

VIAE SERICAE OR SILK ROADS AS THE INTERMEDIARIES BETWEEN ASIA AND EUROPE

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In one popular dictionary road is defined as "a long, narrow stretch with a smoothed or paved surface, made for travelling by motor vehicle, carriage, etc. between two or more points".¹ Its aim is always communication. But roads were not always smoothed or paved. One of the most famous roads in world history the Via Appia Antica (built around 313 B.C.) between Rome and Brindisi, was not well surfaced, and many roads of the Middle Ages were not paved. In the time of *Aucassin et Nicolette* (around the beginning of the 13th cent.), people travelled between the forests, seas, different towns or villages like pilgrims, merchants or soldiers, and fords or passes were their milestones.²

Silk Roads were neither smoothed nor paved, and never firmly fixed, they changed through the centuries, and for a millennium they have been completely forgotten. They even had no names, and "Silk Road" is not Chinese and has never been used in China. Professor Baron von Richthofen was probably the inventor of this descriptive name. In his famous work on China, he speaks of *die Seidenstrasse*. In 1910 Professor Albert Hermann published an extremely valuable work entitled *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien*.³ Sven Hedin in his book which name is a translation of von Richthofen's term – *The Silk Road*, published in Swedish in 1936 and in English in 1938, came up with the idea of the new Silk Road (after making very important contribution to research of the old one) that could be built between the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean.⁴ Although it has never been realized, even in our age of the immense technical possibilities, this fantastic dream having as its aim the intercultural communication and understanding, is to be pondered over again at the end of this century and this millennium.

¹ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of English Usage. New York, Portland House 1989, p. 1238.

² LE GOFF, J.: *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiévale* (Czech edition). Prague, Odeon 1991, pp. 143 and 147.

³ HEDIN, S.: *The Silk Road*. London, George Routledge & Sons LTD 1938, p. 226.

⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

A book in two volumes entitled *Comparative History of Civilisations in Asia*, written by a group of American scholars, begins (excepting the *Preface* and *Introduction*) with the topic called *Processes*. On a few pages (5-12) the authors try to define or at least to explain what under this concept in plural is to be understood:

"The generations of people in different parts of the world who make the long passage from hunting and gathering to village agriculture and from village agriculture to highly differentiated and fast changing condition we call civilization knew not what they were doing. They could not know the cumulative long-term consequences of their own intelligent, ad hoc responses to immediate problems. One cannot be certain that people would have willingly marched into the civilized world if they had known what they would find on their arrival there."⁵

Maybe in the last words there is more speculation than it is necessary but I think that to start a book of this kind, i.e. comparative history, with a short deliberation over the process as a mode of historical progress or regress, transition of one phenomenon to other, motion, change in time and space, usually from lower to higher forms (not always necessary), was a good idea.

The concept or category of world literature is much better elaborated than that of world culture, the last being a *Stammbegegriff* for all material as well as spiritual values produced by human beings in the course of history. It was easier for literature as a part of culture to define its probably most controversial aspect – world literature – for this should be the aim and even the point of departure for all strains of comparative literary studies. The same could be said of the relation between the individual cultures (ethnical or national in their diverse forms), or regional (if you like) and the world culture.

Of world culture, as the highest among the categories of culture, one may say that it is a historical, changing in the course of history, depending on cultural development in time and space, always involving the mutual relations or at least affinities and the possibilities of contact, communication and knowledge.

Even wonderfully written comparative history like that just mentioned above, in spite of its emphasis on the processual character, did not use fully the possibilities of this approach. Maybe, this is not possible in the contemporary stage of research. I have in mind the process-like development of world culture or civilization (in contrast to O. Spengler I do not suppose that culture and civilization are the opposite entities); and if processual change and motion is involved, then all aspects of this development should be stressed, not only the comparative one.

⁵ FARMER, E.L. et alii: *Comparative History of Civilisations in Asia*. Vol. 1. Boulder and London, West-View Press 1986, p. 5.

If we look at the map of Eurasia in the book under review we see there three cultural zones: West Asia, South Asia and East Asia, together with Europe which is not particularly underlined, since it is not an object of investigation. Having in mind just the processual character of the spread of culture there and the rise and development of world culture, it is probably necessary to point out that the Silk Road (not Silk Roads) is mentioned on three pages only, although for about one thousand years (2th cent. B.C.–8th cent. A.D.) it was the most important arterial connection between Europe and China. These Silk Roads alone as a part of continua and continuities in the flux of historical changes in over seven thousand kilometres and probably nearly a thousand years, helped over the course of centuries to form the first world culture in the history.

