

# The Historical Experience of Building a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity from the Perspective of the "Silk Road"

Runtian Guo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Institute of Central Asia of Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710062, China*

## ABSTRACT

The historical process of the Silk Road civilization was formed through the integration and interaction of agriculture, nomadism, and oases. However, its discourse system is controlled by the modern spatiotemporal view and Eurocentrism constructed by the West. In the "social form theory", the symbiosis between different civilization systems along the Silk Road is fragmented and included in different social time series, forming a hierarchy of civilizations. Combined with the Orientalism created by the Western world, it has constructed a knowledge system of the current history of the Eurasian world. Under the influence of this concept, the originally cosmopolitan nature of the northwest region of China has also been concealed. The Western Regions, which have a brilliant civilization in history, have become backward border areas, while the region beyond our borders to the west is called "Central Asia" and has been included in the field of world history research. Since then, it has become a completely different discipline from Chinese history research. Some scholars have called for a "spatial turn" in Chinese history research to respond to and overcome the above issues, in order to construct a new path for the discourse system of the "Silk Road", and provide a theoretical basis for mutual trust for China's "national creation" and the "Silk Road" community with a shared future for mankind.

**Keywords:** *Silk Road, Civilization hierarchy theory, Orientalism, National creation, A community with a shared future of mankind.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1984, Mr. Wang Zhilai, a renowned scholar of Central Asian history, proposed that "half of Central Asian history is Chinese history, half is foreign history, specifically, half is the history of the northwest region of China, and the other half is the history of the Eurasian continent". [1] Central Asian scientist Gavin Hambri pointed out that "Central Asia has played two unique and to some extent contradictory roles in human history: on the one hand, due to the drought in most parts of Central Asia and the lack of natural means of transportation (most of the major rivers in Central Asia flow northward into the Arctic Ocean), as a result, the main role of Central Asia was to isolate its surrounding civilizations such as China, India, Iran, and Russia; But on the other hand, the ancient commercial routes in Central Asia also provided a weak but continuous channel of communication for

the civilizations around Central Asia. It is through these channels that the civilizations around Central Asia not only receive some important goods from each other, but also some limited knowledge from each other." [2] Professor Huang Dayuan believed that the "history of Central Asia" and "history of the Silk Road" cannot be two unrelated systems, and their core is how to recognize and grasp the importance of state actors in Eurasian history. At the same time, he combined Mr. Gu Bao's regional relationship history of agriculture, nomadism, oasis, and snow plateau interaction centered on the Hexi Corridor with Mr. Wu Yujin's proposal that "the important relationship in world history is the relationship between the nomadic world and the agricultural world". Based on the long-term theory of the French Yearbook School, Professor Huang Dayuan has proposed that Chinese history cannot be separated from world history, and without Chinese history, world history will not become a

concept of world history. It is believed that the study of the Silk Road has a composite function of "world history and Chinese history" [3], providing a new theoretical basis for the Silk Road community with a shared future for mankind.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. CRITICISM AND TRANSCENDENCE OF THE PARADIGM OF CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION OF "ORIENTALISM" IN RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

The concept of "Asia" refers to the production of extraterritorial knowledge by Europeans since the Great Discovery of Navigation. European scholars have reinterpreted the entire "world" in the process of transforming the past "divine world" into "human world". Through disciplines such as geography, biology, and ethnology, a knowledge system targeting the East (foreign lands) has been established, and the basic framework of "Orientalism" has been constructed. In the 17th and 18th centuries, European scholars distinguished the Eurasian world into "civilized" Europe and "barbaric" Asia, viewing "Easterners" as political and cultural anomalies, presenting a binary opposition, thus rationalizing the colonial activities of European powers through concepts such as "enlightenment" and "civilization". Since modern times, Russians have also inherited this colonial tone with a "civilization theory" color in order to integrate into Europe, viewing Central Asia as their "new continent". Russia's colonial conquest, popular education, scientific exploration, and railway construction in Central Asia transformed the original spatial structure of the region from a political, intellectual, and transportation perspective, with the aim of finding a legitimate basis for governing the region and gaining recognition from European countries.

