

Silk Road Studies in Japan: its history and Present Situation

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Introduction

The Japanese, confined on their islands, have long aspired to see the interior of the nearest continent. Such aspiration was characterized by popular songs in the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa Eras which frequently contained references to places as the Gobi, the Himalayas, or the Arabian Desert.

In the 40 years after the last world war, the term Silk Road has become widely known to the Japanese people. Especially from the 1960s on, approximately 100,000 Japanese, not only oriental historians, but also cultural anthropologists, writers, painters, photographers, and many members of the general public visited Silk Road sites. A prominent, widely viewed TV series, "Silk Road", produced by NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai), popularized the Silk Road among the Japanese people, encouraging the publication of many books and the organization of many tours to Silk Road areas by travel agents.

The flood of Silk Road references has received a lot of response, both favorable and unfavorable. There are some people who regret that the term has been abused by indiscriminate use, and a tendency to reconsider its use has dominated the academic world.

1. Trends of Silk Road Study in Japan

In Japan study on the Silk Road started with a study on Frontier history in the Asian history realm. This study, completed by the great scholars Kurakichi Shiratori, Jitsuzou Kuwahara, Toyohachi Fujita, Toru Haneda, and Mikinosuke Ishida is still admired as a brilliant feat in this field (1). While early study mainly consisted of historical investigation of place names and local races, Toru Haneda started study of Western areas, cultural history and already tried to elucidate Turki culture through Uigur documents. Mikinosuke Ishida evolved a remarkable theory of the history of cultural exchange between Silk Road areas of the East and the West. Interest in this topic was not high until publication of Historical Studies of Intercourse between East and West (1939, Shigakukai, Fuzanbou, 2 vols.). Also notable was the compiled edition of East-West cultural exchange history by Sueo Goto and Kenzou Akiyama (2), which has become known as a pioneering work. The Ancient Silk Road (A.

Herrmann, translated by Osamu Yasutake, 1944) used, for the first time, the term Silk Road in the title. *Die Seidenstrassen* published a book on an automobile expedition to the northwestern area of Sven Hedin entitled *Silk-road* (translated by Noriteru Hasuda, Takayama Shein) at the end of the same year.

After being interrupted for a period by the turmoil following World War II, Japanese researchers again visited the western area of the Silk Road; Hitoshi Kihara, Shinobu Iwamura, Mitsukuni Yoshida, Tadao Umesao, and Ichiro Hirano published books about their travels (3), thus increasing interest in this region. When it was decided to relay the Olympic Flame for the Tokyo Olympics from Greece to Tokyo via the Silk Road, an expedition team headed by Takeharu Aso and Eiichi Morinishi was dispatched to investigate the relay course. In these ways, the name Silk Road became well-known in Japan (4).

In terms of its place in Asian history, many books on the history of the Silk Road were successively published between 1950 and 1965 by Hisao Matsuda, Namio Egami, Shinobu Iwamura, Akira Haneda, Takashiro Kobayashi, Akira Fujieda, Toru Saguchi, Masao Mori, Nobuo Yamada, Sentaro Ise, Ryoichi Hayashi, and this author (5). The years between 1955 and 1965 can be called the age of enlightenment in reference to the Silk Road.

Between 1965 and 1975, overseas scientific investigations (especially those under the auspices of Kyoto University and the University of Tokyo), became increasingly frequent; also the strengthened Japanese economy in combination with simplified overseas travel allowed many researchers, writers, painters, photographers, and ordinary travellers to visit Western Asia and India. This age of a popularized Silk Road was ignited by the Silk Road expedition headed by the late Kyuya Fukada and this author in 1966 (6). In the 1970s, a lot of publishers actively published books concerned with the Silk Road. Observing the growing interests of the public in the Silk Road and estimating that any book with a title including "Silk Road" could sell, publishers indiscriminately issued such books. This phenomenon, similar to the publishing fever for books on Japanese ancient history, created many vulgar books which offended academic people.

Because of this experience, various experts from different academic fields started to be actively engaged in research on the Silk Road in 1970 to 1980. This marked the age of specialization. Special books written by Hisao Matsuda, Shinji Maejima, Kazuo Enoki, Masao Mori, Toru Saguchi, Nobuo Yamada, Akira Shimazaki, Osamu Suzuki, Takashi Okazaki, Takashi Soma, Hikoichi, Yajima, Tsuneo Yoshimizu, and this author were published (7). In

addition to special books on East-West cultural exchange, a marked recent trend lies in active investigation by anthropologists, painters, writers, and photographers such as Yasushi Inoue, Ikuo Hirayama, Banri Namikawa, Yoshikazu Shirakawa, and Kishin Shinoyama. The Silk Road has gradually become an important target in anthropology, literature, art, and natural science.

