Nomination of the Silk Road to the World Heritage List

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**Abstract**

Cultural Routes have rapidly become one of the focuses in international cultural heritage protection. The aim of this paper is to give new insights about the Silk Road as a cultural route and its role in the evolution of human civilisation.

The Silk Road is the longest Cultural Route with the largest impact in the world. It initially started from the Han Dynasty Chang’an City in the east, an ancient capital of China and the current Xi’an in Shaanxi Province, and extended west to the Mediterranean.

The nomination of the Silk Road for inscription on the World Heritage List is on the 2014 agenda of the World Heritage Committee. The nomination has drawn strong interest and participation internationally and among the nominating State Parties. The project for the nomination of the Silk Roads network in China and five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) was the first to start.

ICOMOS has made recommendations on the definition and contents of the Silk Road for a transnational World Heritage nomination for the Silk Road. This World Heritage project, an unprecedented man-made miracle, should be conceived as 54 corridors under a framework for the entire Silk Road.

Two combinations of corridors have been recommended as a top priority for the initial nomination. The first is the Silk Roads: Initial Section of the Silk Roads, the Routes Network of Tian-Shan Corridors jointly submitted by Kyrgyzstan, China, and Kazakhstan. The second is the Silk Roads: Penjikent-Samarkand-Poykent Corridor jointly submitted by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

With the support from the international peers, the State Parties have summarised some key attributes for the Silk Roads in Kyrgyzstan, China, and Kazakhstan. Such attributes should adequately support this section of Silk Roads to be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

**Background**

Since the ‘Expert Meeting on Cultural Routes Heritage’ was held in Madrid in 1994, Cultural Routes have rapidly become one of the focuses in international cultural heritage protection. Cultural Routes are characterised as representing ‘the Roads of Dialogue’ (UNESCO 1988-1997) connecting numerous heritage places geographically widely distributed, but with close temporal, historic and cultural ties. The value of Cultural Routes as a whole is far more than the aggregate value of each component, and they immensely enrich and extend concepts of heritage value.
In 2005, the draft Cultural Routes Charter was adopted in the 15th ICOMOS General Assembly held in Xi’an. The final Cultural Routes Charter was formally adopted at the 16th ICOMOS General Assembly held in Quebec, Canada in 2008, which established the important role of Cultural Routes as a new type of cultural heritage (ICOMOS International 2008).

The Silk Road is the longest Cultural Route and arguably represents the greatest historic and cultural impact of any Cultural Route nominated to the World Heritage List so far. It begins in the east at the Han Dynasty City, Chang’an an ancient capital of China and now known as Xi’an in Shaanxi Province, and extends west to the Mediterranean area.

Research results show that the historic route of what is commonly known as the desert Silk Road, is from China to Samarkand, which then turns south to Afghanistan, and from Afghanistan passes through Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia all the way to the Mediterranean countries of Syria and Turkey.

There are two ancient Chinese names for Mecca, the holy place for Islamic pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. ‘Tian’fang’, in Chinese means ‘holy land’ while the second is only a simple phonetic translation of the word Mecca. During the Yuan Dynasty of China (1271-1368 AD), the period of the Mongol conquests, the Silk Road was travelled all the way to the Mediterranean and was at its most prosperous. Islam spread rapidly in China and Central Asia during this time and the Silk Road came to be used extensively as a road of pilgrimage to Mecca.

The dawning of the ‘Age of Discovery’ marked by the maritime voyage of Vasco Da Gama from Eastern Africa to Calicut (Kozhikode) on the western coast of India, resulted in the decline of the Silk Road and the 16th Century witnessed its last glory. Figure 1 shows the extent and diversity of the Silk Roads, the Oasis and Steppe Roads and also the Sea Road linking East and West.

**Nomination for World Heritage**

The Silk Road which facilitated cultural exchange and dialogue between the East and West has a scale, function and historical importance which is unparalleled. There are copious reports, travel records, photos and research about the splendor and magnificence of the Silk Road to demonstrate this significance. Currently the nomination of the Silk Road for inscription on the World Heritage List is on the World Heritage Committee’s agenda.

![Figure 1: General map of the Silk Roads. (Source: Guo Zhan)](image-url)
The aim of this paper is to give new insights about the Silk Road seen from the perspective of a cultural route, and its role in the evolution of human civilisation. This can be achieved by cataloguing and summarising its individual components to determine its significance and values.

