

Languages and Cultural Interchange along the Silk Roads

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Individual humans as well as human communities interact in a great variety of ways and, in essence, Unesco's Silk Roads Major Project endeavors to shed light on the cultural interactions along the trade routes linking various Eurasian civilizations. The term Silk Road or Roads conjures up visions of caravans laden with rare goods, carrying them from the distant, perhaps even the so-called "mysterious", East towards the Western World. This general impression is partially created by the word "silk", name of a commodity generally and correctly linked with China where it was first produced. It is good to remember that a "Silk Road" is a historic fiction, invented in the nineteenth century by the German geographer von Richthofen to call attention to the existence of, first and foremost, commercial contacts between China and the Roman Empire. Silk was but one of the *many* goods circulating all along the *many* roads criss-crossing the great Eurasian space. This short essay will provide some information on the languages used along the land arteries of communication between East and West.

It should, however, be noted that East and West are correlative terms, with no border line separating the two. There is but one geographic continuum, reaching from island to island, from Ireland to Japan. "Occident" and "Orient" are purely conceptual categories with a purely imaginary binary opposition between the two, since if there are some distinctive features of the former, such as the almost universal use of the Latin script and the historical dominance of Christianity, we would look in vain for such unifying factors within the "East." Even in the West the term "Orient" has always had multiple applications; it could, and did, and does refer to cultures as vastly different as, say, the Middle Eastern, the Hindu or the Chinese.

The present, unprecedented speed of the globalizing process is the result of vastly improved transportation and telecommunication systems. An idea, a picture can be transmitted instantaneously from one part of the globe to another, an object can be transported in less than a day from any part of the world to the other. Cross-cultural interrelationships are now permanent and with them comes the diffusion of ideas and of material achievements. Yet it should be borne in mind that until the invention of the railroad, the speed of transportation by land was more or less invariable; at its maximum, it was equal to the speed of the horse, in its turn dependent on the efficiency of a relay system. The speed of sea transport was more variable and, all in all, greater, though it linked only port with port whence the road to the hinterland might have taken considerable time. While material or spiritual goods could travel no faster than the means of transportation would allow, they did travel. Though once at a more leisurely pace, the process of globalization has gone on relentlessly, following a simple pattern whereby the numerous swallowed the few, the languages spoken by many supplanted those used by few native speakers.

The diffusion of a civilizational element, spiritual or physical, is not always comparable to the radiation from a source of heat, whose effect diminishes with distance. There are many instances when it should rather be likened to a missile which would affect the conditions at its place of impact but would have no effect on the regions over which it passed. To pattern our comparison on chess, the process of borrowing of ideas might follow the movements in a straight line of a bishop or a rook, but, also, may jump over some squares as does a knight. One single individual may carry with him some knowledge or skill which would affect the place where he settles, or reveals it, but would leave no trace in the land through which he passed. The post-war migration to the United States of some highly specialized German scholars affected history; similar, though perhaps less rapidly felt and less spectacular, cases existed in the past. It was one shipwrecked Indian sailor rescued by Ptolemaic officials in the late second century B.C. who revealed the art of sailing from Egypt to India. In the seventeenth century Jesuits brought to China elements of Western knowledge without affecting in any way the territories lying between the two.

Purely geographic considerations may suggest that in the eastward spread of Buddhism (about which more will be said later), the ever-moving Sogdians played a major role.¹ While this, indeed, is the case, one must note that almost all the Sogdian Buddhist texts still extant are translations from Chinese, to the extent that even words of Indian origin appear in them in their Chinese garb. The axes of penetration of Iranian thought into the Turfan region do not follow, as one would expect, the shortest road: Manichaeism reached the region of Turfan in the second half of the seventh century from China, and not, as could be expected, from Persia, notwithstanding the fact that this religion was brought to China by Sogdian merchants just a little earlier.

