

Modern Silk Road— Historical Factors Influencing Present Opinions on BRI

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Abstract:

This essay provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical reason behind the cautious attitude of the former Silk Road regions toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It starts with a detailed summary of the existing modern literature on the current respective views of the BRI from developing regions along the ancient Silk Road— Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and India. It then proceeds to search ancient texts for historical factors influencing the present. Connections between investigations of historical factors and studies of the literature on current opinions are drawn during the analyses. This research eventually shows that historical factors played a role in shaping countries' cautious attitude toward the BRI. The results offer valuable insights from a historical perspective into many countries within vastly different regions and their people encompassed by the Belt and Road (B&R), thus shedding light on future policy-making related to the BRI and fostering mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperations between developing countries.

Keywords: Silk Road. Belt and Road Initiative. Ancient customs and traits. Pre-modern diplomacy and foreign relationship. Ancient China.

1. Introduction

The Ancient Silk Road, started in the Western Han Dynasty, encompassed both land and ocean. The Land Silk Road refers to the communication networks between ancient China and Central Asia, Western Asia, and Mediterranean states; the Maritime Silk Road connects ancient China to Southeast Asia, India, and Arabia through voyages. It remained at its pinnacle until the Ming Dynasty and eventually perished in the Qing Dynasty.

Fast forward to the present time, Chinese President Xi Jinping in September and October 2013 proposed developing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (B&R), more widely known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to foreigners. Reviving the communication networks between China and the previous Silk Road regions, Central Asia (via the Silk Road Economic Belt) and Southeast Asia and India (via the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road), the BRI is aimed by the Chinese to become the upgraded modern version of the once flourishing ancient Silk Road.

Foreign opinions this time around, however, deviated from Chinese expectations, especially the views from developing countries located along and participated in the ancient Silk Road: caution rather than full support became

their common attitude toward the BRI and the Chinese nation behind it. These reactions seem counterintuitive since the Silk Road was said by history textbooks to be all beneficial for its participants, notably less-developed ones. However, as shown later in this paper, certain historical factors that were overlooked by the mainstream rather contributed to the superficially inexplicable attitude of previous Silk Road regions. The historical factors include different regions' ancient people's customs and traits (Indians, Scythians, and Xiongnu), long-standing historical diplomatic and relationship norms (the Chinese with the Xiongnu, foreigners in China, and Southeast Asia respectively), and an influential and representative incident in ancient China (Huang Chao Uprising).

This paper mainly employs qualitative research. The methods applied to examine the primary and secondary sources found are twofold: articles addressing former Silk Road countries' current thoughts on the BRI are first summarized according to the developing regions (Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and India) and then critically analyzed, and historical texts are sent to thematic discussions (characteristics and norms) and case studies (Huang Chao Uprising) are applied.

2. Current Opinions of Former Silk Road Regions on BRI

2.1 Central Asia

Central Asia is the first stop west of China on both the ancient Land Silk Road and the modern Silk Road Economic Belt. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are known as the Central Asian states, making up a crucial part of the B&R^[1]. The region has had a long and intricate history of dealing with China—Dynasties in the past and the People's Republic in the present.

The five Central Asian countries all show some extent of caution toward working with China on the BRI currently, and every society of each nation exhibits distrustful perceptions of Chinese presence and influence in the region to some degree^[2]. Retaining autonomy and sovereignty turns out to be Central Asia's primary concerns. In particular, Central Asians are especially aware of the potential Chinese erosion of their own cultural identity.

2.2 Southeast Asia

Like Central Asia, Southeast Asia is the first stop south of China on both the Maritime Silk Road and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. The scope of research goes from individual countries (Vietnam and Malaysia) to major actors in the region (ASEAN) and then to the whole Asia-Pacific area.

Vietnamese are rich in experience in tackling China, their usually powerful neighbor. Political, economic, and security initiatives proposed by the Chinese, including the BRI, always raise the alertness of Vietnam's governors, and the Vietnamese perceive China as a source of instability in the political and security realms^[3]. Thus, Vietnam holds a vigilant feeling on not only the BRI but also the Chinese nation behind it.

Malaysia serves as a transition point from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean on both the ancient and modern Silk Road. Its attitude toward the BRI can be seen in its evaluations of one representative BRI infrastructure—the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL). Malaysians hold that the ECRL currently remains not contributory to either Malaysia's overall economic development or the uplift of the local population's living standards^[4]. All point to acute prudence in the Malaysian reaction to the BRI and its proposals.

As the term suggests, ASEAN consists of ten influential states in Southeast Asia, including previously analyzed Vietnam and Malaysia. It is believed that the BRI cannot create win-win situations with ASEAN and other participants^[5]. To the worst end, ASEAN countries view the BRI as a mere tool for the Chinese to pursue its national

interests by setting up unfair economic relationships and even implementing some sort of colonialism^[6]. It is thus explicit that the ten ASEAN member states are extremely worried about their sovereignty being diminished by the BRI.