I have mentioned that the world culture, just as world literature, is a historical and changing concept. In reality, all concepts, cultural, philosophical, literary and the like, are in a state of constant flux, although sometimes immensely slow, just as the real phenomena or substances they are representing. The concept of world culture now, if looked at as a historical category, should be seen in a light of mutual relations or affinities between the cultures of various parts of the world, and studied or analysed both from genetic-contact and typological point of view. In my paper delivered at the 33rd ICANAS at Toronto I tried to define a cultural continuum as a "sum of relationships within itself or with the surrounding milieu, main actors of which are human beings, members of national and other cultures," and continuity as a set of motions manifesting "the process-like character of continuum, of a philosophically conceived cultural fact (also in plural, M.G.) in its historical existence."⁶

Those who from the Chinese side gave the impetus to above mentioned cultural continuity in order to meet another cultural continuity coming to Central Asia from the other side of the cultural area – from the Mediterranean (Greco-Roman) world, were certainly not musing over cultural matters. Jacques Gernet was right when he asserted in his monumental *Le Monde chinois* that the "whole policy of the First Han emperors was dominated and directed by the problems of the steppe. Invasions of horsemen using the bow who came from the steppe were doubtless nothing new, for they had threatened the kingdoms of Ch'in, Chao, and Yen from Kansu to Manchuria at the end of the fourth century, and caused the construction of the first defence walls. But the danger increased at the end of the third century B.C. It was in fact just in the time of the rebellions which marked the end of Ch'in dynasty and during the civil war between the various claimants

⁶ GÁLIK, M.: *Intercultural Process in East-West Interplay*. In: HARRAK, A. (ed.): *Contacts Between Cultures. West Asia and North Africa*. Vol. 1. Lewiston, New York, The Edwin Mel- len Press 1992, p. 482.

to supreme power that a great confederation of nomad tribes led by Hsiung-nu was formed in the steppe zone.”⁷

The most important man in Chinese history in the last two pre-Christian centuries, emperor Wudi (141–87 B.C.), certainly did not have as an aim the spread of Chinese culture westwards, when he three years after ascending the Dragon Throne at Chang'an, sent Zhang Qian to find Yuezhi, probably an Iranian people including Tocharians, to convince them in fighting Xiongnu, the northern neighbours of Chinese, maybe the forerunners of European Huns. Xiongnu became the first great enemies of Chinese people in history. Zhang Qian after leaving China proper fell very soon into Xiongnu captivity from which he escaped after ten years only. Later he succeeded in finding Yuezhi in Bactria (Daxia) between Hindu Kush and Oxus (now Amu Darya) where he spent one year. The alliance with Chinese was declined for obvious reasons: to live in these parts of then prosperous Central Asia on the main trade road between Greco-Iranian world and the oases of later Chinese Turkestan was much less dangerous and profitable than in the vicinity of the militant Xiongnu. Zhang Qian did not fulfil his mission but opened the gate for China to a new world; he was the first personality who helped to pave the way for establishing the first world culture in history. Soon after him Chang'an was named in Latin as *Sera Metropolis*, just like before him many towns or cities in the Near and Middle East as well as in Africa were named after Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.). Zhang Qian returned to China after 13 years bringing new knowledge concerned with *Xi yu* (Western lands) of Central Asia, and to some extent even with Persia and Roman empire. After a Zhang Qian's unfruitful mission to the land of Wusun, nomads living at the Lake of Balkhash in the year 115, Wudi sent his expeditionary armies westwards to subdue the local small kingdoms (or city states) on the way to Bactria and to make secure the trade routes leading from China to West Asia and the Mediterranean Europe. Zhang Qian's experience and knowledge which was certainly broader than left in scriptural form, persuaded him about the necessity and utility of trade activities in the new dominions and just discovered territories. There was a great demand for silk and other Chinese products in the regions beyond Pamir. If the culture began to be one of the determining factors for the rise and development of this Sino-Western commerce, it was not its spiritual but at first its material element.