In general, our past understanding about the values of the Silk Road as World Heritage can be listed as follows:

The Silk Road predates the Han Dynasty in China, although 138 BC when the Han Dynasty dispatched Zhang Qian to the western region has been officially determined as the starting point in time for the nomination of ‘the Silk Road’.

Successive Chinese Empires linked up existing routes through diplomatic and administrative measures, and put in place a stable and relatively secure transportation system that supported the gradual development of the great routes of trade, dialogue and exchange that connected the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa.

The pioneering journey to the west of the envoys of the Chinese empire was the catalyst for this process and can be seen as a milestone in the history of the Silk Roads.

In the nineteenth century this vast network of trading routes which facilitated cultural exchange and dialogue between the East and West was named by Richthofen, a German geographer and traveller, as the Silk Road in 1877 (http://www.ancient.eu.com/Silk_Road/) and this name has been widely accepted by the world as the generic term for the great diversity of Silk Roads and networks of routes which wind their ways across the lands and mountains of Eurasia.

Some international peers also consider that the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia, Western Asia and the Near East contributed to the development of many of the world’s great civilisations. The Silk Road comprises routes of integration, exchange and dialogue between East and West that have contributed greatly to the common prosperity of human civilizations over more than two millennia.

Despite being the official date of the beginning of the Silk Road for nomination purposes, the formation of the network of routes which comprises the Silk Road was not a sudden creation by the Chinese empire in 138 BC, when the diplomatic envoys were sent to communicate with Central Asia and Persia, but a long process that had taken place in various regions and sections before that; what the Chinese empire did was rather to combine what had been there, and link up the already existing intermittent trade roads through diplomatic and administrative measures, and further, transform them into a stable transportation system using a series of administrative and military defense systems, thus gradually developing the network into a great route of trade, dialogue and exchange connecting the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa.

Because of the fundamental significance of this Chinese intervention in the history of the Silk Road the pioneering journey to the West of the envoys of the Chinese empire could be said to be the most outstanding milestone of the history of the Silk Road, having made a significant contribution to the history of human civilisation, and becoming a milestone and a geographic starting point of the Silk Road in today’s world heritage nomination. Ancient China made the most prominent contribution to the linking up of the whole Silk Road and to its long lasting prosperity. We nevertheless can’t say that the Silk Road belongs to China alone, or was created...
purely by China. As a route of dialogue between the East and West, which operated for over a millennium, the Silk Road belongs to all states along the route.

On the other hand, ‘silk’, a poetic and elegant product of China was later used to name this great route which reflects the principal supporting position and important role that China played in the development of the ancient Silk Road, and its historic position and role as one major centre of civilisation in the ancient world of the East.

In practice, the Silk Road(s) was a network of routes over the central and eastern part of the Asian continent, connecting long-distance trade and transportation from Chang’an to Tallas, a region in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan from the 2nd century BC to the 16th century AD. As a cultural heritage route, the Road is composed of a number of representative heritage sites in China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the relationship among these sites formed in the process of interchange over the eighteen centuries.

Since the Silk Road was a vital transportation line for thousands of years, with the passing of time the route of the Road itself has constantly changed. But the representative historical architecture and material remains along the route can be connected like dots to form a line, giving a full view of the Silk Road and its enormous influence.

Already there are numerous debates about the attributes, inception, category, characteristics and geographic dispersion of the Silk Road. A consensus has not yet been reached on many of these matters but internationally there is a clear understanding of the Silk Road in time and space, and its development and history and a general acceptance of its unparalleled features and values.

**The Nomination Process**

The nomination of the Silk Road has drawn strong interest and participation internationally and among the nominating State Parties. The project for the nomination of the Silk Roads network in China and five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) was the first to start. The World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS have coordinated the efforts for ‘upstream’ services under the World Heritage Committee. Other countries along the Silk Road are also actively involved.

ICOMOS, in its thematic study report (Williams 2011) put forward a definition of the Silk Road and its components during the development of the transnational nomination for World Heritage of the Silk Road sites. In addition to the standard definitions for cultural routes to demonstrate ‘a cross-fertilisation of the affected cultures in space and time, as reflected both in their tangible and intangible heritage’ (ICOMOS 2008) the report identified three components of the Silk Road’s heritage:

**Category 1:** Infrastructure facilitating trade and transportation (including caravanserais and inns; military posts, garrison stations and fortifications; bridges; irrigation systems; natural and cultural landmarks).