In pre-modern times travel was mostly motivated by trade, religion, or warfare. For our present purpose let us disregard the last of these activities. The first two were greatly dependent on verbal and written communications. It is safe to say that language has always been the single most essential tool of communication between the various peoples. The very importance of languages in intercultural communications made vulnerable those spoken by smaller peoples. There is no point in talking to someone in a language he does not understand; in St. Augustine's words, "a man had rather be with his own dog than with another man of a strange language."²

The multiplicity of languages used along the Silk Road was extraordinary. In the documents discovered by the German Turfan expeditions at the beginning of this century seventeen languages are represented. There are good reasons to assume that in the course of history, in Eurasia alone, hundreds of languages have ceased to be used. Among them were not only the tongues of small peoples whose destinies have remained in the background of history and who left but few, if any, written or archaeological traces of their existence. Once mighty empires may decay and fall – the case of the Egyptian or Sumerian empires come readily to mind – and with them, in many cases, fall into disuse and into oblivion their languages. In the regions crossed by the Silk Roads one can cite, among others, the cases of the Tanguts, the Sogdians, and the Alans.

The Tangut (Hsi-hsia) Empire flourished for about two centuries, between 1032 and its destruction by Chinggis Khan in 1227. Until the discovery of Tangut (Hsi-hsia) inscriptions at the end of

the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century all information about this once powerful people had to be culled from Chinese sources. In 1036 the Tanguts created a most complicated script comprising almost 6000 ideograms which they used for the products of their own literature as well as for translations of Chinese secular and Buddhist texts. The script and the language are still the subjects of painful decipherments.

More interesting is the absorption by other peoples of the Sogdians, causing the death of their language. Known since the sixth century B.C., mostly under foreign rule, they survived as a distinct people until the Arab conquest in the eighth century A.D. The ruins of their cities such as Penjikent in Tajikistan, with its splendid wall paintings, still command admiration. Deprived of an independent state of their own, according to a Chinese source, Sogdians "have gone wherever profit is found"³ and became the principal organizers and beneficiaries of early medieval transcontinental trade. At the same time they were also the chief transmitters towards the east of Iranian ideas such as Manichaeism, which they introduced to China and made into the state religion of the Turkic Uighur empire of Mongolia. Notwithstanding the fact that the Sogdian writing system (derived from Aramaic) has survived and is still used in our days by the Mongols, all these achievements had fallen into oblivion until their discovery in our century. The first written fragment of their once widely used language was identified only in the early part of this century by the German scholar F.W.K. Müller. By the end of the first millennium the Sogdians of Chinese Turkestan, probably following a period of bilingualism, were absorbed by the Turkic population and their language fell into disuse. A commercial document written in Sogdian probably by a Nestorian towards the end of the tenth century contains several Uighur sentences. Yet, the use of Uighur did not spread along the Silk Roads; the place of Sogdian as a commercial language was taken by Persian and Cuman.

None of the Eastern Middle Iranian languages known today from written traces (such as Sogdian, Choresmian, Khotanese, Tumshuqese, Bactrian, Sarmatian) has a direct living descendant. The Turkic language of the Cumans, in the 13th-14th century a *lingua franca* along the Silk Road, is known only from a few extant

documents; the language died out by the end of the eighteenth century. Scores of other languages are known only by their names. The five badly damaged Kushan inscriptions at Dasht-i Nawur provide a good example of the mixture of languages and scripts used in the region. Two of these, written in Greek script are in Bactrian, one, in Middle Iranian is in the Kharosthi script of Aramaic origin, and two were written in a script not yet deciphered and, hence, in a language not yet identified. It has been suggested that at least one of these inscriptions is a monument of the language of the people called Yüeh-chih by the Chinese and Tokharoi by the Greeks.