2. Criticism of the Silk Road Fever

Rigorous Silk Road fever, indicated by indiscriminate publication of a wide range of books, was heightened by the prominent NHK TV series "Silk Road". Parts 1 and 2 were respectively released in 1980 and 1983. However, some young researchers reacted adversely against the trend and presented harsh criticism against the fever initiated by the mass media. Eiji Mano, Toru Horikawa, and Sunao Hori led such criticism, saying that Central Asia should not be regarded merely as a transit point of the East-West route which was centered on the Silk Road. They argued that research on Silk Road areas should be approached by regions and races as they provide a focus to understand interaction and confrontation among cultures and peoples from East, West, South, and North and that Silk Road history should be researched from inside.

These criticisms by young researchers indicated the basic attitude toward study of Central Asian history, and presented candid opinions to other Silk Road researchers, who might be adversely affected by popular journalism.

However, an important point to keep in mind is that these criticisms are primarily concerned with a basic attitude to Central Asian history. The study of the Silk Road itself is not, as described by Sunao Hori, overdone, and it still is a very important field of study in approaching the history of East-West cultural exchange, which along with Central Asian history forms a major part of history.

It is natural that researchers of Central Asian history place regions and races at the center of their research, and claim that an internal approach to the construction of assumptions about history is important. However, researchers should not ignore the aspect of transportation among neighboring countries, especially those dealing with the Silk Road. An ignorance of this area can cause great misunderstanding and confusion in the research field. Recently Prof. Masao Mori developed a keen observation concerning this point (8).

Originally the East-West cultural exchange history covered not only Asian history but also Japanese and Western history, making its study interdisciplinary. Its field of research is extremely extensive, including chinoiserie and Japonism (9). The histories of East-West cultural exchange, Central Asia, North Asia, and South Asia require mutual cooperation by the researchers, and research on the Silk Road, a main area of East West cultural exchange history, will become a more important subject. Now that mutual understanding by people not only in the East and West cultures, but by people of the whole world is required, it is quite natural that the East-West cultural exchange history and its heart, historical study of the Silk Road, will increase in significance.

3. Prospect of Future Research

The term "Silk Road" originated from Seidenstrassen, as it was used, in 1877, by F.F. von Richthofen to designate a West Asian transportation route used by Silk traders between China Transoxiana and India between 114 B.C. and 127 A.D. Present progress in research on East-West cultural exchange history reveals the existence of a steppe route through North Asia and a marine route around South Asia in addition to the generally acknowledged oasis route via Central Asia (10). Due to recent specialization in historical science, North Asian history and Southeast Asian history are now regarded as separate fields. We sometimes tend to ignore from North Asia and Southeast Asia.

The researchers of East-West cultural exchange history should devote all efforts to systematize the historical research on the Silk Road.

Results of recent research show that the steppe route was more important in the ancient East-West cultural exchanges to be replaced in importance in recent times by the marine route. In this sense, the steppe route was the main transportation route in ancient times, the oasis route from the later part of ancient times to the middle ages, and the marine route in modern times. A main theme of research on the Silk Road in modern times might deal with developments seen as a result of the spreading powers of such countries as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, the U.K., and France (even perhaps Africa and the U.S.). Research on East-West cultural exchange history is not meant to deal with Central and West Asia alone, but it is to view the entire history of humans by conducting meticulous historical investigations. Therefore, Silk Road history should be systematized from the global point of view.

To this end, we should probe the subjects concerned with the history of East-West cultural exchange even to include a view to North and Southeast Asian histories. Recent research trends in Central Asian history naturally indicates an emphasis on primary historical documents, unearthed at local sites (11). While continuing to conduct research on already discovered primary historical documents, we should also make efforts to find new historical documents. Although many difficulties can be expected, we should cooperate with researchers in countries like China, Afganistan, Iran, and Syria and practice historical science with a behavioral science approach. Collaboration on Xin-jiang with Chinese scientist can probably be accomplished. Cities along the Silk Road have been remarkably modernized, and subjects of historical and cultural study are unlimited; they can range from ancient times to today.

Popularization and specialization will undoubtedly develop further in future Silk Road research. Popularization will make the study more familiar to the public and will help it spread. At the same time, nonacademic, vulgar theorizing may also spread. Researchers in the related fields should take the initiative to achieve high-level, historically accurate results and prevent tendencies toward vulgarity.