The Silk Roads, established after Zhang Qian's discoveries, but having existed in various forms since the decline of central political power in China between the end of the 2nd cent. B.C. up to the 8th cent. A.D., connected Chang'an and

⁷ GERNET, J.: *A History of Chinese Civilization*. Transl. by J.R. Foster. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1985, p. 117.

China with the Tarim Basin through the passes of Pamir, the towns of Samarkand, Bukhara or Balkh, Merv, Palmyra, Tyrus, Antioch, Alexandria and ended in Rome, or later Byzantium, the heir of Rome in European East and Asian West. More than hundred years after the first deliveries of silk reached Rome emperor Tiberius wrote to the Senate that too much gold was paid for "articles which flatter the vanity of women, jewels, and those little objects of luxury which drain away the riches of the Empire",⁸ and philosopher Seneca sighed when looking at Roman matrons in light-textured stuffs showing their slightly veiled naked charms: "*Video sericas vestes, si vestes vocandae sunt.*" (I see silk vestures, if these may be called vestures at all).⁹

The knowledge of Romans concerning China was very poor. According to Pliny's *Naturalis Historia (Natural History)*, the Chinese (*Seres*) (23–79) remove silk from the trees with the help of water and they themselves are "of more than average height, they have red hair, blue eyes and harsh voices, and they have no language in which to communicate their thoughts".¹⁰ Chinese knowledge was also limited but fair: Romans were no barbarians but equivalent partners of Chinese; they regarded Roman Empire as a mirror reflection of the Middle Kingdom on the other side of the Sino-centric universe.¹¹

Dubious or only basic knowledge is not enough for establishing an intercultural continuum. Other elements or even structures and their interplay should be included there. In Central Asia on our side of Pamir, the existence of Greco-Asian states (Bactria, Sogdiana, Ferghana, partly also Khwarazm) was important. Here especially the existence of Greco-Iranian cultural synthesis prepared the soil for receiving further vital stimuli. These came from India with Buddhism finding its new territories and zealots in Kushana kingdom during the last two centuries B.C. and later in Chinese Turkestan and in East Asia. The spirit of Hellenistic and pre-Islam epoch in this region west of Pamir was very liberal: religious and cultural syncretism dominated here for centuries.

Buddha with his teaching of compassion together with instruction on how to achieve deliverance from the miseries of life, meant the same for Central, East and South-East Asia, as Christianity with its teaching of love and forgiveness for Europe. In order that this culture could really become a world culture *in sensu strictiori*, it needed besides Mediterranean Europe and India, the stimuli from

⁸ Quoted according to BOULNOIS, L.: *The Silk Road*. London, George Allen & Unwin LTD 1966, p. 60.

⁹ Quoted according to HUDSON, G.T.: *Europe and China*. Boston, Beacon Press 1961, p. 92.

¹⁰ Quoted according to BOULNOIS, L.: op. cit., p. 46.

¹¹ Cf. SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, H.: *Ausdehnung der Welt und innerer Zerfall*. In: BAUER, W. (ed.): *China und die Fremden. 3000 Jahre Auseinandersetzung im Krieg und Frieden*. München, C.H. Beck 1980, p. 84.

China, the three most important cultural regions of the old and medieval world. The culture of this kind came into existence first in the oasean city states of Chinese Turkestan, now Xinjiang. Here four counterflows, Greco-Roman, West, South and East Asian, met each other fully or partly in fruitful clash and harmony and they together formed the first specimen of the highest embodiment of inter-cultural process.

2

From the beginning of the Silk Roads up to the end of the 8th cent. A.D., through these oasean cities led all the land routes between China, Europe, West and South Asia. This could not fail to have an impact on art, principally because its authors and patrons were economically powerful Buddhist monasteries which with the help of the institutions and families connected with them, assured a smooth course of trade and pilgrimage.