In the first century A.D. the Alans, whose descendants, the Ossetes, live at present in the Caucasus, were a dominant force between the Caspian Sea and the river Don. In the fourth century, in the wake of and together with the Huns, some of them moved West and early in the fifth century settled on the territory which is now France where they soon became assimilated with the local populations. But in the famous Battle of Hastings the Inner Asian tactics of feigned retreat was successfully used by the Bretons led by Count Alanus. Today the name Alan survives in French, Italian and Swiss place names, source of the innumerable "Allan", "Allen", "Allain" etc. surnames to be found in our telephone directories. Yet, at the beginning of the Christian era the core of the Alan people lived in Transoxania and was known to the Chinese. In the thirteenth century, while some Alans – called also As – could still be found in the Don region, others constituted an elite military unit, some thirty-thousand strong, founded in 1272 in the service of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China. Subsequently, these Alans were converted to Catholicism by John of Monte Corvino, the first Catholic archbishop of Peking (Khanbalik), who died no later than 1330. In 1336 the chiefs of these Alans living in China in the service of the Mongols sent a delegation to the pope in Avignon, urging him to appoint a successor to John of Monte Corvino. The same delegation carried also another letter written in July 1336 by Toghān Temür, the last Mongol emperor of China in which he recommended to the pope "the Alans, my servants and your Christian sons," and also asked him to send "from where the sun goes down, horses and other marvels."⁴ The letter,

probably written in Mongol, survives only in a Latin translation. Descendants of these Alans (under the name As) are still named among "Mongol" tribes of the seventeenth century. This short sketch illustrates the curious phenomenon that, though we can follow Alan history in its great lines for about 1500 years in a space reaching from Gaul to China, nowhere can we establish the criteria of a specific Alan culture, and the sole remains so far found of their language consist of one tombstone using Greek letters, a few sentences recorded by the Byzantine historian Tzetzes, and an Alan-Latin glossary of the fifteenth century discovered in Hungary where a group of Alans migrated at a time when some of their compatriots served in China.

Sogdians and Alans, together with the languages they spoke, disappeared in a diaspora covering immense territories, extending over many centuries. Their case provides a good example of the gradual linguistic uniformization of Eurasia.

In most cases, there was no permanent link between a language and the script used to note it. Old Turkic (Uighur) texts have been found written in seven scripts. While the great majority of the Turkic texts (usually referred to as Uighur) found in Chinese Turkestan were written in the Uighur script derived from that of the Sogdians, there were discovered fragments written also in Runic, Estranghelo, Manichaean, Sogdian, Tibetan, Syriac, and Brahmi scripts. To these should be added Arabic though, conventionally, texts written with Arabic letters are considered Middle Turkic. To cite just a few curious cases, there is an Uighur Buddhist catechism written in Tibetan script, and we also have samples of the same language written in the Brahmi script. The Syriac script was used for the Turkic text to be found on the seal affixed to two letters in Arabic written by the Nestorian Patriarch Mar Yahballaha III to the popes Boniface VIII and Benedict XIII in 1302 and 1304, respectively, and also on many Turkic Nestorian tombstones discovered in the Semirechye.

The many multilingual inscriptions to be found in the lands crossed by the Silk Roads testify to the linguistic diversity of the peoples living along them and, at the same time, to the political or religious need to address them in their own tongue. Mention has been made of the inscriptions of *Dasht-i Nawur*, probably all in an

Iranian language. The inscription of Karabalghasun in Mongolia is trilingual. Erected in the eighth century A.D. by the Turkic Uighurs, it proclaims the glory of that people in Uighur, Chinese, and Sogdian. A Buddhist inscription of 1345 is pentaglott: Mongol, Tibetan, Chinese, Tangut and Uighur. By that time the Iranian languages were no longer used within the Chinese orbit. Not surprisingly, under the Mongol Yuan dynasty Sino-Mongol inscriptions were common but these do not properly fall within the purview of Silk Roads studies. The Sino-Uighur inscription erected in 1334 in Kocho testifies to the simultaneous existence, probably on equal footing, of the two languages. The Buddhist inscription engraved in 1345 at the Chü-yung gate near Peking is hexaglott: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Mongol (in Phags-pa script), Uighur, Chinese, and Tangut. The multiplicity and variety of such multilingual inscriptions may be contrasted with the quasi unchallenged position held by Latin in Europe. Though in no way monolingual, even unto modern times, Europe continued to use Latin in inscriptions destined to perpetuate the memory of an important person or event. It was supposed to be understood by all those who mattered. The seal of my own Indiana University founded in the wilderness in 1820 carries a Latin text.

