

Silk Roads: an Ecosystem of Ideas & Imagination

Michael Stetson

Abstract

One of the many modern definitions of “globalization” is as a step in world history that develops trade networks that span continents, supersedes cultural allegiance and embraces the exotic in both commodities and ideas. However, there is much about our modern initiative that is merely an attempt to replicate what has been transpiring for thousands of years. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Silk Roads, ancient arteries of movement and exchange of not only tradable goods but also cultures. In today’s era of trendy cross-cultural interaction, there is much we can learn by observing the peoples of the Silk Roads, with an eye to finding our human similarities among the specific cultural and ethnic differences that this photo essay documents.

Key words: cultural diversity, ethnic diversity, ethnic identity, photojournalism, Silk Road, visual media

Trade diasporas have been an integral part of human experience at least since the arrival of urbanization from around the 4th century B.C. These trade networks and the routes that connected them were the stage where diverse ideas and experiences collided, refracting cultural paradigms then reassembling them into something that echoed the original but was special and unique. As a result of commercial, social and cultural interactions that took place on that stage, human experience has evolved into a rich and vast array of knowledges and cultural imaginaries.

Our insatiable appetite for leaving the known in order to explore the unknown is a common thread present in storytelling and other forms of cultural expression that links humankind across diverse and far-apart cultures. Leaving one's motherland to become a foreigner in a host country entails learning that culture's customs, language and often their belief systems to facilitate trade or business. In regard to the Silk Roads, China was a prominent player in providing the impetus for cross-cultural trade along them, trade that traversed a wide variety of ecological regions and cultures between East Asia and the Greek and Roman empires. Evolving from a dual need to protect its borders and to enrich its empire, competition for land with the Xiongnu pastoral nomads led to the building of the Great Wall of China from 220 B.C. and also to the sending of envoys to the west of China (present-day Afghanistan) in order to establish an east-west alliance. Knowledge of the exotic goods that could be acquired from the West eventually led to the Han government's decision to open a commercial trade route, thereby extending the Great Wall westward to Dunhuang and making alliances with the oasis states along the Taklamakan Desert.

The fabled Silk Road, whose vast network of routes stretched like a web from China in the east to the Mediterranean in the west, remains today one of the best-known examples of cross-cultural trade and the institutions associated with it. Trade flourished along these routes from the second century B.C. until the fourteenth century. After that time, the overland routes became too dangerous because of anarchy and factional warfare, making the sea routes more preferable for long-distance trade. The oases towns of Western China and the Eurasian steppes provided way stations, or *caravanserai*, where convoys could stop, rest, refresh supplies, buy new beasts of burden and exchange imported goods for the local ones. The *caravanserai* was not only a vibrant, exotic community for conducting business, but it also provided an opportunity for strangers from different cultural backgrounds to interact, socialize and observe traditions foreign to their own.

Although different environments engender different methods for sustaining life and ensuring survival, cross-cultural exchange as well as the products of trade that facilitate living together re-shape cultures, restructure societies and stretch the boundaries of established belief systems. It is in the spirit of acknowledging and respecting both cultural specificity and the universality of human endeavor that these photographs along the Silk Roads are intended. The interplay between familiarity and strangeness that occurs when we look into the worlds of these photos underscores the infinite variety of experiential options, other means of interpreting the world, other ways of being human.