

China-Central Asia Friendship: From the “Shanghai Spirit” to the “Community of Shared Destiny”

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ABSTRACT

This article takes the historical connection of the Silk Road as its logical starting point to explore the evolution of friendship between China and Central Asia. As a bridge for the exchange of civilisations, the Silk Road laid the foundation for a thousand years of mutual trust between the two sides. The concepts of peace, cooperation, openness, and inclusiveness it embodies trace their historical origins to the ‘Shanghai Spirit.’ The contemporary ‘Shanghai Spirit’ centres on mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and consultation, driving deeper collaboration between China and Central Asia in security and economic fields. Cultural exchange, as an important vehicle for friendship, strengthens emotional bonds through people-to-people connectivity, injecting intrinsic momentum into the development of relations. From the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ to the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, the friendship between China and Central Asia has evolved from pragmatic cooperation to a shared value consensus. This not only continues the tradition of civilisational dialogue along the Silk Road but also provides a new model for inter-state relations in regional and global governance.

Keywords: *China and Central Asia, Silk Road, Cultural exchange, Friendship.*

1. INTRODUCTION

From 14 to 16 September 2022, prior to attending the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Samarkand, General Secretary Xi Jinping paid state visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan at the invitation of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan on 14 September. On 15 September, he met with President Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan at the Samarkand State Guest House, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, and President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. This Central Asian tour has elevated China's cooperative relations with Central Asian countries to a new historical level. Looking back at history, China has always maintained close ties with Central Asian countries. The deserts and camel bells of the ancient Silk Road, the relay stations along the way, and the exotic landscapes—all serve as historical testimonies to the friendly exchanges and mutual understanding between China and Central Asia. The material and spiritual cultures brought by

China, such as silk, porcelain, carvings, gold and silverware, Chinese books, and traditional Chinese medicine, have all contributed to the cultural development of the Central Asian region and built a bridge for the integration of Chinese and Central Asian civilisations. Today, cultural exchanges and interactions between China and Central Asia are deepening. The “Silk Road Spirit”, which originated in China and embodies the principles of “rooted in history, oriented toward the future; originating from China, with opportunities and benefits shared by the world”, to the “Shanghai Spirit” encompassing “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilisations, and pursuit of common development”, represents the historical continuity of the friendly exchanges among the peoples of countries along the ancient Silk Road. From the “Shanghai Spirit” to the “community of shared future”, it is the contemporary journey of peoples along the Belt and Road working together hand in hand.

2. DEEPENING CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION THROUGH THE “SHANGHAI SPIRIT”

Over the past 30 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian countries, the two sides have weathered storms together, marched forward hand in hand, and walked side by side. The relationship between China and the Central Asian countries has grown increasingly close. As founding members of the “Shanghai Five” mechanism, China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have jointly addressed the unprecedented changes of the century, cooperated closely, and tackled challenges together. In 2001, Uzbekistan's President Karimov formally applied to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to join the “Shanghai Five” mechanism. Today, China and Uzbekistan are actively consolidating and developing their comprehensive strategic partnership to enhance the well-being of their peoples. Over the past 30 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian countries, their cooperative relationship has achieved leapfrog development, with political mutual trust and people-to-people friendship deepening, and cultural exchanges becoming increasingly vibrant. Guided by the “Shanghai Spirit”, there is a must to build bridges of mutual understanding among peoples, promote mutual learning and exchange among civilisations, and enable citizens to broaden their horizons and expand their perspectives through cultural exchange and mutual learning, thereby constructing a community of shared human values. The “Shanghai Spirit”, which embodies the wisdom of human civilisation, plays a crucial role in strengthening cultural ties and carries the hopes for peace, stability, and prosperity between China and Central Asian countries.

Since the establishment of the SCO in 2001, the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative and the joint fight against the COVID-19 pandemic have brought together countries from different regions, at different stages of development, and with different civilisational traditions. Today, the SCO comprises eight member states, four observer states, and multiple dialogue partners. The “Shanghai Spirit” running through these efforts holds major significance for deepening China-Central Asia cooperation and serves as an important foundation for promoting cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions among countries.