**Category 2:** Production of trading goods (including mining, metal working, manufacturing and handicrafts, and other industrial and production sites).
Category 3: Outcomes such as cities, art, knowledge as a result of contact and exchange (including trade cities, urban centres and settlements; religious, spiritual and ceremonial sites (such as shrines, caves, tombs and sites of pilgrimage); and places of associations with political events, transfer of ideas, language, music, dance, poetry, etc.) (Williams 2011: 29).

The nomination of the Silk Road is the largest World Heritage nomination project yet undertaken. The Silk Road is very long, so long that it took a major effort to coordinate the assessment of the heritage values of each section. The rich and complex natural settings and cultures along the road added another challenge to the assessment.

ICOMOS proposed that this World Heritage project, an unprecedented man-made miracle, be conceived as consisting of 54 corridors under the framework of the Silk Road nomination, taking into account the intrinsic factors, the environment and the context. The Silk Road will eventually be a serial transnational property composed of distinctive cultural corridors which each could demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value, and within each corridor a series of heritage sites, while the route itself will not constitute a site, but rather a framework. Based on that idea, China suggested adding more corridors or networks of routes to the nomination.

On the other hand, the concept of a cultural corridor or corridors cannot include and interpret all the experiences and associations of the Silk Road entirely, and it is undeniable that the whole road has a logical progression, distinctive environments, shared attributes and suitable criteria. The centuries old winding road might appear as a unitary form of corridor in some narrow valleys; but in many places it is a complicated system of numerous roads and routes in flatlands, basins or maritime routes across oceans; and includes a range of alternative mountain pass systems through high mountain ranges. Thus the Silk Road heritage consists of a series of interconnected components, road systems and corridors. Taking this into account, the States Parties should be encouraged to make a united nomination synthesising the various combinations, and also encourage the neighbouring States Parties to make transboundary nominations, to reach the final goal of a successful nomination of the great road of exchange between civilisations linking the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. These are the first transnational nominations within the whole overarching framework of Silk Roads, but they only extend from China to Central Asia. So, there are dozens of corridors yet to be nominated.

Initial nomination

Two corridors have been recommended as a top priority for the first phase of the nomination. The initial section of the Silk Road is the routes network of the Tian-Shan Corridors jointly submitted by Kyrgyzstan, China, and Kazakhstan. The second is the Silk Road Penjikent-Samarkand-Poykent Corridor jointly submitted by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The two nominations have been submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on February 1, 2013 for evaluation by the World Heritage Committee at its 38th session (2014).
A nomination may be for more than one corridor. Experts believe that there should be 54 corridors representing the different geographical and cultural backgrounds which have been identified. Corridors located next to each other can be grouped into one nomination once there is evidence that they are closely associated with common features.

Under the Silk Roads Heritage Corridors approach, the nomination, while acknowledging the overall elements of significance of the Silk Road, should set out the unique features of different corridors or groups of corridors, to identify the distinctive geo-cultural features of each component of this serial heritage nomination. The corridors approach ‘also supports the concept of the wider picture – that the whole is more than the parts – by capturing the smaller scale elements of the Silk Roads’ (Williams 2011: 52).

The ICOMOS Report recommended selection of the corridors should be based on:

- Responses to topographical and natural features
- Urban patterns and architectural designs
- Socio-economic development
- Political events that shaped the corridor
- Religious and spiritual activities
- Achievements in science and technology
- Specific achievements in the arts (sculpture, painting, carving, etc.). (Williams 2011: 59)

With support from international peers, the State Parties have summarised the following attributes for the Silk Roads in Kyrgyzstan, China, and Kazakhstan:

- The Chinese Empire and states in the Zhetysu region controlled and encouraged trade along the nominated corridors.
- An elaborate system of forts, post-houses, way stations and caravanserais was operated by the Chinese Empire and states in the Zhetysu Region to regulate trade and ensure its safety.
- There is evidence of a succession of palaces that reflect the power centre of the Chinese empire over 1,200 years.
- There are diverse types of geographical features and landscape, mainly deserts and snow covered mountains along the corridor.
- Cities developed as intersections between nomadic and settled communities.
- There are diverse types of water management systems in arid areas.
- There is evidence of a succession of Buddhist monasteries (including temples and cave temples) that record the dissemination of Buddhism eastward along the Silk Road.
- A succession of large cave temples with exquisite wall paintings is unique to this corridor.

