

“Not one, but four Silk Roads from China to Europe, and also to Mexico”

Han Suyin

Venice, where lions fly, and pigeons walk, Venice the miraculous city born of the wondrous sea, is the city which belongs to the world, as the world, at one time, WIX was hers to travel, to discover. It is the city that invented capitalism, discovered taxation on revenue and spectacles to correct shortsightedness. Venice was more, it was, and remains, the treasure house of man's memory. There are no barriers and no frontiers when one reaches these canals, and if the Chinese say that under Heaven there are no more beautiful cities than Suzhou and Hangzhou, this is because they too are born of water, their streets are canals. It is the marriage of sea and land, which has produced the wonder of Venice, and today we gather to speak of her share in that great artery of life, love, and trade, which was the SILK ROAD.

This year is the year in which China celebrates the 2,100 anniversary of the Silk Road. I say THE silk road, but must also say that there is more than one silk road, although the others are possibly younger, and also deserve our notice. But the major Silk Road, which like the arteries of a body linked the Orient to the Occident, linked China to ancient Roman Empire is the one we shall first try to describe.

Way back in history, in the annals of China, there is recording of that Roman Empire, and even before it of the fabulous man, Alexander of Macedon. There is the tale of the Roman phalanx, which lost its way, and ended up in what is China today, in a village still known as the village of Burning Torches, very near the Silk Road. I went to see the inhabitants, who are descended, it is said, from those Greeks who lost their way and found themselves here, and settled down.

There are other fabulous tales, including one about Jesus Christ, which one finds in Cashmere. Cashmere was one of the areas through which the Silk Road sent a branch, a branch, which went around the plateau of Tibet, and plunged into Northern India. It is said in this region that when he was a young boy of 15, Jesus Christ left for his travels and that he travelled the Silk Road.

The Nestorians and the Manicheans used it to flee from persecution, and they came to China, where Nestorian relics are still fairly abundant and have been described in records and books. Some centuries ago, the inhabitants of today's province of Sinkiang, in China, were known to be of the Manichean creed. Islam travelled the Silk Road to China as well, and so

did Buddhism, of course. And there is the story of Byzantium, where some of the bishops were Chinese.

It is then, fitting that in this era of tourism and travel, the SILK ROADS (all of them) should be commemorated, and those who travelled them in the past and left records of them. It is fitting too that in this grandiose city of Venice we should commemorate, through one of her great sons, Marco Polo, the adventures of the mind, the discoveries, and the exchange of culture, techniques, and philosophies, which the SILK ROAD brought about.

But first, I want to say something about two little known silk roads. I notice that the maritime Silk Road, from Venice to the Orient, will be fully covered both in travel and through researchers and experts. I shall therefore say a few words about two other Silk roads. One of them also dates back some two thousand years, but very little has been written about it. It originated in the heart of China, in the province of Sichuan, which produced silk and went on and goes on producing its heavy silk, which can never wrinkle. It went south, through Yunnan, the province called South Of The Clouds, and down to the gulf of Bengal. What was known during World War II as the Burma Road formed part of this southern silk road. It then crossed the sea, to land at the beautiful port of Mahabalipura in South India. Those of you who have been to India have probably seen the temples of the sea, temples out in ocean water, of Mahabalipura, and the extraordinary stone sculptures there. For centuries the silk saris of Southern India were made of Chinese silk, imported through Mahabalipura, and worked at Conjivaram (Kanchipuram). Even today Kanchipuram saris are well known all over India. It is from Kanchipuram that the ancestor of Zen Chan, the Boddhidharma, came. He was the third son of Palevi kings of South India, themselves of Persian origin. He set sail on the oceanic Silk Road, going to Sri Lanka, and then to Guangzhou, from whence he went to see the emperor of China. I have traced his itinerary in China, visited the cave in Honan province, near Shaolin monastery, where the Boddhidharma sat for ten years facing a rock, and received illumination. Then there is another road, and this road is also by sea. It originates in Quanzhou, called in western records Zaiton, which in Hebrew means olive.

This road from Quanzhou goes onto Manila in the Philippines. The silk was sent there, and in Manila, the Spaniards picked it up in their galleons, and brought it across the Pacific Ocean to Acapulco in Mexico.

The beautiful ornamental vestments of the Catholic bishops of Mexico were made from this Chinese silk.

Quanzhou, which I of course visited, has many fine relics of many cultures, and it is one of the cities that Marco Polo also knew well, for there is a record that he was sent there for a while, as an inspector, of trade.

Just as I traced the Boddhidharma, I went to the cities that Marco Polo went to. Born in 1254, of a family engaged in trading with Constantinople, Marco Polo, with his father and brother, went to see the great Kublai Khan, first emperor of the Yzuan dynasty of China, and grandson of Gengis Khan. The Polos were well received by the Khan, who sent them back to Europe to ask the Pope for a hundred missionaries to convert the people to the Christian faith. But when they reached Venice they learnt the Pope was dead and they waited two years for a new Pope to be elected. Then they felt they had to go back to tell the Khan their mission had failed, for the new Pope sent only two, not one hundred, and these two became afraid of the long journey and went back. But the Polos journeyed on and after three and a half years arrived in the middle of 1275 in Kampuli, today's Beijing. Young Marco had by then on the journey learnt the language of the Mongols, and he was thus employed as visiting administrator to distant provinces and cities of China.

Ibn-Battuta 1340?

It is of these cities, of his discovering, for instance, that cowrie shells were used for money, but also to make necklaces for dogs in distant Yunnan province, that Marco Polo, that prodigious and great scientist of travel, tells in his memoirs. And the grace and favor of the Khan continued for 17 years, during which Marco Polo served him well, reporting accurately on everything he saw. Now, after 17 years, the three Venetians wanted to return home, and since the Khan of Persia, today's Iran, sent to China for a wife, the three Venetians were entrusted with the care of the princess, and a splendid squadron of ships was fitted out, which took two years for the voyage to Iran. In 1295, twenty five years after they set forth on their journey, Marco Polo and his relatives were back in Venice. But alas, in Venice then, no one believed him, although he produced exquisite fabrics, and great stories, and also noodles, to become the pasta of Italy today in all its forms, large or small, thick or thin.

Marco Polo's genius was to see more fully than later, the civilizations of the East, and especially of China. Even today, in Venice, in Italy, we find in the textiles, the embroidery, and a sustaining origin in Asian patterns. And the Italian people remain today a people open to all the winds of the seas, able to adapt, to accept to create newness out of what is old, as Venice, is forever a resurrection of the marriage between sea and land.