Art of different kinds was the most important by-product at the process of spreading the three different world religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Manicheism. The role of Buddhism was especially extremely important. As one of the most liberal and human religions of the world, it was able of various metamorphoses after the contact with indigenous and foreign elements, through its long history (half a millennium longer than Christianity) in different times and environments. Originally an ethical teaching *par excellence*, in reality a part of Indian philosophy, by Buddha (Siddharta Gautama, Shakyamuni), who was born around 563 B.C., as a son of king Suddhodama and queen Maya, had been transformed into a widespread religion. Apart from a few year after marriage with a young girl at the age of sixteen, Siddharta devoted the whole of his life to the elucidation of the mystery of suffering and the ways of its overcoming. Full enlightenment is the only way out, or at least it may make this suffering lighter. Buddha's teaching underwent many changes in its way between Nepal and Ceylon, or between the present Afghanistan, Persia, Central Asia, China and the Far East. In its most prevalent form (Mahayanan interpretation) it may be characterized as follows: "All phenomena are transient and lacking in objective reality. They are result of process of cause and effect which leads to an endless succession of births and deaths for all those who continue to be deluded by desire, aversion or ignorance. Only by cultivating complete detachment from all the objects of the six senses (including that of cognition) can the chain of life and death be broken and Nirvana, the state wherein there is no birth, decay, death, sorrow or impurity, attained."¹²

¹² BLOFELD, J.: *The Jewel in the Lotus. An Outline of the Present Day Buddhism in China.* London, Sidgwick & Jackson LTD 1948, p. 31.

This feeling of the “transitory existence” or existence “behind appearances” we may observe in Buddhist art. Philosophy without art is possible, religion not. The intention of Buddha to teach ethical principles was one thing and the discovery of the principle of suffering as a basic element of all existence quite another. When this teaching came into the contact with another Eastern cults in West Asia, it changed its original form very much and also partly content. Six centuries between the death of Alexander the Great and Constantine the Great (ca. 274–337) have a peculiar flavour in the history of the East-West intercultural process due to its extreme stress on the individual salvation.¹³ From the beginning of Hellenism, the city states of Greece and Asia Minor, and later Hellenist states stretching from the Aegean Sea to the Hindu Kush, from the Syr Darya to the Indus, there were always struggles between the powerful and powerless, the gods of the polises or of the greater states. These were winning or loosing the battles together with their believers. Individual salvation became a common concern for many in the times of social, political and ideological insecurity. In Europe Christianity won in the competition between different mystic cults, in Central Asia, Tibet, Mongolia and in the Far East the Mahayana Buddhism. Maurian Kingdom in Northern India represented by the king Ashoka (272–236 B.C.) took the first initiative, together with his son Mahinda, and they become the first Apostles and generous supporters of Buddhism. According to M.M.J. Marasinghe, Ashoka sent his missionaries even to Greece!¹⁴ Be that as it may, Sir Aurel Stein was very surprised when during his visit of Miran, one of the towns on the southern route in Xinjiang, he saw a picture of a winged angel, very similar to those from the first Christian centuries.¹⁵ At that time and later up to the beginning of the 1920s, a very broad intercultural continuum of Gandharan art (Gandhara was situated around the town of Peshawar in the present-day Afghanistan) in Greco-Indian style, was discovered. In post-Alexandrian times on our side of Pamir the presence of the Hellenistic spirit made it possible for many variegated cultural movements to flower and they influenced each other and created the conditions for new syntheses. The winged angel discovered by Stein was very Greek, but the synthesis of Hellenistic art (mainly sculpture) and Indian elements was common. Buddhas were engraved in stone like young men of Apollonian kind with the straight noses. Their eyelids were heavy due to the spiritual strain and meditation and auricles too long since they were alluding to their wisdom according to the Indian tradition. They wore

¹³ FERGUSSON, J.: *Mysterienkulte*. In: CAVENDISH, R. und LING, T.O. (hrsg.): *Mythologie der Weltreligionen*. München, RVG Rheingauer Verlagsgesellschaft mbH 1981, p. 144 (originally: *Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia*. London, Orbis Publishing Ltd 1980).

¹⁴ MARASINGHE, M.M.J.: *Der Theravada-Buddhismus*. Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ STEIN, Sir Aurel: *Serindia. Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Western-most China*. Vol. I. Oxford 1906, p. 494.

dressess similar to the togas of Greek or Roman orators or philosophers, only their posturings and the gestures were Indian.