The sections of the Silk Road initially nominated – the Routes Network of Tian-Shan Corridors by Kyrgyzstan, China, and Kazakhstan – focus on the impact of ancient China on the Silk Road. Of the 33 heritage sites distributed in and connecting four geo-cultural regions: those of Central China, the Hosi Corridor, the North and South Tian-shan Mountains and the Zhetysu Region nominated by the three countries, numerous towns, palaces and citadels of the same...
style bear testimony to the willingness, management skills and determination of the ancient Chinese Empire to protect the roads, and the post houses along these ancient roads. (The poet Li Bai of the Tang dynasty, the most renowned poet in Chinese history, was born in one of the nominated sites, the ancient city of Suyab, today’s Kyrgyzstan).

The famous Great Wall system is also associated with this magnificent Silk Road, with the inclusion of the remains of the Wall system showing the completeness of such a nomination by the three countries. The Great Wall is not simply a wall. The Great Wall in the east of today’s Gansu Province functioned as a ‘wall’ and a defence system separating the agricultural civilisation from the nomadic civilisation, but the Great Wall in the west of Gansu is a ‘wall’ with beacon towers, enemy lookout points and citadels. The Great Wall is a comprehensive defense system that the ancient Chinese agricultural empires used to defend themselves against the intrusion of nomadic nations and to protect the road for transportation and trade between the East and West. It is called a ‘wall’, but is not limited to the wall itself; instead it comprises a series of continuous walls all the way from China’s eastern coast to Dunhuang in Gansu Province in the mid-west of China, and includes an integrated defense and alarm system composed of fortresses, beacon towers and garrisons etc. This system stopped having continuous walls west of the Yangguan Pass in Dunhuang, but the remaining fortresses and beacon towers continued the functions of guarding and raising the alarm, and extended as far as the central power of the ancient Chinese
empires could reach. They indeed belong to a unified system, hence serving as strong evidence for the inner unity of the joint nomination project. Its main role was to protect the Silk Road and not to separate two civilisations, as testified by the historic remains along the Silk Road both inside today’s China and in the neighboring countries.

The sections of Silk Roads inside Krygystan, China, and Kazakhstan are closely linked, though with differing natural settings and cultures. Each has its own unique cultural landscape. The Hosi Corridor has been described as a typical Silk Road Corridor, stretching from east to west across China’s Gansu Province flanked by the Yin Mountains and Qilin Mountain on two sides. The siting of this main east-west road bordered by these mountains is determined by its topography and cannot be relocated or bypassed, either by the camel-driving merchants two thousand years ago or today’s highways/railways.

The Silk Roads in Krygystan, China, and Kazakhstan wind through the farmlands, deserts, steppes and oases, through the territory of nomadic tribes and sedentary ethnic groups, through arid areas and semi-deserts. Town centres, large cities, and varied irrigation systems all contribute to the unique cultural landscape in each section.

The distinctive topography and climate, combined with the long history form the beautiful cultural landscape. Contributing to the significance of this landscape are the intangible values, comprising familiar folklore and legends, the different religions, folk customs and everyday life of the people along the Silk Road. Some folk tales have become literary works still celebrated today. A Journey to the West, one of the four great classic novels of Chinese literature, is based on the story of a Chinese monk in the Tang Dynasty who travelled from China to India and back to get the sacred books of Buddhism. The rivers and mountains mentioned in the novel, such as the Flaming or Fire Mountain in China, are typical places along the Silk Road.

The painting depicts the pilgrimage to the west of monk Xuanzang of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). The wall paintings in the grottoes of Western Xia Dynasty (1038-1227 AD) portrayed the history of the famous Buddhist monk Xuanzang travelling
to the west for the sacred Buddhist books, which predate the literary classic *The Pilgrimage to the West* written in the 16th century and based on the same historic fact.

The Hosi Corridor exemplifies the wealth of cultural exchanges, and while it reflected the spread of Buddhism along the Road as an exceptional example of its significance which is quite different from other corridors, there were numerous other religious and cultural exchanges and contacts along this same route.