3. EXAMINING CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH HISTORICAL RECORDS AND DOCUMENTS

China and Uzbekistan, as well as Kazakhstan, are all ancient civilisations with deep historical roots and a solid foundation for cultural cooperation. During the Ming Dynasty, the central government sent envoys to the Western Regions on multiple occasions. For instance, Chen Cheng and Li Xian wrote *The Record of the Journey to the Western Regions* and *The Chronicles of the Western Regions*, which are the only firsthand accounts of the Ming Dynasty's expeditions to the Western Regions, detailing the journey and the conditions of the regions visited. The **Ming Shilu** and the **Ming Shi: Xiyu Zhuan** also contain relevant records. In Central Asia, the ruler of the Timurid Dynasty, Mirza Shah Rukh, dispatched an embassy led by Hujjar Ghiyasuddin Nahasi. In 1419, the embassy departed from the Timurid capital of Khwarezm and travelled east along the Silk Road to the Ming Dynasty under the rule of the Yongle Emperor. The embassy stayed in Beijing for over five months. He recorded his observations of various regions in China in the form of a diary, describing the customs and landscapes along the way, as well as the political, economic, and cultural prosperity of the Ming Dynasty. He authored “*The Account of Shah Rukh's Envoy to China*”, which was compiled into three versions by Hafiz Abru, Abd al-Razzaq, and Mirhun.

In terms of researching the cultural and historical ties between China and Central Asia, Chinese scholars have a natural advantage in languages such as Chinese, Persian, and Chagatai. By using historical documents to verify the friendly relations between China and Central Asia throughout history, this research also holds profound significance for establishing Chinese scholars' authority in discussing cultural exchanges between China and Central Asia.

4. REVIVING THE HISTORICAL MEMORY OF CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH THE “ANCIENT SILK ROAD”

The ancient Silk Road was a trade route connecting China with Central Asian countries. As economic and political exchanges between nations developed, the Silk Road also became a major

platform for the convergence and integration of the lives and cultures of people along its route, serving as a major channel for civilisational exchange. The Yuezhi, Wusun, and northern Xiongnu nomadic tribes were the first to open a grassland route connecting the Eurasian continent along the Hexi Corridor. Sima Qian's account of Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions in the "Shiji: The Biography of the Great Yan" marks the official opening of the Silk Road and the formal commencement of East-West cultural exchange. Central Asian miniature paintings, as an important representative of Central Asian art, feature numerous works that clearly depict Chinese-style patterns such as blue-and-white porcelain, lotus flowers, and auspicious clouds. Their artistic style has been significantly influenced by Chinese fine-line painting, court painting, landscape painting, and ink wash painting. During the prosperous period of the ancient Silk Road, China and Central Asian countries engaged in trade, exchanged envoys, and shared resources, playing a significant role in maintaining stability and peace along the route. This effectively promoted cultural exchange, mutual learning, and dialogue between China and Central Asian countries.

Furthermore, historical records from the Dunhuang Mogao Caves and Jingdezhen porcelain also provide ample evidence of the friendly relations between China and Central Asian countries throughout history. Although the former glory of the ancient Silk Road has been obscured by the dust of history, the "Silk Road spirit" it embodies serves as a solid foundation for the higher-level integration and mutual learning between Chinese and Central Asian cultures today. Exploring the friendly historical relations between Central Asia and China along the 'ancient Silk Road' can gradually awaken public memory and national memory.

