

# The Spread and Integration of Religious Culture Along the Eastern Silk Road

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The eastern Silk Road is a product of the mutual exchange of material culture and spiritual culture among ancient China and other countries, regions, and nations. It is the result of the contact and collision between eastern and western civilizations. It is also a strong proof that the Chinese nation implements the policy of opening to the outside world. Historically, the Silk Road served as a bridge of economic and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, closely linking ancient Chinese culture with the cultures of central Asia, west Asia, Persia, and even ancient Greek and Roman cultures. In various regions along the eastern silk road, there were many religions, but not only did they rarely fight with each other, but they were able to live in harmony and develop together. On the Silk Road, various religions developed in parallel, their doctrines absorbed and integrated, and different religions borrowed terms from each other and adopted the forms of other religions, making the silk road a cultural stage for the exchange and integration of religions, which constituted a unique phenomenon in the history of the development of world religions.

*Keywords:* the Silk Road, cultural communication, religious culture, religious syncretism

## Introduction

The diversity of religious belief in history and the resulting openness and inclusiveness have resulted in the mutual learning and gradual integration of foreign religious cultures and local cultures. Moreover, the changes and integration in a single field, such as religion, language, and writing, are not isolated from each other, but interact with each other, evolve alternately, and integrate with each other. There are many important transportation routes and hubs along the Silk Road, such as Xinjiang, Gansu, and so on. It has been inhabited, multiplied, migrated, and developed by many ethnic groups. Foreign religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, also came into contact. However, when each foreign religion is introduced here, it is not quickly accepted by the local people. It usually needs a process of adaptation and combination with the national customs and local culture. In this process, the diversified development and mutual communication of religions are often reflected.

## The Origin of the Silk Road

The Silk Road was officially opened by Zhang Qian after his arrival in the western regions, but it had already been formed in the 5th century BC. According to the records of the historian by Sima Qian, this passage “led to the opening of the northwest country to the Han dynasty”. However, after the opening of the

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Silk Road by Zhang Qian, “all the travelers were called noble princes, believing that the quality (integrity) and the foreign countries believed in it”. Pei Si said in the historical records “Qian opened the western way”. This proves that Zhang Qian who came to the Western Regions, played a huge role in the prosperity of economic and trade on the Silk Road. Not only did he bring quantities of specialties from western countries for main land people, but he also let them know a great deal of unheard information and knowledge. At the same time, this move also expanded the influence of ancient China in the world, making the Western Han Dynasty and all nationalities in the Western Regions, the Central Asian countries establish friendly relations. For the ethnic groups, regions, and countries, the Silk Road played a very good role in promoting economic and cultural exchange. The Silk Road traffic route has broad sense and narrow sense. Commonly what we call about the Silk Road is narrow; it refers to the starting from Changan, the Hexi Corridor, Mount Tianshan between the north and the south, again through Central Asia, West Asia, west to the Mediterranean city of road traffic road. However, the generalized Silk Road also includes transportation route through the grasslands to which nomadic peoples migrate and the sea lanes to Central Asia and Europe. According to the natural characteristics along it, the Silk Road can be divided into eastern, central, and western three sections. The eastern one refers to the east of Dunhuang, Chang’an, Luoyang, and other famous ancient capitals that have served as the starting point of the Silk Road. The middle one is from west of Dunhuang, Green Ridge (now Pamirs), and Kunlun mountains, southeast of Central Asia, across western China, to Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The western one refers to west the road from the Green Ridge. It crosses the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Italy, Egypt, and other dozens of countries.

### **The Characteristics of Religious Culture on the Silk Road**

The culture and life of a nation are multifaceted, among which religious belief occupies an important position. Through the ages, not only religious belief dominates the thoughts and feelings of believers, but religious organizations and customs also deeply affect people’s daily life. In today’s international disputes and regional conflicts, religious conflicts count a lot. However, for thousands of years, along the Silk Road, the main melody of religions has always been a symphony of harmony in which diverse religions live together in harmony and develop together. It can be regarded as a rare example in the world religious history.

As foreign religions, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism came into China, and had a strong impact on the traditional Chinese culture, and then blended with it. In this process, they also showed some characteristics of religious and cultural contact.

#### **Quite Different Degrees of Transmission**

In Xinjiang and even in the northwest regions through which the Silk Road passed, Islam is a relatively mature religion. More than a dozen ethnic groups, including Uighurs, Hui, and Dongxiang, believe in Islam, which has exerted a significant influence on architecture, religious festivals, and religious practices. Buddhism culture has a profound influence on the culture of the Chinese nation. After being introduced into China, it, together with Confucian culture and Taoist culture, constitutes the most important traditional culture of China. Compared with the Buddhist culture and Islamic culture, the Christian culture has little influence because the time was short after it had been introduced into China.

