



INSTITUTE OF  
CHINESE STUDIES

## **The Silk Road Idea (1877-1971)**

**Speaker:** Dr. Tamara Chin

**Chair:** Dr. Sreemati Chakrabarti

**Date:** 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2019

**Venue:** Seminar Room, ICS

Dr Tamara Chin began her talk with a map which outlined in red and blue, the old and the new Silk Roads. She said that this conceptualization of the Silk Road on a map is a relatively new concept and that there is no ancient word for the Silk Road in Greek, Latin, Chinese or Japanese texts.

She further went on to describe the three phases of how the idea of the Silk Road came about. In the first phase from 1877-1945, a period defined by imperialism and two world wars, the term Silk Road entered English, French, and German geographical texts. It was, however, rare in Chinese and Japanese. In the next period of decolonisation and cold war from 1945-1971, the idea of the Silk Road started appearing in films, novels, and historical studies in the US and Japan. In China, in contrast to the usage in the US and Japan, the idea was popularised in the Afro- Asian diplomacy. In the third phase, i.e., after 1972, its usage was popularised by global arts and the Humanities and through UNESCO projects. It later became an inspiration for People's Republic Of China's One Belt One Road idea.

Talking about its history, Dr Tamara indicated that the term was coined by the German traveller and geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877. He was the first person to undertake a scientific, geographical analysis of China and argued that this road wasn't a bridge between the

West and the East as it is today. He even went on to say that “Little doubt exists that eventually China will be connected with Europe by Rail”. In the 1920s Sven Hedin, a Swedish geographer popularised “The Silk Road Motor Road” and associated the idea with the Chinese. After the Second World War, the term became particularly popular, especially in Japan. Its representation was similar to that of Europe and the US; however, China had yet not taken ownership of the idea. This point was reiterated by Dr Tamara several times during her talk.

She further talked about the manifestation of Silk Road in world literature. Mao Dun’s works are a prominent example- Mao Dun mentions the Silk Road as a world-famous road responsible for cultural exchange between countries. He says that the world literature had been present long before colonies were built but colonisation isolated their works from the treasury of world literature.

Next, she spoke of how the term Silk Road was used by Pakistan, however not by China and India, to define the Sino- Indian relationship. She infers that the name was more so used in literature than in diplomacy. Even the idea of the maritime silk road does not appear until the 1980s. She qualifies this by giving the example of the Sino- Arab friendship, Sino-Africa relations, with news clippings from Somalia, which had no mention of the term. She further goes on to say that these narratives are essential for their effect on academia. The newspapers often reiterated that China and the African nations and, China and India had relations which went back centuries. Therefore, the relationships that they were building were not new. A new narrative of the Sino- African solidarity was introduced with a focus on “redevelopment” projects. In all of this, the term Silk Road was not mentioned rather terms like sea route, trade channels, etc. were used. In 1920 when Tagore visited China, he urged the reopening of the channel of communication between India and China.

She summarised her talk in three brief points:

1. Silk Road as a set of modern political ideas and narratives.
2. Two different Silk Roads came about during the Cold War.
3. The Afro- Asian “Silk Road” which disappears in modern times (after 1972).

In conclusion, Dr Tamara said that through all of this, her aim is to answer the question of where did the kind of push to look for China’s relations with the outside world come from. She ended

by highlighting the importance of her research work which tries to bring to light the complex and multifaceted narratives of the colonial silk road, as used by the British, French and Germans and the anti-colonial silk road as is in use in China, India and other central Asian countries.

Her presentation was followed by an engaging session of question and answers from the audience.

*This report was prepared by Ashima Vardhan, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

### **Disclaimer**

This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.