To learn a language is a difficult task, and many tradesmen had neither the talent nor the time to acquire the language skills needed; they had to rely on the services of interpreters. Herodotus, speaking of the peoples living beyond the Scythians, tells us that the latter use "seven interpreters and seven languages" to communicate with them (Bk.IV, ch.24). Pliny the Elder (A.D.23-79) speaks of a city on the river Anthemus visited by "three hundred tribes speaking different languages" who relied on the services of "one hundred and thirty interpreters" (Natural History, VI, v.). In the Bosporan kingdom the chief interpreter was an Alan whose work was praised in a Greek inscription dated 208 A.D.

Interpreters were not less in demand on the eastern extremities of the trade roads. It is reported that under the Later Han dynasty "military agricultural colonies were set up in fertile fields, and post stations built along the main highways. Messengers and interpreters traveled without cessation and barbarian merchants and peddlers came to the border every day."⁵ As can only be expected,

most of the interpreters were multilingual by birth. Son of a Sogdian father and a Türk mother and brought up in China, early in his life An-lu-shan, whose rebellion was to shake the T'ang dynasty, "was a vicious thief, full of wiles and clever at reading men's thoughts. He understood six barbarian languages. He became a middleman for the barbarians in the frontier markets."⁶

Chinese histories of the first millennium tend to indicate the distance between China and far away places by the number of interpreters needed to communicate with them. By this reckoning there were peoples at a distance of "double", "quadruple" or even "ninefold" interpretations.

In the first half of the fourteenth century the Italian Pegolotti prepared for the use of merchants travelling east a work known as *La pratica della mercatura*. It contains the following piece of advice:

Do not try to save money on the interpreters by taking a bad one instead of a good one. The additional money you spend on the good one will be less than what you save by having him. And besides the interpreter it would be advisable to engage two good servants who know well the Cuman language. And if the merchant so wishes, he could take with him a woman, though there is no obligation to do so. But if he does take one he will be kept more comfortably than if he does not take one. Be that as it may, if he does take one it would do well if she were as familiar with the Cuman language as were the servants.⁷

Interpreters were needed not only for commercial but also for diplomatic purposes. In the negotiations conducted in 560 between Justinian I, emperor of Byzantium and Chosroes I, king of Persia,⁸ the ambassadors were helped by six Roman and six Persian interpreters and the agreement was drawn up in Persian and Greek. The Eastern Roman and the Chinese Empires both had regular corps of interpreters. On occasion, a slip in their rendering of a name or a term reveals the interpreter's mother tongue. Such is the case when Türk ambassadors arriving in Constantinople in 563 are called in the Greek texts under the Persian name of the Türks, an indication that the interpreters themselves were Persians. A similar conclusion could be drawn if a German-born interpreter working in Washington would refer to the French as "Franzosen".

There are many examples of interpreters being used in the frequent diplomatic intercourse between the Mongols and the West.

Let me just mention here the two Dominican friars active in the Mongol delegation which visited Louis IX in 1262, or a certain Richard – judging by his name a Christian – who served as an interpreter to the Mongol delegation participating at the Ecumenical Council of Lyons held in 1274. The Syrian Christian interpreter Ise or Ase (standing for his real name “Jesus”) achieved an influential position in China; his name appears in Chinese, Persian and Latin sources.

Catholic religious proselytism was also in dire need of competent interpreters. Thanks to the globalization of communications under the Mongol Empire, Roger Bacon saw correctly that Christians constituted but a tiny fraction of the world’s population and opined that the learning of foreign languages was an obligation inherent in the very duty of the propagation of the faith. In the 1280s, the Italian Dominican Ricoldo di Montecroce, active in Tabriz, used an interpreter to preach the Gospel in Arabic. The unsatisfactory results obtained by such a method prompted him to recommend vigorously to all missionaries the learning of foreign languages. While the Roman Curia, with the arrogance characteristic of western great powers, stuck with the sole use of Latin and is not known to have used interpreters of its own, mainly among the Franciscans and the Dominicans there was no dearth of men advocating the study of languages spoken along the Silk Roads. Understandably, priority was given to Arabic but Humbert of Romans, Dominican Master-General (1254-63), called also on those who wished to acquire a “barbarian tongue” to present themselves. Individual, often successful efforts were made to learn at least some of these. A case in point is that of the Spanish Franciscan Pascal de Victoria who could report in 1342 that “by the grace of God” he learned the Cuman language and the Uighur script, generally used in the Mongol Empire, Persia, China and many other countries. The so-called *Codex Cumanicus*, a work of miscellanea compiled around 1300, contains not only a Cuman sentence, probably to be memorized by a priest, in which he declares that neither does he know Cuman nor has he an interpreter but also the request couched in Cuman: “Pray to God on my behalf that he give me such intelligence that I can learn fast and well your language.”⁹