5. PROMOTING CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

In 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative. China's cooperation with Central Asian countries on the Belt and Road Initiative has advantages in terms of culture, history, and geography, and has received active support from the people of all countries. By integrating the ancient Silk Road with the Belt and Road Initiative,

we can enhance people-to-people connectivity between China and Central Asian countries, promote friendly exchanges and mutual understanding among their peoples, and advance the well-being of Central Asian citizens through the core principle of "consultation, cooperation, and shared benefits", thereby fostering cultural exchanges between China and Central Asian countries. As a pathway for the exchange and mutual learning between Eastern and Western cultures, the Belt and Road Initiative has already stimulated academic exchanges among countries along the route, such as the publication of works like "The Belt and Road Initiative Reader", "The Belt and Road Initiative Leading China", "China's Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative", and "The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilised Globalisation in China: 1998-2018", among others, have been published. Meanwhile, using tourism to drive cultural exchanges among Central Asian countries has become a new trend. Xinjiang in China, Mary in Turkmenistan, Suyab in Kyrgyzstan, and Samarkand in Uzbekistan are all iconic locations along the ancient Silk Road, attracting a large number of international tourists to embark on this cultural journey to explore the traces of friendly exchanges between China and Central Asia. Academic exchanges and people-to-people cultural exchanges will open up even broader prospects.

With the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation between Central Asian countries and China has become closer, with broader cooperation spaces and enhanced cooperation efforts. Countries along the Belt and Road are tapping into cultural resources, innovating exchange formats, and expanding exchange platforms to promote cultural exchange and mutual learning. This facilitates closer cultural exchanges and promotes mutual understanding among peoples, thereby advancing the extension of the 'China-Central Asia' segment within the Belt and Road Initiative.

6. CONCLUSION

Among the 'Five Connectivities' concepts of the Belt and Road Initiative, 'people-to-people connectivity' is the most fundamental, deepest, and most essential channel for communication and exchange. China and Central Asian countries share a rich historical heritage, having historically developed an open, inclusive, and mutually learning attitude, as extensively documented in historical records such as the Ming History and

Ming Veritable Records. Today, China and Central Asian countries continue to promote people-to-people connectivity, actively explore cultural exchange platforms, and jointly build a “community of shared future”. Confucius Institutes have taken root in Tashkent and Samarkand, cultivating a large number of Chinese language talents for Uzbekistan. The two countries actively engage in diverse cultural exchange activities such as art festivals, seminars, and exhibitions. Additionally, Chinese and Central Asian universities have established active international talent cultivation cooperation, providing excellent talent for cultural exchanges among nations. Through close cultural exchanges and the promotion of people-to-people connectivity, China's relations with Central Asian countries have achieved leapfrog development. With 58 pairs of friendly cities, the people of the two countries engage in friendly exchanges, carrying forward the deep-rooted emotions between the Chinese and Central Asian peoples spanning over 2,000 years. The people of the two countries have entered a new phase of more equal, open, and free dialogue in culture, as well as in academic discussions and grassroots exchanges.

To build a China-Central Asia community with a shared future, it is necessary to draw strength from the “Shanghai Spirit”, consolidate the foundation through “ancient texts and manuscripts”, gather spiritual wealth from the “Silk Road Spirit”, and draw nourishment from the “Belt and Road Initiative”, continuously deepening cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions between China and Central Asian countries. China and Central Asia share many cultural treasures. For example, “Akyn singing” and “Girl Chasing” are folk cultural heritage shared by China and Kazakhstan, while the epic “Alipames” (Alipamesh) is a cultural asset shared by China, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

On 11 June 2019, during his state visit to the Kyrgyz Republic, President Xi Jinping stated in a signed article: This (referring to the epic poem “Manas” — author's note) cultural treasure shared by the peoples of the two countries has once again shone brightly, resonating the strong melody of traditional friendship between China and Kyrgyzstan. President Xi Jinping emphasised that the epic poem “Manas” is a “cultural treasure” shared by the peoples of China and Kyrgyzstan, capable of playing a positive role in fostering mutual understanding and friendship.

China's relations with Central Asian countries are in their golden years of maturity. From the “Silk Road Spirit” to the “Shanghai Spirit”, and from the “Shanghai Spirit” to the “Community of Shared Future”, China has continuously promoted cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions between China and Central Asian countries. The ancient “Silk Road” has painted a historical scroll of friendly exchanges between the peoples of China and Central Asian countries. The new era of the “Belt and Road Initiative” will continue to chart the blueprint for the enduring friendship between the peoples of China and Central Asia in the new era.

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