#### **Strong Local Characteristics**

As the regions along the Silk Road were inhabited by many ethnic groups, many religious cultures collided and came into contact here, so that almost every ethnic group had its own religion. However, in the

transmission of each religion, the ethnic groups did not accept it directly, but integrated with ethnic customs and local culture. For example, the Hui nationality and other ethnic groups have different views on the Holy Festival of Islam from those of other Islamic believers abroad, and all ethnic groups have their own new ideas on the Christian Christmas.

### **Certain Adaptability**

When each religion is introduced, it is not quickly accepted by the local people, and it often requires a process of adaptation. Islam has absorbed many local cultures, including some Zoroastrianism and Shamanism since its introduction in the Western Regions, and was more easily accepted by the local people. Islamic architecture also varies according to the characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture, geographical climate, and building materials of different regions.

### **Co-existence**

Despite the spread of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, religions coexist in harmony and communicate with each other with tolerance. Each religion learns from each other and develops together, forming the characteristic of co-existence.

## **The Religious Cultural Fusion on the Silk Road**

### **Sharing of Religious Terms**

The various eastern and western religions spreading along the Silk Road originally had different cultural colors, but in the process of spreading and developing in China, all of them were endowed with the inherent cultural connotation of China. The borrowing and sharing of religious terms is the most prominent manifestation of this feature. Manichean borrowing from Buddhist terms is fully reflected in the newly discovered Manicheism literature “Manicheism Buddha” in Xiapu. Let’s start with the term “Moni-light Buddha”. The name “Moni-light Buddha” is obviously a Buddhist term. Mani, orb, was used as a leader. Except of borrowing harmonics and good, its doctrinal origin (Ma, 1999): “light” word was from Manichean worship of the light, to borrow from the Buddhism “Lou the rocana Buddha”, “Vairocana Buddha” with its “vast wisdom, light shines”, suitable for Manicheism that advocates the theme of light [key]. The word “Buddha” is borrowed from the Sutra of Hui Que, written as “burxan”, which is used by Manicheism to refer to the deities of the religion (Yang, 2008).

### **The Borrowing of Forms of Expression**

Since the introduction of various religions from the Silk Road into China, they have been integrated with traditional Chinese culture. Later than Buddhism and Taoism, the Three Yi Religion has also been integrated with Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs. In the process of spreading along the Silk Road, various religions changed according to different situations, not sticking to the original classic cases, but changing towards the direction of human biochemistry, reality, and secularization. In this process, the deity worship of various religions also diverged quietly, and its primitive belief integrated with Buddhism, Taoism, and other mainstream Chinese religions and various folk beliefs, and depended on each other to develop.

## **Conclusion**

Religion is the important inner spirit of cultural gene, and all national cultures more or less embody the religious spirit of the national culture. At the same time, the concrete manifestation of religion has become a part of culture. Therefore, civilized communication cannot be separated from the cultural and political attributes

brought by the value system of religion or similar religion. As a matter of fact, the spread and influence of various ancient religions, including thought, language, writing, and art, on the Silk Road, altogether embody the achievements of the communication between eastern and western civilizations. It can be seen that religion plays an irreplaceable role in ancient civilization. On the one hand, it is the carrier and representative of the major ancient civilizations. On the other hand, while preaching, religious believers also undertake the mission of civilized communication, such as Buddhism to ancient Indian civilization; Zoroastrianism, Manicheism to ancient Persian civilization, Judaism to ancient Hebrew civilization, Christianity to ancient European civilization, and Confucianism, Taoism to ancient Chinese civilization.

Religions are their civilization breeds and carriers of all factors in their own ancient civilization (Zhang, 2010, pp. 40-52). Therefore, religion is concentrated reflections of civilization in some period in ideology, mode of thinking, values, and moral value. In western and eastern ancient civilization, religion has played a very important role. In this sense, the Silk Road is more than just a trade route between China and foreign countries, it is also a channel for religious and cultural exchange, and a veritable way of belief and religious integration.

The Silk Road culture communication and integration can be considered to be a kind of typical cross-cultural communication, which comes from different cultural backgrounds among individuals, groups, or organizations, involving information among people from different cultural backgrounds, items spreading, and interpersonal communication, as well as the diffusion, osmosis, migration, and fusion of human cultural elements. The opening of the Silk Road has promoted the political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and the west, which has become an indisputable fact. Up to now, this road is still an important channel for communication between China and the west.

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