Important as the spoken word of the missionaries might have been, the results would have been ephemeral without the backing of religious texts translated into the languages of the proselytes.

Experience has shown that a really faithful and accurate translation needs the cooperation of several persons. The legend linked with the Septuagint version of the Bible supports this view. In China or in the Caliphate during periods of intense intellectual activity "offices of translators" were in existence. Unfortunately, to make a good translation, someone is needed who, besides great competence in the languages used, has also a good knowledge of the subject. Translators or missionaries have to explain the unknown in terms of the known, a problem that beset the translators or propagators of the Buddhist faith in the third century just as much as it did the Jesuits active in China in the seventeenth century.

From its Indian cradle, Buddhism spread in all directions using as a vehicle whatever languages or scripts it encountered in its expansion. In its advance towards Bactria the favored language was the Middle Indian dialect Prakrit of Gandhara, written in Kharosthi. Although Buddhism was known in China in the first century A.D., the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese began in 148 A.D. with the arrival of the Parthian Arsacid prince An Shih-kao. Work on a larger scale was started by the famous scholar Kumarajiva (344-413?) hailing from Kucha,¹⁰ who arrived at Ch'ang-an in 401 where he set up an office of translators employing hundreds of men whose products were vastly superior to previous translations of Buddhist texts. Translations were not always based on a written original. Thus, for example, Kumarajiva translated into Chinese the Sanskrit text of the *Sarvastivadavinaya* by listening to the recital of the original. In the seventh century, with the penetration of Buddhism into Tibet, began the translations of the sacred books into Tibetan; they include works written in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese and other languages. Tibetan texts were, in their turn, translated into Turkic and Mongol, though Central Asian Buddhism owes most to translations made from Chinese. The famous Buddhist monk Hsüen-tsang was responsible for the translation into Chinese of more than seventy Buddhist works.

Tokharian Buddhism remained very close to its Indian roots and Tokharian texts were further translated into Uighur. Other

Uighur texts are translations from Tibetan. The Chinese version of the famous *Suvarnaprabhasa sutra* was translated into Uighur.

Manichaeism was a syncretistic religion fusing elements of Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism and was moved by a strong missionary spirit. Mani himself (216-276) sailed to India but his missionaries fanned out in all directions and his religion found followers from Gaul to China. Manichaean canonical books were written in languages ranging from Coptic to Chinese. In the area of our concern, Parthian or Middle Persian texts were translated into Sogdian and Sogdian texts were rendered into Uighur. The translation of religious terms caused great problems and terminological concessions were all the more unavoidable since the same translators could work on texts pertaining to different religions. At the time of their encounter with Manichaeism, the Sogdians were Buddhists, and Central Asian Manichaean texts borrowed much of their terminology from Buddhism. All these texts reflect the intermingling of many languages. There are Indian-Buddhist words to be found in Khotanese texts, Turkic Uighur texts contain Sogdian, Chinese or even Greek words; and many instances point to a Zoroastrian (Avestan) substratum. The phonetic transcription of a short Zoroastrian prayer, based on an oral recitation of an Avestan text made probably by a Manichaean scribe, has been found embedded in a Sogdian manuscript.

Although some Uighur and Sogdian Nestorian texts have come to light, and there is a Mongol translation of what appears to be a Catholic Creed, all in all the Inner Asian Christian corpus is quite modest when compared to the Buddhist and Manichaean religious literature in translations. Though few in number, the Nestorian texts show the use of a variety of languages and scripts. The Sogdians used not only their own, but also the Syriac script in their translations of portions of the New Testament. There is a Sogdian translation of the Book of Psalms which shows the influences of both the Syriac Peshitta and the Greek Septuagint versions. There was also discovered a Sogdian version of the hymn *Gloria in excelsis Deo* in its turn translated into Chinese and preserved in a text discovered in Tun-huang.