The Hellenistic impact was only one of the variety of those that played a role in the oasean states, and probably also in West Asia, at least in its eastern part. Japanese scholar Ueno Teruo in his study dealing with the sculpture from the Xinjiang region shows that apart from Gandharan and Indian styles, Classic-Western style, Oriental and Iranian style, Chinese and indigenous Xinjiang style were also present in the region. He clearly differentiates between Classic-Western style by which he has in mind Greek, and Gandharan style affected by Greco-Roman sculptures. Among the works of this kind he includes those made of clay that have the forms of amphorae, oinochoe, lekythos, with terra-cotta figurines attached to them that "clearly represent the Gorgo (or Medusa)".¹⁶ The same applies to the winged angel mentioned above, or to the winged angels and pigeons seen around a Bodhisattva in the ruins of the temple at Kocho (Gaochang). It is interesting to note that angels travelling from the West to the East seem to lose their wings in the works of art. By Oriental and Iranian styles are meant Egyptian and Mesopotamian elements of which only a few have been found, but include, for instance, a chair leg carved in the form of female body, but with a cow's legs; the combination of human beings with animals was quite common in these two countries. Of interest are terra-cotta figurines from Yotkan, fired in the Indian style, including numerous monkeys representing everyday scenes from life, sexual ones not being excluded.

A peculiar feature in the case of Xinjiang art is that the impact of the different intercultural components can be practically measured in terms of a geometrical proportion of the distance between the giving and receiving structure. A glance at a map reveals that Western, Near-Eastern and South-Asian influences are evident on the western side of both branches of the Silk Roads, Chinese influence on the eastern side, while the Xinjiang style was most prominent in the milieu of Kucha, somewhere half-way between the individual foci of impact. About the indigenous Xinjiang style Ueno Teruo asserts that it is essentially Gandharan, but less plastic, the eyes, noses and mouths being formed differently, the whole being more feminine, and allegedly more elegant. The description implies, although the author does not underline it, that it embodies more mannerism than other styles.¹⁷

As to the Chinese style, Xinjiang began culturally to be influenced from the Chinese side fairly late indeed, as late as the 7th and 8th centuries. The impact was mutual, although not reciprocal: China received musical stimuli in particular from Central Asia, but not otherwise. Artistic impulses from China reached the

¹⁶ UENO, Teruo: *Skulpturen aus Ost-Turkestan*. In: KLIMKEIT, H.-J. (ed.): *Japanische Studien zur Kunst der Seidenstrasse*. Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz 1988, p. 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

region of Turfan, but also as far as Kucha and Khotan, and at the last stage of impact the Chinese style became a part of Xinjiang culture. In the statues of Buddha, the Chinese style is apparent in more oval, fuller faces which is probably a result of the beauty ideal prevailing during the period of the Tang dynasty (618–906). At Astan, not far from Turfan, archaeologists have found figurines of soldiers and officials, women, horses, camels, etc. The women likewise conform to the then fashionable ideal with dimples on the cheeks and red lips.¹⁸

Not one of the researchers, as far as I know, tried to assess the significance of the presence and activity in various domains coming from the variety of languages and scripts in Chinese Turkestan reminiscent of the mythic Tower of Babel, but here with a positive meaning: Khotan, Sakian (Scythian), Sogdian, Parthian, Hepthalitian, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tocharian, Tibetan, Chinese, Old Turk, Syrian, and even Hebrew. The most important proved to be Sanskrit through which Buddhist sutras of Indian origin found a Promised Land in China and the neighbouring countries.¹⁹ Without the mediating role of the oasean cities it would hardly have been possible.

3

Continua that came into touch during the millennial existence of the Silk Roads proved to be differently prepared for giving-receiving process in intercultural activities. Western regions including Mediterranean Europe, Egypt and Asia Minor profited very much from Oriental religions and cults westwards of Pamir and India, but Indian cultural impact was negligible and the interest of those countries was focused on silk, lacquer and Seric iron (probably steel), but not on the spiritual values. The situation was different on the other side of the Pamir passes. The Chinese expressed an immense interest on all things concerned with the different forms of Mahayana Buddhism, its teachings (sutras) and literary works connected with them. Gradually, through a slow but an unceasing Sinicization process, both the philosophical and literary tradition was enriched and attained a high level hardly possible without strong foreign impact.

