

## SILK ROAD



### A New Silk Road?

*" I did not tell the half of what I saw because I knew that I would not be believed."*  
(Marco Polo, Italian Merchant Explorer, c. 1254-1324 )

In a recent article written by James Corbett of his online Corbett Report : "China's Trillion Dollar Gamble: The New Silk Road " he maintains that a recent train carrying 32 containers of cargo arrived in Tehran will change the face of global geopolitics. This first ever shipment between Wuyi, China and Tehran, Iran, took only 14 days to transverse the 6,462 mile distance between the two cities. In the past, those same containers would generally be loaded onto ships in Shanghai and sail toward the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas for a travel time of 44 days. In contrast, this newly established railway route eliminates a full month of travel from the trip. While Corbett emphasizes that the significance of this event is not the connection between China and Iran, per se, but rather that this new connection represents only one facet of a much more ambitious project: China's "One Belt, One Road". This entails a plan to construct a vast transportation infrastructure connecting the "middle kingdom" to destinations throughout Central and South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. Their vision of a " 21st Century Maritime Silk Road " is intended to connect China to 65 countries with a combined population of 4.4 billion people; more than half of our planets entire population.

An official statement by the Chinese government explains:

More than two millennia ago the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges that linked the major civilizations of Asia, Europe and Africa, collectively called "the Silk Road" by later

generations. For thousands of years, the Silk Road Spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual benefit, has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilization, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.

It seems clear, therefore, that this new Silk Road is envisioned as a 21st century equivalent of a millennia old idea and is intended to serve as much more than a mere transportation infrastructure. (James Corbett, <http://apperspective.blogspot.au>, March, 2016)

The term Silk Road was coined as *Die Seidenstrasse*, by German cartographer and explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthoven (1833-1905) uncle of the World War I Red Baron flying ace, who was affectionally portrayed as the iconic villain in Charles Shultz's much beloved **Peanuts** cartoons. Baron von Richthoven suggested the name in 1877 following his seven expeditions to China from 1868 to 1872. This "road" was in fact an ancient network of caravan routes which consisted of a series of trading posts, and oases which extended along nearly 7000 miles from Rome and Syria to the Yellow River in China and continued on from around the time of the 2nd century Han Dynasty (207-220 B.C.) when the Chinese extended the Great Wall in order to increase protection along these trade venues.

In "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads", historian David Christian maintains that the Han routes were pre-dated by the Persian Royal Road, established during the Achaemenid Empire (500-330 B.C) founded by Cyrus the Great to become the largest empire in ancient History and his roads became the main arteries for the later Chinese trade routes. (Journal of World History, 11:1, 2000, p.1-26) Nevertheless, remnants of intricately woven textiles believed to be Chinese silk, have been found in Ancient Egyptian tombs dating from 1070 B.C. And, earlier still, mummies of blond and red haired, Caucasian- featured individuals, buried in tartan and twill clothing have been found in the barren desert of the Tarim Basin, along the Silk Route, east of Yingpen which have been dated as early as 1800 B.C. ( V.H. Mair and J.P. Mallory: **The Tarim Mummies**, 2008).

These early trade routes exchanged not only silk and other textiles, dyes, cosmetics, perfume, ceramics, glass, precious metals, gems, ivory, medicinal and culinary herbs and spices, exotic animals, livestock, agricultural produce and technologies, paper and gunpowder, but also languages, diseases, genes, ideas, philosophies and religions, as well. As the Chinese Silk Route evolved, it grew to become an elaborate network which facilitated trade and fostered the development of civilization on from China, the Indian sub-continent, Persia, Europe, Arabia and the Horn of Africa. In 2005, archeological evidence hidden in a lofty 1,800 year old tomb, discovered by monks, has revealed that this trade route also extended into the high altitudes of Tibet. When excavations began in 2012, research teams discovered artifacts which indicated that merchants were traveling from China to Tibet along a branch of the Silk Road that had been lost to history. Overall, these long standing Silk Routes continued on until the 14th century A.D. when they began to be replaced by sea routes. (Jane Qiu," Archeologists Uncover Another Branch of the Silk Road", **Scientific American**, April 1, 2016)

While Corbett, who resides in Western Japan, in his Asian-Pacific Perspective article wonders if this "One Belt, One Road" dream will actually ever become a reality, the concrete fact is that a cargo train just rolled into Tehran from China and the world is gradually re-orienting toward Beijing. Also a fact, is that China remains standing as one of our world's oldest, truly magnificent, continuous and successful civilizations. While James refers to this project as "China's Trillion Dollar Gamble", if I were a gambler as well as an historian, I would definitely place my chips in favor of China's vision of their New Silk Road. (see also: [www.corbettreport.com](http://www.corbettreport.com))