Based on this, it is necessary to review the academic context and knowledge construction of Central Asian studies of both China and foreign countries, survey the Russia's construction of the "civilization hierarchy theory" in the Eurasian space and time, uncover the historical fog of the construction of "Orientalism", and further clarify that the concept of "Central Asia" is a product

constructed in the context of Eurocentrism, civilization hierarchy theory, and "Orientalism", which is the top priority of this article. Modern Russia distinguished between "European Russia" and "Asian Russia" based on the level of civilization. Through "scientific investigation", it transformed the vague and discriminatory concept of "the Other" "Tataria" in the Western historical context into "Russia Central Asia", and further eroded China's borders from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Ultimately, it influenced the historical process of Central Asia and China from outside the region. Under the influence of the concept of national state history in the Western context, the five Central Asian countries and China have become estranged or even antagonistic in their historical construction, which has separated the diversity of Central Asian space from the unity of social and economic interactions between nomadic, agricultural, oasis, and snowy regions in the Chinese world system. Therefore, the historical narratives of countries along the Silk Road must break through the modern historical framework of nation states, focus on the overlap and connection between their own countries and the external world in historical space, bridge and connect the knowledge gaps caused by previous national historical paradigms through a new paradigm of global and holistic history, and, in addition, micro historiography, that is, find commonalities between each other in history from the daily lives of the people. Therefore, theoretical analysis of social sciences plays a crucial role in research [6].

## **3. CHANGING FROM "FRONTIER" TO "WORLD": A NEW PATH TO CONSTRUCT THE DISCOURSE SYSTEM OF THE SILK ROAD AND THE EURASIAN WORLD**

As Professor Li Hongbin pointed out, the current research on the Silk Road "is nothing more than connecting several points at both ends or in the middle through channels, but in essence, it is still the development and evolution of each country and region's own history". The countries along the Silk Road have been influenced by Western ethnic concepts, and their historical interpretation has always been based on the narrative model of nation states, which has established people's understanding of the Silk Road in a rigid form of dynastic states. This rigid mode of historical understanding is precisely due to the long-term entrenchment of a single central knowledge system in people's minds,

---

1. The viewpoint of this article is a condensed and summarized version of Professor Huang Dayuan's book "China and the World in Eurasian Space and Time".

forming a fixed thinking pattern. Under the influence of the theory of single line social form, the space that originally had synchronicity and fluidity was often ignored. People instead regarded the areas along the "Silk Road" as countries composed of a single ethnic group since ancient times, forming a static historical geographical spatial view, which undermined the spatial integrity and historical continuity of the Silk Road. At the level of historical research, the impact of this mode of thinking is that traditional national history research is only limited to discussing issues within the boundaries of the country, using static modern national boundaries to frame the boundaries of academic research, while ignoring the elasticity of regional boundaries and the inherent historical connections between regions.

At a long-term scale, although there have been many phenomena of ethnic migration and the rise and fall of political power, the underlying logic of the interaction between nomadic, agricultural, and oasis reflected in daily life has always existed [4]. From the synchronicity and mobility of the "Hexi Corridor", "Chang'an-Tianshan Road Network", and "Northwest" along the Silk Road, it can be seen that there is a geographical correlation between agriculture, oases, and nomadism, as well as the symbiosis of these regions in economic and social interactions. However, in the modern world's view of time and space, the one-sided "social form theory" has made the "northwest" region of China a backward and underdeveloped "frontier" region, resulting in an awkward situation where "one part of the same nation is still in 'modern time' and the other part is still in 'ancient time'." [3] Firstly, the "Oasis Bridge" in the Hexi Corridor serves as the intersection of regional and overall relationships and space, thus becoming an important geopolitical stage for the "serial nature of rise and fall of foreign tribes" to occur, and a "crossroads" and hub of the Eurasian continent; Secondly, the "Chang'an-Tianshan Road Network" is actually four heterogeneous regions - the Central Plains region (agricultural core area), the Hexi Corridor (oasis area), the north and south of Tianshan (oasis in the south and grassland oasis in the north), and the Qihe River Basin (grassland core area). The geographical foundation of this huge road network is that the four regions blend and interact economically and politically, as one falls another rises. Therefore, it is necessary to transform the concept of "Northwest" from the "frontier" in the modern spatiotemporal perspective to the "world" in the Eurasian spatiotemporal dimension.

#### **4. THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE PLURALISTIC INTEGRATION OF THE CHINESE NATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EURASIAN TIME AND SPACE: A TENTATIVE RESPONSE TO "WHAT IS CHINA"**

British scholar Anthony Smith believes that modern national construction includes two levels: "national construction" and "national creation". "National construction" refers to the establishment of a unified political, economic, military, transportation, and judicial system as well as a technological development system throughout the country; "National creation" refers to the growth, cultivation, and transmission of common memories, myths, and symbolic symbols that the entire nation should possess, and the determination, cultivation, and transmission of shared culture, knowledge, and value "credibility", as well as the definition, cultivation and transmission of the symbolic signs and myths of territory and the motherland. For a long time, the "impact-response" theory centered around the ocean has dominated the interpretation of modern Chinese history. This theory overlooks the relationship between sea and land at the level of national construction, and also confuses the different connotations of nationalism in modern Chinese history at the national level.