Professor Edward H. Schafer left us a book entitled *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, suggesting and alluding to the Golden Apples of the Hesperidae (Greco-Roman myth), the Peaches of Immortality from the abode of Xi Wangmu,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁹ Linguistic situation in Xinjiang is wonderfully described in GABAIN, A. von: *Sprachen und Völker im Tarim-Becken entlang der Seidenstraßen*. In: FRANZ, H.G. (Hrsg.): *Kunst und Kultur entlang der Seidenstraße*. Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt 1987, pp. 93–118. For Buddhist impact on China see two monographs by CH'EN, K.S.: *Buddhism in China. A Historical Survey* and *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*. Both appeared at Princeton University Press in 1964 and 1973 respectively.

the Queen Mother of the West (Chinese myth), or J.E. Flecker's *Golden Journey to Samarkand*. This book presents a rich source of information about the real imports from the different parts of the then accessible and open world, like the "horses, leather goods, furs and weapons of the North, the ivory, rare woods, drugs, and aromatics of the South, the textiles, gem stones, industrial minerals, and dancing girls of the West" (under the West meant are mostly the oasean cities), since "the Chinese of T'ang, especially those of the eighth century, developed an appetite for such things as these and could afford to pay for them".²⁰ Very probably the expenses were not so high as for originally Chinese silk in Roman Empire: much of it came into China in the form of tribute of foreign countries or states. Some of those articles, goods, animals, plants, etc. do not exist anymore. The golden peaches of Samarkand were brought to Sera Metropolis, but we can only imagine their taste, colour or size. The same is true of the "celestial horses", a race that "sweated blood" brought to emperor Wudi by Zhang Qian from the region around Kokand, in the valley of Ferghana, in contemporary Uzbekistan. Blood sweating was probably caused by the parasites, but the big and strong horses could be well used in the battles against Xiongnu.²¹

Spiritual values have usually longer life than rare animals, plants, or trees. The fruitful impact of Buddhism in China lasted nearly one millennium. It changed Chinese philosophical and religious physiognomy beginning with Neo-Taoism, then achieving its apogee in the most developed schools, like Consciousness-Only (*Faxiang*, or *Yogacara*) and Garland (*Huayan*), influenced Neo-Confucianist doctrines, reformed Chinese literature, especially its narrative and imaginative segment. The art of story-telling learned much from Indians and *Xiyouji* (*Journey to the West*) by Wu Chengen (1500–1582) is probably the best example of it. The Chinese language became enriched when new terms coined by Buddhists, and phonology has been introduced after the contact with Sanskrit language and alphabet. For the history of painting and poetry, Chan (Zen) School of Buddhism, that launched in China, is extremely important for the whole Far East. In the best Chinese specimens, like in the painting by Ma Yuan and Xia Gui (both fl. around 1190–1225) human beings are put in a nature that acts in the eyes of the observer as an aesthetic continuum. Fisherman, poet, or hermit sits there in the boat on the lake, or meditates under a cliff in the moonlight, or plays a flute on the bank on the river. A few lines rule over the painting, all the rest is only emptiness. *Artis poeticae est non omnia dicere*.

According to the best authority on the history of Chinese science (or proto-science) Joseph Needham, Chinese-Indian scientific contacts were quite lively, but

²⁰ SCHAFER, E.H.: *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand. A Study in T'ang Exotics*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1963, p. 2.

²¹ BOULNOIS, L.: op. cit., p. 26.

their effect was not quite satisfying; allegedly only the impact of Chinese mathematics on Hindu mathematics is unmistakable. Astronomical knowledge of Indians were held in high repute in Tang China.²²

4

Another important cultural continuum, this time connected with the newly risen Arabian world in the 7th cent., and which had became the most deciding factor in the development of South and Western Europe, played only secondary role along the Silk Roads, and also in the relation to China. Some years after the death of Muhammad in 632, Arabs had conquered Persia (644), and more than one century later in 751, their and Chinese armies met at the Talas River. For the Arabs the victory was Pyrrhic, since it meant the end of armed Islamic expansion towards the East: what was worse, it signalized the beginning of the end of the classic Silk Roads. Silk remained for some time an important article of the international trade, but its exporters, at least from the 4th cent. onwards, were not always the Chinese: it began to be produced in Xinjiang, namely in Khotan (around the year 440),²³ later in Persia and in Byzantium. Persian silk products were of high quality and their designs were able to compete with Chinese ones. In the 6th and 7th cent. Chinese silk hardly transcended the western border of the oasean cities.