Enlarging the scale to the whole Asia-Pacific area, opinions on the BRI remain far from full embrace. In addition to Vietnam and Malaysia, in Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines, the cautious attitude of the leadership exerts a significant amount of impact on society's feelings: from optimism to pragmatism with wariness^[7]. All Southeast Asian countries are inferior to China in size, so sovereignty issues are their primary concerns when considering the Chinese BRI.

2.3 India

In ancient times, India was reachable by the Chinese through both the Land and Maritime Silk Road; in modern days, it remains an important hub on the B&R. The Indians are primarily anxious about the Chinese violation of their sovereignty in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the strategic purposes involved in Maritime Silk Road constructions^[8]. The increasingly cautious attitude of India in response to the BRI can be observed in its researchers' focus: from developmental studies to political economy evaluations^[9]. With the ever-growing instability in regional and global political dynamics, India's conservatism is prevalent in many issues, including the BRI, to prioritize self-reliance and regional stability.

2.4 Summarization and Critique

To sum up, all three developing regions recognize the potentially huge benefits of the BRI, but various other aspects hold them back from full embrace. Some of the main concerns are the erosion of their cultural identity, political and security instability, real intentions to pursue national interests, loss of sovereignty, unfair treatment, and over-reliance on external forces.

Virtually all of the existing literature in this field of study, including the above articles, meets two characteristics: focusing on individual countries or organizations in each analysis rather than covering different geographical spaces and taking solely contemporary (within two centuries from now) standpoints when discussing the BRI without considering historical factors from its predecessor the ancient Silk Road. Therefore, current investigations primarily lack holistic and historical approaches to fathom the distrustful thought from developing areas included in the Silk Road toward the BRI.

3. Ancient People's Customs and Traits

3.1 Indians

Indians were subject to various social customs. Compared to the Chinese, who enjoyed numerous forms of entertainment, the Indians felt embarrassed to participate in it; all kinds of heady drinks were considered inappropriate, and people required the king of their state to prepare for their neighbors' invasions rather than getting drunk^[10]. In India, thieves were punished to death in a standardized and cruel manner regardless of the value or quantity of the stolen goods^[11]. Indians did not shave their beards or cut their mustaches: they did so when they lost relatives or close friends^[12].

Several traits of the Indians can be concluded from above: a robust sense of propriety and discipline, severe penalties in case of misbehavior, and rigorous social usage. These characteristics incline an attitude that is cautious regarding foreign initiatives like the BRI—Indians tend to value stability and self-sufficiency over foreign influences and collaborations, which correlates to the present worries about instability and external impact.

3.2 Scythians

Scythians who were representative of ancient nomads expelled all foreign customs, especially Greek ones; for example, a member of the royal family named Anacharsis was fascinated by Greek rituals during his travels around the world, and he ended up being killed by one of his close relatives when he was found practicing them^[13].

This Scythian trait shapes contemporary views along the Silk Road. Countries view the BRI with caution, fearing the dilution of cultures, much as in the past when foreign powers exerted influence under economic or cultural exchange. It explains why the prospects for BRI remain cautious among nations from this region.

3.3 Xiongnu

To not only ancient but also modern ordinary Chinese people, Xiongnu is synonymous with Central Asian nomads. According to Chinese knowledge, the Xiongnu did not have stationary dwelling places, and they constantly moved around to feed their animals; they practiced hunting, horseback riding, and fighting on horseback from a very young age, and they always prepared well for conflicts and wars^[14].

These customs epitomize the nomadic and highly mobile nature of the Xiongnu: constantly on the move in search of resources, rather than settling in fixed locations. Such mobility and autonomy doubtless have conditioned an aversion to external controls or influences that are present in the BRI. Additionally, such martial culture in the Xiongnu—inculcated since childhood—emphasizes

readiness for war and self-defense. This may result in modern republics in this region adopting a wary attitude toward initiatives like BRI that they perceive as infringing on their independence.

4. Long-Standing Historical Diplomatic and Relationship Norms

4.1 Chinese with the Xiongnu

The deep-rooted idea of autonomy and independence within the Xiongnu, as seen above, is reflected in the formation of diplomatic norms between the Han Dynasty and themselves. The Xiongnu set a rule that an envoy could only grant access to the Chanyu's tent if he discarded the manners of his state and had tattoos on his face, and no exceptions were made for the Chinese^[15].

The hard-line conditions in their diplomacy, like making envoys habituate themselves with them, testify to the cautious attitude toward foreign contacts that the Xiongnu had and the need to ensure that their terms and cultural integrity were upheld. These concerns descend well down to modern times, especially worries from the same places toward the BRI.