Although its link with the Silk Roads is dubious at best, it is proper to mention here the Abbasid era of translation, which lasted

for about a century after 750 A.D., and led to one of the most momentous intellectual awakenings in the history of thought and culture. It was marked by translations into Arabic from Persian, Sanskrit, Syriac and Greek. This stream of culture was then redirected into Europe by the Arabs in Spain and Sicily, where it helped create the Renaissance of Europe. On the long, winding road of intellectual development the names of great translators stand as landmarks: Yahya ibn Masawaih, commissioned by the caliph Harun al-Rashid to translate Greek medical manuscripts brought back as booty from Muslim raids in Anatolia; Ibn Muqaffa (eighth century), who brought a part of Persia's and India's intellectual heritage to the Arab world, whence it reached Europe. The role of these Muslim scholars is all the more important since in the Middle Ages in the West the knowledge of languages (including Greek) was at an all-time low. Of course there were some exceptions such as Gerard of Cremona (eleventh century), head of the Toledan school of translators, who put into Latin, from Arabic, some of Aristotle's work; or John of Avendeth (also known as Johannes Hispanus), responsible for the Latin translation of many writings of Avicenna. It is difficult to overestimate Europe's indebtedness to their labors.

A really good translator is worth the weight in gold, if not of his person, so of the work translated. Such were, it has been said, the emoluments of that ninth-century Prince of Translators, Hunayn ibn-Ishaq (the Joannitius of the European Middle Ages), over and above a handsome monthly salary of five hundred dinars. True, he rendered into Arabic and Syriac works of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, the Old Testament and almost all of Galen's scientific output.

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This short essay was not meant to give more than an impressionistic picture of the role of the languages in the cultural interchange along the Silk Roads up to the thirteenth century.¹¹ To treat the subject according to its merit one or several books would be needed and it is hoped that these imperfect musings may just prompt some scholar to undertake such a task. If there is one general conclusion to be drawn it is that history does not favor the

languages of the smaller peoples, so that it can be said that the survival of a language depends largely on demographic factors. Trade goes on unabated but, just as the means of transportation change with time, so does the use of the languages at its service.

Notes

1. The Sogdians were the Iranian-speaking inhabitants of Sogdiana (in Transoxania) before their adoption of Turkic tongues brought about by repeated Turkic invasions. (ed).
2. St. Augustin, *The City of God*, XIX, vii, London, 1945, p. 243.
3. E.G.Pulleyblank, "A Sogdian Colony in Inner Mongolia," in *T'oung Pao*, 41 (1952), pp. 317-56, p.317.
4. Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (new edition revised by Henri Cordier), 4 vols., London, 1913-1916, vol. III, pp.180-81.
5. Ying-shih Yü, *Trade and Expansion in China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations*, Berkeley, 1967, p.143.
6. Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *The Background of the An-lu-shan Rebellion*, Oxford, 1955, p.8.
7. Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La practica della mercatura*, ed. by Allan Evans, Medieval Academy of America, 1936, p.21.
8. The Sassanid king Chosroes (531-579) had the reputation of a wise and just man. He clashed with the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I and occupied Antioch and Lazica before withdrawing in 562 against payment of an annual tribute (ed.)
9. Vladimir Drimba, *Syntaxe Comane*, Bucuresti-Leiden, 1973, p.222.
10. Kumarajiva (344-413?) was born in Kucha to an Indian father who was a fervent Buddhist and a Kuchean princess. His mother took him to Kashmir so that he would receive an Indian and Buddhist education. After his return to the Tarim Basin he lived for a year in Kashghar and in Kucha. In 388 he was taken by Chinese numerous Buddhist texts. (ed).
11. Because of the vastness of the subject no bibliography could here be given. Readers interested in the subject may find further information in Denis Sinor, "Interpreters in Medieval Inner Asia," in *Asian and African Studies. Journal of the Israel Oriental Society*, 16 (1982), pp. 293-320.