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road has a solid historical basis. The earliest description of the Southern Silk Road is found in *The Records of the Grand Historian*. It started from Chengdu, Sichuan, through the hinterland of Yunnan, to countries and regions in South Asia and Southeast Asia. It has been verified that the Southern Silk Road was developed no later

than the 4th century BC, which was far earlier than the land Silk Road in northwestern China and the Maritime Silk Road in the East and South China Sea. In ancient times, China relied on the three Silk Roads to interact with relevant countries in Asia, Africa and Europe, doing business, promoting money circulation and facilitating people-to-people exchanges. Also, thanks to the three Silk Roads, the ancient civilizations of China, India, Egypt, and others were well connected, forming a road of economy, culture and friendship between China and the overseas regions of Central Asia, Western Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. The Silk Road enabled different ethnic groups to exchange needed goods and realize mutual adaptation and joint progress. As a result, China was able to exert its influence on the rest of the world, and vice versa. Therefore, based on the ancient Southern Silk Road, an economic corridor, starting from Xi'an, through Chengdu and Kunming, to South Asia and Southeast Asia is under construction. This economic corridor will be conducive to the revival of the three ancient Silk Roads, the fulfillment of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the building of an all-round opening-up system in this new era.

The development of an economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road is of realistic significance. Through over three decades of relentless efforts, China has made extraordinary achievements in its reform and opening-up. Ever since the launch of the Western Development strategy in 2000, all relevant provincial-level administrative regions have experienced rapid development, featuring their fastest-ever economic growth, best development quality, strongest enhancement of comprehensive strength, most substantial change in urban and rural areas, as well as largest benefits to the masses. However, due to factors such as geographical location, factor endowment and development basis, China now is faced with an imbalanced opening-

up landscape, in which the eastern region develops faster than the western one, and the coastal region outperforms the inland regions. It is in such a context that China decided to develop the economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road, which will run from Xi'an, via Chengdu and Kunming, to South Asia and Southeast Asia. The economic corridor is expected to enhance ties among provincial-level administrative regions such as Shaanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi, and link Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into an organic network. Also, it aims to further integrate the two "Land of Abundance" title owners, i.e. the Chengdu Plain and the Guanzhong Plain, reinvigorate the two "economic pearls" (Chongqing and Urumqi) in western China, forge Kunming into a new center for economic development, and further promote the Western Development strategy. The Economic Corridor along the Southern Silk Road happens to coincide with the "Tibetan-Yi Corridor," which facilitated the ethnic migration and integration in ancient China. Even today, it is still a major region inhabited by ethnic minorities. Given that, the development of an Economic Corridor along the Southern Silk Road is conducive to the economic and cultural exchanges among the Chinese ethnic minorities of Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Lisu, Naxi, Bai, Pumi, Drung, Nu, Hani and Jingpo, the stability of the frontier region, and the common prosperity of all local ethnicities.

In conclusion, China will strive to develop a major economic corridor along the Southern Silk Road, which will run from Xi'an, via Chengdu and Kunming, to South Asia and Southeast Asia. This economic corridor is expected to promote China's internal and external exchanges, link the north and south regions of western China, and enhance ethnic unity. It will be based on both historical and realistic bases and at the same time echo the call of the



future. To promote the development of an Economic Corridor along the Southern Silk Road, this paper hereby proposes the following suggestions. First, we should upgrade the development of this Economic Corridor into a national strategy and include it in the Belt and Road Initiative. Second, we should enhance policy communication and overall coordination, set up a cooperation platform for provincial-level administrative regions along the Economic Corridor, improve the existing cooperation and communication mechanisms, and coordinate our opening-up with the causes of Western Development and ethnic unity. In the meantime, we should also strive for balanced

development among relevant provincial-level administrative regions such as Shaanxi, Sichuan and Yunnan, improve the economic and social benefits of resource allocation, form an overall development momentum, and stimulate regional vitality. Third, we should rely on connected road networks and smooth trade flow to accelerate the construction of a Xi'an-Chengdu-Kunming expressway network, build a highly efficient and speedy comprehensive transport system consisting of road, railway and air transport routes, and promote the development of modern logistics in a bid to form a cross-regional cooperation framework.

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