



MY SAY: Reconstructing the Silk Road

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Since time immemorial, Asia has been standing at a global crossroads, if we take the Silk Road as an example. Originating in Central Asia, the almost 7,000km route ran through major trade hubs to Europe and Africa. It extended from the city of Xi'an (formerly Chang'an, the capital of ancient China) in the northwest Shaanxi province to Europe via South and Central Asia. While the Silk Road generally referred to a land route, it also included the seas that were crossed for the exchange of materials, information and knowledge.

The intensity of the exchanges can be gauged from the works of several Renaissance painters, in particular Hans Holbein the Younger, who painted *The Ambassador* in 1533. Detailed analyses of this piece provide ample evidence of not only how the East and West were intricately interconnected, but also — and more importantly — how the East impacted the West. Among the more obvious clues are the various knowledge-related items and equipment that appear in the painting. These are said to have been from the East, not least from the Islamic civilisation that was at its peak at the time and dominated the trade route. Also, the ambassador and his companion in the painting wear Eastern clothing.

This is not surprising as such goods were plentiful along almost the whole of the Silk Road, attracting the interest of travellers and traders who plied the route from various parts of the world. The interactions were rich, leading to several cultural and technological exchanges.

Interestingly enough, the busy trade route was named the Silk Road or *Sichou zhi lu* by a German scholar in the late 19th century. In other words, Asia was recognised as part of the global crossroads by the Europeans.

However, the Silk Road fell into a decline after the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). By then, Western Europe was already experiencing the Renaissance and over the next few centuries, it became a dominant global force. There was then a reversal in the exchange of cultural and technological ideas between Asia and the West and the Silk Road was neglected.

Gradually, Asia became a "consumer" of all things Western, from ideas to products to education.

In a different sense, Asia is indeed at a crossroads. This is especially so for many of its institutions that represent the continent when interacting with their counterparts and the world at large. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Asia because the West has its own interpretation of things that is based on limited experience and is to its advantage.

Asia has been conveniently reduced to a monolithic entity called "Chindia", to be exploited as a place of cheap labour for the manufacture of Western goods. At the same time, Western ideas and concepts have been, and are being, promoted as "international". Sadly, Asia has uncritically absorbed much of them and turned into a market of heavily demanded Western produce, in contrast to the days of the Silk Road.

Overall, Asia has adopted an "international", or Western, approach to almost all aspects of its life, forcing it to behave like a square peg in a round hole. Much of its unique features have been voluntarily marginalised as things of little significance. Some are even ashamed of being associated with anything Asian.

Take the issue of poverty, a prevalent and worrying problem in many parts of the region. Yet not many Asian institutions, including universities, are working to solve this problem as set out in the Millennium Development Goals. The same goes for sustainable development as promoted by the UN when it declared 2005 to 2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Although many Asian countries face population explosion, economic disparities and varying political ideologies, few of them are seriously weighing sustainable development.

Asian institutions are trapped in the one-size-fits-all design of the West, underscored by a "Western identity", norms and values. In fact, multiculturalism is deemed a failure by many European leaders and more recently endorsed by the Council of Europe.

Unless the Silk Road comes back to life, Asia's position will not change in the near future. This is where the region's institutions can play the role of game-changer, given the global economic and financial crises over the last decade. Changes unimaginable a few years ago can be effected by balancing the prevailing socioeconomic bias.

According to Ben Simpfendorfer, chief economist for China at the Royal Bank of Scotland in Hong Kong and author of *The New Silk Road* (2009), this is now a probability with some difference. This time, the connection is to another part of Asia — West Asia or the Middle East — rather than the West. Headlines like "China on track in Mid-East but US losing its way, envoy says" (*South China Morning Post*, March 11) with respect to regional unrest in West Asia are no longer a mere coincidence.

All these seem to suggest that Asia is both physically and mentally reconstructing the Silk Road. However, it is only possible for Asia to be influential at the global crossroads again — despite its dynamic growth — if the New Silk Road is able to change the captive mindset of Asians since the colonial days. This is a challenge for all Asian institutions, particularly when we reflect on the US and UK-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

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