In 1935, economist Ji Zhaoding proposed the concept of "basic economic zones" in Chinese history, analyzing China's historical characteristics from a spatial perspective and emphasizing the role of developed agricultural areas. Later, American scholar Lattimore criticized and inherited the concept of Ji's "basic economic zone", pointing out that this concept may not necessarily apply to societies with strong heterogeneity. Lattimore criticized this concept for implying the "Central Plains centric view", while emphasizing the significant differences between grassland society and agricultural society, and the new community formed by the merger of the two has characteristics that are different from either side. Lattimore then proposed the concept of "strategic zone", believing that the integration of the southern economic zone and the northern strategic zone is a strong driving force for China's growth. This historical view of "spatial integration" highlights the significant impact of the north-south interaction on China's historical space. Professor Huang Dayuan further pointed out a hidden east-west axis in modern China's national construction, and the "Great Wall-

Tianshan" commercial road is the carrier of this east-west axis. With the geopolitical confrontation between China and Russia since the mid-19th century, China's strategic area has shifted towards Central Asia and the Mongolian Plateau. The integration of the northern and southern regions of Tianshan into the "state" requires strong investment from the Qing government. This energy allocation and resource integration covering military, financial, human, and other aspects has also led to a closer relationship between the economic zones in North China and Jiangnan and the strategic zones in the north and south of Tianshan Mountains, forming a complete "Great China" in space, and thus realizing the transformation of Chinese history from the north-south axis to the east-west axis, presenting a dynamic and multidimensional new perspective.

After the demise of the Qing Dynasty, according to the western "ethnic geography" about the idea of a nation-state, the relationship between Xinjiang, Mongolia, Xizang, Manchuria and the so-called "Chinese headquarters" was ambiguous. How to transform the heterogeneous dynastic territory into a "common territory" recognized by all citizens has been a topic that many scholars in modern China have pondered and attempted to respond to. In the late 19th century, Japanese colonialists introduced the theory of "China's headquarters" to China, which had a negative impact on China's border situation and national security. In 1939, Mr. Gu Zhegang and Mr. Fei Xiaotong engaged in an academic debate on the viewpoint that the "Chinese nation is one", but both aimed to compete with the discourse system of Japanese colonialism. In the late 1950s, Sino-Soviet relations were tense, and Soviet scholars reintroduced the distorted theory of "non China beyond the Great Wall" in the debate, emphasizing the identification of the people of all ethnic groups in Central Asian countries with Russia, emphasizing the centripetal force of the people of Central Asia and Xinjiang, strengthening their identification with Moscow and the Soviet Union, thereby provoking and dividing China's ethnic relations, and even hindering the construction of a community with a shared future for humanity from the perspective of the "Silk Road". In order to dispel the influence of the Soviet Union on the ideology of Central Asia and Xinjiang, Chinese social science workers, including ethnologists Mr. Fei Xiaotong and Mr. Gu Bao, proposed to reform the research paradigm of ethnic history and form Chinese characteristics. Mr. Gu Bao distinguished the concepts of ethnicity and race, and proposed the

viewpoint of "commonality of the Chinese nation", emphasizing that in Chinese history, the Xiongnu, Turkic, and Uyghur tribes were not a community of racial individuals, but rather a community of "people" and "ethnic groups" in history. Therefore, for the paradigm of ethnic history research, the issue of ethnic integration cannot be ignored. Instead, it is necessary to start from China's history and national conditions, emphasizing the process of diversified integration of the Chinese nation with "you have me, I have you". [9]

