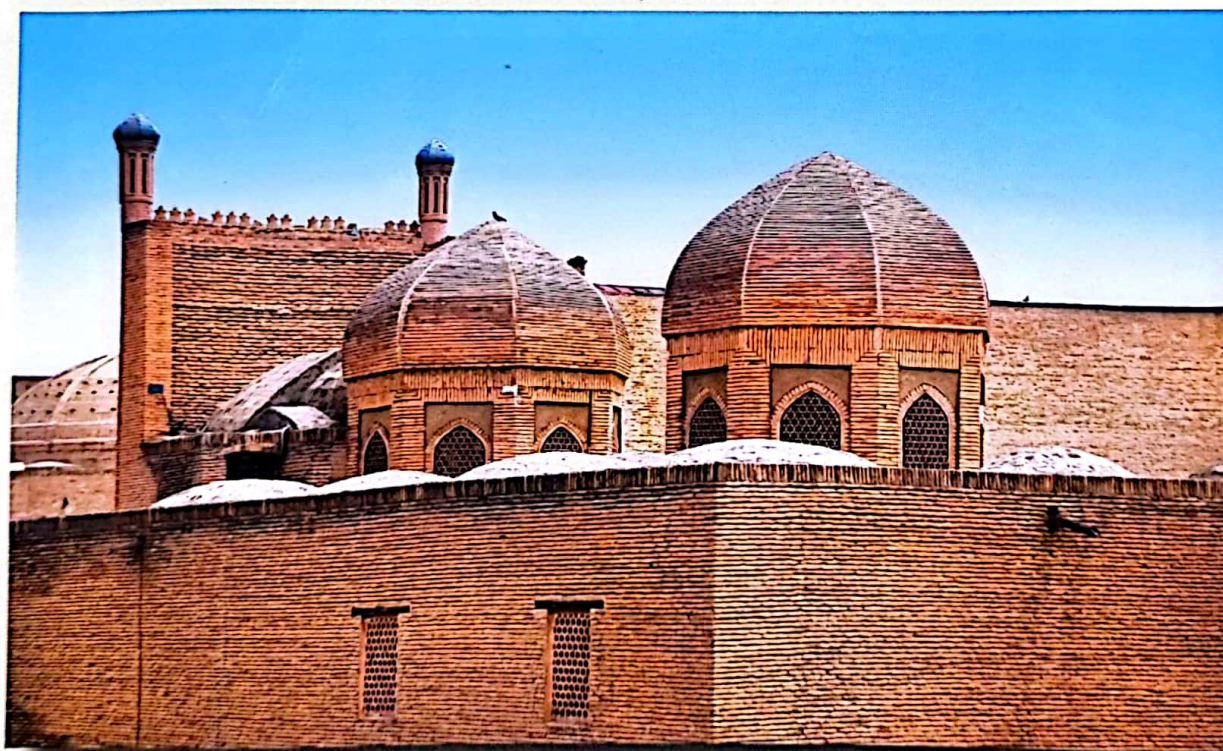




Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan

From Petroglyphs to the Present Days

edited by
Jerzy Montusiewicz
Bakhodir Eshchanov



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Lublin 2022

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Monografie – Politechnika Lubelska



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HISTORY AND ECONOMICS OF THE GREAT SILK ROAD

One of the greatest and most significant achievements of civilisation is the Great Silk Road. It can rightly be assigned the role of the main trade artery of Eurasia of its time. This is the first transcontinental route in the history of mankind, connecting countries and peoples from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean. For many centuries, goods, ideas, technologies and crafts were exchanged along it. Travellers were not put off by the difficulties encountered on this long and hard way [1, p. 5].

During its existence for several centuries, the Great Silk Road showed itself to be an important factor in the economic, political and cultural progress of the regions it crossed.

Based on the analysis of various sources, it can be concluded that the Great Silk Road is a single transcontinental system of caravan trade routes connecting countries within Western Europe and China. It arose in the 2nd century BC [2] (according to other sources from the 3rd century BC [3]), and functioned until the 15th century.

The term 'silk road' was proposed in 1877 by the German geographer F. Richthofen to designate the links between the Eastern and Western part of Eurasia [4, p. 31]. At the same time, the Great Silk Road was not a single highway, but was divided into several sections: the Lapis Lazuli Road, which connected Central Asia and the Middle East with the Mediterranean and India, the Jade Road from East Turkestan to China and the Steppe Road, stretching from the Black Sea to the banks of the Don, and from there to the Sarmatians of the Southern Urals and further to the Irtysh region and to Lake Zaisan. But in the 2nd century, these paths began to merge into two main routes, connecting East and West [5, p. 42]:

1. The southern route – from the north of China through Central Asia to the Middle East and Northern India;

2. The Northern Route – from the north of China through the Pamirs and the Aral Sea region to the Lower Volga and to the Black Sea basin.

Minor paths ran between these two routes connecting them to each other. The main routes of the caravans shifted to the northern route, then to the southern one. The presence of centralised power extending to the surrounding areas was able to ensure security on the caravan routes. And this was possible only in the conditions of the existence of large state formations, which turned out to be China, Central Asia, India, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

For the Great Silk Road to work successfully, a developed system of international division of labour in production and in providing the infrastructure of transport communications was needed. And since trade required overcoming huge distances, it was necessary to transit points, specialised bazaars, a regime of stable cash settlements, etc. Many cities on the way of the Great Silk Road were not equally developed and had different sizes and significance.