The Buddhist temple, in terms of architecture and layout, had gradually acquired local characteristics during its eastward spread from the Western Regions to Central China along the Silk Road: the layout changed in form from a central stūpa, to an integrated hall with stūpa, to a Buddha-hall and finally generated the unique layout form of the Buddhist temple in Central China (Su Bai 1996: 49; Li Chongfeng 2012: 13-54; Gray 1959: 43).

During its transmission eastward along the Silk Road, the cave temple changed adaptively in form, which also showed the process of localisation. The changes in styles of cave temples are apparent: the Chaitya in India appeared in the form of central-pillar caves in the Kucha Region (e.g. Cave 38 in Kizil Cave-temple Complex, R01-CN): and in Dunhuang, which is Sinicised and transformed into a hall cave that imitates traditional Chinese buildings. The themes of wall paintings and statues changed from stories about Sakyamuni’s life in the early times, to the Jataka tales (as seen in Kizil Cave-temple Complex, R01-CN) and when the Silk Road was flourishing to the stories of the Sutra (as seen in Maijishan Cave-temple Complex, R04-CN). The development of the themes demonstrates the process of Buddhism transmitting eastward, and conversely the particular themes that were developed in Central China (e.g. at the Longmen and Yungang Grottoes) were transmitted west and influenced the wall paintings and statues of the Maijishan Cave-temple Complex. Along the Hosi Corridor (Mogao Caves), the themes developed in the paintings spread their influence to the Kucha and Zhetyrus regions in the

Figure 11: The Grand Buddha Temple in the site of ancient city of Qocho (photo taken from north to south). (Source: Guo Zhan)

Figure 12: The Fengxian temple of Longmen Grottoes, Luoyang city, China. (Source: Guo Zhan)
Tian-shan Corridors; and at the same time, these themes showed characteristics of repeating reverse influence and interaction (Grünwedel 1912: 153; Grünwedel, 1920: 31; Lal 1967: 53-55; Li Chongfeng 2013:70; Xuan Zang 1985: 130-131; Cultural Relics Press 1989: fig.25; Ma Shichang 2001: 157-176).

The Longmen Grottoes and Mogao Caves, which have both been independently inscribed on the World Heritage List, are two crucial sites which demonstrate Buddhism's transmission route in this corridor. The Longmen Grottoes indicate the “terminal” of eastward dissemination of Buddhism to Central China in the 5th century and the Mogao Caves are a masterpiece of the westward flow back of the Buddhist arts of Central China in the 7th century.

Administratively and in terms of International Conventions intangible and movable cultural heritage tend to be separated from World Heritage. In the case of the Silk Road, however, both of these heritage attributes have close and complicated connections with the nomination. For cultural routes, intangible and movable heritage are an intrinsic element of significance and need special attention and recognition. The case of the Silk Road nomination demonstrates the artificiality of the attempt to separate the concepts of intangible and movable heritage from the places in which they exist.

The attributes, outlined above, should adequately support the successful nomination of this section of the Silk Road to the World Heritage List.

However it could be argued that the name of this nomination should be changed to ‘Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang-an & Tianshan corridor(s)’. The use of the plural more accurately describes the complex network of alternate routes, varying through time, which characterise this section of the famous Silk Road.

Conclusion

The transboundary nomination of the Silk Road is a positive initiative that promotes the spirit, mission and guidelines of the World Heritage Convention both intensively and extensively on an unprecedented scale. With profound and extensive social impacts and long lasting historical significance, this nomination and subsequent management of the Silk Road has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of human society.

In the complex contemporary international political reality, it is undeniable that some historic sentiments and political relations make the originally purely academic description of values of the Silk Road sensitive and difficult to discuss at an international level. However, the well-intended cooperation between State Parties and generous support from international peers make the accurate and appropriate interpretation and expression of history in the Silk Road nomination possible. The existing obstacles are not at all insurmountable for the transnational Silk Road nomination.

The transboundary World Heritage nomination expresses the appreciation, confirmation and commemoration of intercultural exchange in human civilization, as well as providing encouragement and support to contemporary efforts at peace, friendship and international cooperation. It promotes and strengthens the cooperation between all parties across the world to preserve this cultural heritage for present and future generations.

For the achievement of long-term sustainable conservation of the Route, the prerequisite is to set up an ongoing and effective mechanism to coordinate the effort for the transboundary World Heritage nomination. We understand the concerned State Parties are moving in this direction. We wish them all the success!
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