The trade along the Silk Roads did not come to a stand due to the Arabs. It was only with them as rulers over Persia, that the slow end of religious, and to a great extent, cultural tolerance began. Forced Islamization of the territories both in Persia and Central Asia destroyed fully or to a great extent the first world culture. When the Islamic rulers observed that the “tolerance toward the other religions presented a peril to their own position, they made a deduction from it carrying out a forced, violent Islamization the end of which led to the interruption of free trade between East and West”.²⁴

In philosophical and artistic domain the Arabs did not need the Indian or Chinese teachings or art as incompatible with their beliefs or visions. “The distinctive culture of the Muslim world, though it began in Syria, soon came to flourish most in the Eastern and Western extremities, Persia and Spain.”²⁵ It was the cultural unity of the Western (European) and Near Eastern (Asian) world. Arabs never

²² NEEDHAM, J.: *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1978, pp. 72–73. Cf. also SCHAFER, E.H.: op. cit., pp. 275–276.

²³ BOULNOIS, L.: op. cit., pp. 138–139.

²⁴ UHLIG, H.: *Die Seidenstraße. Antike Weltkultur zwischen China und Rom*. Bergisch Gladbach, Gustav Lübbe Verlag GmbH 1986, p. 258.

²⁵ RUSSELL, B.: *History of Western Philosophy*. London, George Allen & Unwin LTD 1946, p. 443.

showed interest in the old Chinese or Indian culture or philosophy, and therefore could not become the mediators like they were in the case of old Greek philosophy and the European Middle Ages. They were interested in Chinese and Indian scientific contributions: in mathematics, astronomy and medicine.²⁶ Western science and philosophy developed without the benefit of Indian and Chinese research in these fields, with later exceptions including paper, printing, gunpowder and compass (just to mention the most important technological innovations all coming from China).²⁷ From these probably only the first one reached Europe through the Silk Roads.

The soil for the foreign response was much more better prepared during the first millennium A.D. in China than in all regions west of Pamir. Nearly one more millennium was needed for the heirs of Rome to appreciate the culture of Sera Metropolis (or the whole *Serindia*, i.e. South and East Asia)²⁸ and its progeny. During the second millennium A.D. great journeys especially by Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English marines led to the far reaching discoveries that had an impact on the much broader conceived and realized world culture of the 19th century, comprising more or less the whole world. The last one is still alive, the first one lies buried under the moving sand.

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Nearly 60 years ago during his research work at the Lop-nor Lake (allegedly wandering one), an elderly Sven Hedin pondered over the fortune, previous glory and contemporary misery of the classic Silk Roads. At that time the idea of a new Silk Road originated in his mind and caught up his imagination: "It is not a fantastic dream to affirm that the time need not be far off when an enthusiastic motorist can start from Shanghai in his own car, follow the Silk Road to Kashgar, drive all through Western Asia to Istanbul, and then travel via Budapest, Vienna and Berlin to Hamburg, Bremerhaven, Calais or Boulogne."²⁹

This vision remains unrealized and due to many reasons unrealizable to this day, and it certainly will not see the light of the day during our millennium. Hedin did not foresee that this imaginary road facilitating trade communications, cultural understanding, should in the times that followed the year 1934, find many adversaries who would not allow its construction, although its expenses would need less money and human power than the ancient Great Wall of China. He un-

²⁶ NEEDHAM, J.: *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China*, pp. 72-74.

²⁷ NEEDHAM, J.: *Science and China's Influence on the World*. In: *The Grand Titration. Science and Society in East and West*. London, George Allen & Unwin LTD 1969, pp. 55-122.

²⁸ Cf. UHLIG, H.: op. cit., p. 171.

²⁹ HEDIN, S.: op. cit., p. 232.

derestimated the gaps between the cultures, religious, political units and peoples that live on its axis. Now when the call for intercultural understanding and communication is stressed and heard all over the world, we should with sympathy appreciate the words of great researcher and explorer: "Everything that is calculated to bring different peoples together, to connect and unite them, should be greeted with sympathy at a time when suspicion and envy keep the nations asunder."³⁰

Suspicion, envy, hatred and war are still common affairs among different peoples and nations along a great deal of the future Silk Road and nobody can foresee their end. The vision of the new Silk Road seems rather remote today.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 234.