In his article "On the Correct Explanation of the Historical Status of the Nomadic Society of the Xiongnu", Mr. Gu Bao denied the existence of differences in civilization levels between the nomadic and agricultural regimes, and equalized their status in the dual interactive structure of agriculture and animal husbandry in the "synchronicity" territorial space. From the perspective of geographical landscape and ethnic creation, the researchers delve into the historical process of China, shape the spatial structure of Chinese history through regional landscapes, emphasize the significance of landscape changes in territorial composition in the "unified" historical view, and use the interaction and correlation of "corridor time and space" to dispel the erroneous understanding of Chinese history formed by the West and Russia based on "ethnic geography" [10]. The rich geographical landscape diversity of China reflects the complexity and diversity of Chinese culture, as well as the temporal and spatial intersection of various ethnic groups in the north and south of the Great Wall. In the process of modern "national creation", Chinese scholars need to implement the multi-dimensional space of the traditional Chinese dynasty into a highly isomorphic historical territory. And in the process of modern national construction and national creation, it is necessary to have a profound understanding of the basic logic that "the modern sense of national territory is a deep investment of the emotions, experiences, memories, intentions, and desires of national members", as well as the close connection between the working population as developers and the territorial space, so as to grasp the historical connection between "ethnic groups", "people", and "land". In other words, only by understanding historical China from a local perspective can the researchers establish a system of historical interpretation that is different from that of the West, Japan, and Russia, thereby integrating the historical relationship between China and Central Asia that has been separated.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From the 19th century to the 20th century, Russia conquered Central Asia from the south, while Britain moved north from India. The great power game between the two empires around Central Asia had a huge impact on the traditional tribute system of the Qing Dynasty. During the period of transition from the "world view" to the "frontier view", the former "Western Regions" became the western frontier. At the same time, under the influence of geopolitics and national strategy, the Qing court and the opposition had a dispute over "coastal defense" and "border defense". The flourishing of Northwest historical geography during the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods marked a revolution in the knowledge system of the geopolitical frontier view. After the October Revolution broke out in Russia, although the old Tsarist Empire was replaced by the socialist Soviet Union, this geopolitical pattern continued. The Soviet Union, with its advantage in Central Asia, promoted the Central Asian region to become a strategic bridgehead for infiltration into Xinjiang, China. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a game in Xinjiang, and even experienced a "three countries four parties game" situation. This reflects the continuity of the geopolitical connectivity inherent in the Eurasian continent. It can be said that the competition among major powers along the "Silk Road" will not disappear and will always pose challenges for China to build a community with a shared future for mankind along the "Silk Road". In the past, from the perspective of ocean centered analysis, the historical relationships and spatial interactions between Northwest China and Central Asia were often overlooked. The historical experience of a community with a shared future for mankind on the Silk Road cannot be presented in the historical narratives of nation-states, making the proposition of a community with a shared future for mankind a "castle in the air",

By sorting out the historical relationship between modern China and Central Asia, it will help trigger readers to rethink the centrality of history. To make Central Asian countries understand that the research paradigm based on the analysis of nation states is based on a knowledge system centered around the maritime order, with a theoretical approach that targets the historical development trajectory of Europe. Only by criticizing colonial orientalism and traditional regional and national studies, rethinking the power

structure behind knowledge and its impact on regional space, and then interpreting historical knowledge and culture from the geopolitical coherence and symbiosis of the regions along the Silk Road, can we sort out a worldview that emphasizes symbiosis, and construct a set of mutual trust, connectivity, and underlying logic for the "Silk Road" community with a shared future for mankind. This requires the current academic community to explore the common historical space between China and surrounding regions based on geography and combined with "human land relations". [7] In terms of research perspective, this Eurasian shift in regional country studies breaks through the rigid modern national boundaries and grasps the overall connections of countries along the Silk Road in regional networks. In terms of research methods, this approach emphasizes problem awareness and focus selection, highlighting the importance of internal perspectives and human land relationships along the Silk Road region.

In a word, the current academic community is facing many challenges in the process of "building a community of shared future for mankind along the Belt and Road". Only from the perspective of regional integrity, with the help of new space historiography, can the academic community jump out of the shackles of the framework of "Chinese history" and "foreign history" to accurately grasp the pulse of historical evolution, so as to understand the power differences, interactive relationships, and shaping effects on regional spatial structure between China and surrounding regions in geopolitical context [8], and to restore the historical connections of the regions along the Silk Road and achieve mutual understanding among the people.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Wang Zhilai, On the Necessity of Teaching and Studying the History of Central Asia [J]. Journal of Hunan Normal University, 1984 (04). (in Chinese)
- [2] Hambly Gavin, chiefly ed., Central Asia [M]. Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1994.
- [3] Huang Dayuan, China and the World in Eurasian Space and Time [M]. Social Sciences Literature Press, 2022. (in Chinese)
- [4] A. H. Dani et al. , History of Civilizations of Central Asia (Volume I): The dawn of civilization: earliest times to 700 B.C.

(Composed by UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 1992)

- [5] Chahryar Adle et al. , History of Civilizations of Central Asia (Volume V): Towards the contemporary period: from the mid-nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century (Composed by UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 1992)
- [6] Wallestein, etc., Open Social Sciences - Reconstructing Social Sciences Report [M]. Liu Feng, trans., SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1997. (in Chinese)
- [7] Huang Dayuan, Guo Runtian, The Eurasian Turn of Regional and International Studies: Focusing on Problem Consciousness [J]. Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, June, 2021 (02). (in Chinese)
- [8] David Storey, Territory: The Claiming of Space, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.
- [9] Gu Bao, Some Opinions on Seriously Implementing the Party's Ethnic Policy in Cultural Work, internal manuscript, March 10, 1982. (in Chinese)
- [10] Guo Yanshun, trans., Selected Translation of Бадмаев П.А. (1983-1905) of the Seventh Class Civil Servant of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Imperial Russia [J]. China Tibetology, 2014 (S1). (in Chinese)