After gaining an advantage over the Xiongnu by force, the Han Dynasty constructed resting sites and military colonies in the Western regions and deployed troops to protect Han territories; plus, scared nomadic states sent representatives to China with presents showing submission to the Han Dynasty, and the Han responded by setting up agencies there^[16].

These norms of the Han-Xiongnu relationship highlight the long-standing Chinese policies of political and military control over the Silk Road regions, which could influence current perceptions and caution toward modern initiatives like the BRI. Countries in the same region can get anxious about losing their sovereignty once again to China at present time.

4.2 Chinese with Foreigners in China

Different from clichés in history textbooks holding that people coming to China always receive warm accommodation since ancient times, foreign merchants could be victims of injustices: Arabs faced undeserved penalties and their property forcefully confiscated^[17].

These unpleasant experiences of foreigners in China illustrate how the unfair treatment of foreign merchants in ancient China has long-lasting impacts, harming the global image of China until now. As shown in previous sections, many countries remain skeptical of Chinese BRI partly because of the possibility of being unjustifiably hosted, which has its historical origin in Silk Road communication.

4.3 Chinese with Southeast Asia

Apart from the well-known history of Chinese domination (either via direct control or cultural influence) of Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, the currently heavily valued Malacca Strait is often overlooked in historical analyses of the China—Southeast Asia relationship. The importance of the Malacca Strait in the present time can be seen in its colossal influence on China's energy security, regional economic stability, and global geopolitical strategy^[18].

Throughout the history of sea-based commerce, Southeast Asians were accustomed to the Malacca Strait being occupied to serve imperial expeditions, among them was the management of this chokepoint in the fifteenth century by the Ming Dynasty^[19]. Historically, control of the Straits has passed between powers including the Chinese, thus leaving behind a legacy of outside control and competition over these vital maritime routes. Such background of foreign control builds skepticism among the nations lining the ancient Sea Road towards China's contemporary initiatives—the BRI—in particular—lest history repeats itself with major powers having control over their strategic assets.

5. An Influential and Representative Incident in Ancient China—Huang Chao Uprising

In fact, the ancient Silk Road did not always flourish and was subject to instability in relevant regions, especially China. When Chinese dynasties fell into turmoil, foreign communication was hampered or even went perished in some cases. One of the most influential and representative instances is the Huang Chao Uprising which gave the Tang Dynasty a heavy blow and led to its eventual demise.

During the uprising, the rebellion army conquered one important city after another from Tang control, including Khānfū, where many Arabs coming to China on voyages arrived; after a long and vicious fight, Huang Chao occupied Khānfū and went on to exterminate its Chinese and overseas residents, killing approximately 120,000 foreigners, notoriously known as the Khānfū massacre; additionally, he cut down all the mulberry trees that nourish silkworms in the city, completely disabling silk trade with Arabia^[20].

Huang Chao Uprising indicates how historical examples of internal chaos in China have had long-lasting effects on governance and international relations. Although the modern People's Republic of China is undoubtedly highly stable, many other B&R countries are subject to severe internal disputes, some of which result in extremely vulnerable governments. Instability within those nations can

exert significant negative effects on BRI communication, just as Huang Chao once did. This historical context contributes to the current cautious attitude toward the Belt and Road Initiative, reflecting concerns over political and security instability already discussed in previous passages.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the paper, connections between the present opinions on the BRI and Silk Road history are drawn. A thorough and critical review of the literature suggests caution as the theme of contemporary views of developing former Silk Road regions— Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and India— on the BRI. Subsequent presentation and interpretation of Indian, Scythian, and Xiongnu's various customs and traits discover their modern influence. Long-standing diplomatic and relationship norms of the Chinese with Xiongnu, foreigners in China, and Southeast Asia greatly contribute to present wariness in all three regions. Finally, the Huang Chao Uprising serves as an influential and representative example of the effects monumental historical incidents have on trans-regional connections. In short, historical factors play a recognizable role in shaping the current cautious attitude from developing previous Silk Road regions toward the BRI.

This research has mainly two undermining factors. Firstly, present public attitudes and government policies are influenced by many other factors than historical ones, and sometimes historical reasons are not among the main reasons that affect modern opinions. In fact, all this research does is contribute analysis from a previously lacking historical perspective to the grand discussion of BRI reactions, even though the contribution may be relatively small. Secondly, regretfully are field studies not conducted in this research to directly prove the connections between historical findings mentioned above and the present. More work encompassing on-site investigations needs to be done to further develop this paper's arguments.

The wary thoughts from developing regions along the ancient Silk Road toward BRI first seem unfathomable through the lens of mainstreaming history textbooks. However, by conducting careful studies of both current and historical materials, precious knowledge of the people's characteristics, norms, and vital incidents in these regions can be obtained. This massively contributes to future BRI policy-making and overall cooperation between developing countries.

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Bwoah (or Mwoah).

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