A large number of various goods were transported along the Great Silk Road: silk, jewelry, military equipment, leather, wool, carpets, etc. But the most famous commodity that passed along this intercontinental route was silk.

The birthplace of sericulture was China. It had a monopoly on its production until the 5th–6th centuries, but after that it continued to remain one of the largest centres of production. In particular, silk has been produced since ancient times on the territory of Uzbekistan. Officials, scientists, travellers, merchants, industrialists arriving in Central Asia saw there a large number of artisanal workshops for the cultivation of silkworm and manufacturing silk fabrics. In the Middle Ages, porcelain and tea were also exported from China. In the countries of the Middle East and Central Asia, woolen and cotton fabrics were made, sent along the Silk Road to the east, to China. Spices for preserving products and making medicines were brought to Europe from the countries of South and Southeast Asia.

When carrying out trade transactions, Europeans bought expensive oriental goods and paid in gold or silver. That is, there was a passive trade balance between Western Europe and the East. Thus, along the Silk Road, precious metals were «pumped» from Europe to the East. This had a negative impact on the economy and the monetary system. Despite attempts to restrict the purchase of Eastern goods and the export of gold and silver, the «pumping» of precious goods from West to East continued. The competitiveness of European goods was able to more or less catch up with the Eastern only after the Industrial Revolution.

The Silk Road facilitated the transfer not only of goods, but also information about the technology of their production. A striking example of this is the borrowing of silk production technology, first in east Turkestan, and then in Central Asia, Iran and Byzantium. The same can be said about the secret of paper production. In China, in turn, thanks to the Great Silk Road, such crops as beans penetrated. Thus, in the course of caravan trade, the West borrowed industrial innovations, and the East – agricultural

ones, which indicates the technological superiority of the mediaeval East over Europe, partially preserved until the 18th–19th centuries. But some technological secrets of production, such as the production of porcelain dishes and weapons, could not be adopted by Europeans at that time.

By the end of the 15th century, the Great Silk Road ceased to exist. The reason for this was the opening by Europeans of the sea route to India and China.

Despite the many benefits of transporting goods by sea, there are now plans to restore the Great Silk Road. From the fact that India and China have significantly increased their production in recent years, the transportation of goods only by sea is increasingly difficult due to several reasons:

1. congestion of ports, as a result of which the waiting time for loading and unloading of goods has increased;
2. the capacity limits of the Suez Canal;
3. a long road from China or India to Europe (for example, through the Suez Canal cargo reaches the West in 45 days, and through the Trans-Siberian Railway – in just 14 days [6, p. 2]).

Several projects have already been discussed in connection with the possibility of restoring the Great Silk Road. The most well-known of them now is China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is being actively promoted by China and in which the countries of Central Asia have an important role to play.

In conclusion, it should be said that the Great Silk Road had an important economic and political function in the life of the peoples of Asia and Europe. At the same time, the Great Silk Road as an economic phenomenon can be classified as formation of a network. In a soft form it united many enterprises, people, organisations and power structures that ensured its smooth functioning. If you look at it as a phenomenon of network economy, it «was not something like a narrow path, it was a huge economic and cultural space with a width of a thousand, or even fifteen hundred kilometers» [7, p. 315]. Along the way, not only trade deals were carried out, but also «diplomatic treaties and military alliances were concluded» [8]. That is why the Great Silk Road played a crucial role in the economic and political life of the peoples of Eurasia, acting as a link between the countries of different civilisations and socio-economic systems and a kind of bridge between East and West. The desire to revive the Great Silk Road testifies to the indispensability of such interaction between peoples for the purpose of mutual enrichment.

The Great Silk Road stimulated the development of trading cities in the mediaeval East. There is a trade specialisation of cities, trade differentiation, the emergence of villages specialising in the production of export goods [9, p. 31]. If in Western Europe cities served mainly local markets, then in Asia they supported international trade, playing the role of transit points on caravan routes. These cities (Tabriz, Hormuz, Bukhara, Samarkand, Khorezm, Otrar, Kashgar, Turfan, Khotan, Dunhuang, etc.) had caravanserais that combined the functions of hotels and warehouses. Special markets

were organised for foreign merchants to trade in the most popular goods. People of many professions worked in the service of trade caravans – translators, money changers, camel drivers, caravan guards, tax collectors, etc. [10, pp. 5–8]. The reliance of the trading cities of continental Asia on the service of long distance caravan trade led to the fact that the destruction of the Silk Road caused the decline of these cities. Some of them have completely disappeared (for example, many cities of East Turkestan).

The Republic of Uzbekistan, together with the world community, actively participates in the development of tourism, scientific and cultural exchange on the Great Silk Road, contributes to the practical restoration of the Silk Road, paying special attention to the implementation of projects for the construction and reconstruction of transport communications. Further work on the revival of the Great Silk Road is all the more relevant, because the most important task of the development of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the present stage is «deepening the dialogue between countries and peoples at various levels, giving a systematic character to contacts not only between governments but also parliaments, figures, science and culture, representatives of the public.» [11, pp. 110–113].

Central Asia and Uzbekistan, in particular, were the «heart» of the Great Silk Road. The constant increase in the importance of Central Asia as a link in the relations between China, the states of East Asia, Russia and Europe requires a new understanding of the history of relations between the states of the Great Silk Road.

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