

Defining 'Silk Road literature' across time, borders and disciplines

LITERATURE

By WANG RULIANG

"Silk Road literature" is a concept that has gained increasing popularity in recent years. However, academia has yet to determine its classification, significance, timeline, connotation, extension, and disciplinary attribution. It is necessary to clarify these concepts before expanding its study.

Definition of Silk Road literature

Of the prevailing definitions of Silk Road literature, two are quite representative. One sees it as literary works which portray regions along the Silk Road, while the other refers to it as all narratives that relate to the route.

If we accept the first definition, we will encounter two dilemmas. For one, the Silk Road covers a wide range of areas. As far as the ancient land route was concerned, it started from Chang'an (now Xi'an) or Luoyang in China, passed through the Hexi Corridor, Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia, and reached the Roman Empire in the West. The literature of such a vast area is so comprehensive that it approaches the inclusivity of world literature. The second dilemma is that literature along the Silk Road is not all related to the trade route, so if all literature produced in these regions is defined as Silk Road literature, it is difficult to capture the unique value of this genre.

That said, the second definition is not flawless. Literary works about the Silk Road are diverse, and the Silk Road itself is a multi-disciplinary concept with rich connotations. How would specialists define the Silk Road theme? It's hard to know for sure. This definition tends to be generalized.

The parameters of Silk Road literature should not only highlight its uniqueness when compared with other literary concepts and genres, but also should make it easy to research, avoiding uncertainties or ambiguities.

To this end, Silk Road literature might be defined as a collection of Chinese and foreign literary works, a type of literary phenomena based on the Silk Road's temporal-regional background, depicting the landscape of the Silk Road, capturing the spirit of the Silk Road, and reflecting cultural exchange between East and West.

To further articulate the Silk Road landscape, this concept refers to the local heritage, religious

art, culture and customs along the route. The Silk Road spirit is the pioneering, open-minded, and perseverant spirit displayed by the merchants, emissaries and monks who traveled back and forth along the trade route. The East-West cultural exchanges would encompass a broad range of interactions, occurring on material, technical and institutional levels, as well as individually, in custom and spirit.

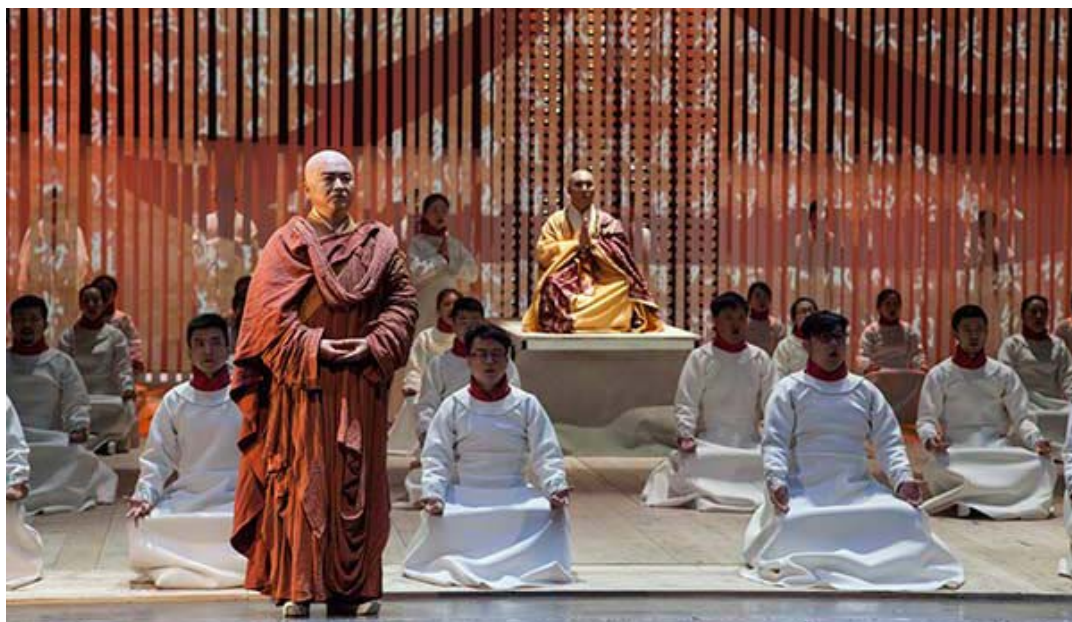
Multi-dimensional classification

From a temporal perspective, Silk Road literature can be divided into ancient and modern Silk Road literature. Some scholars proposed a separate pre-Silk Road literary genre, but this approach is not popular, due to inconsistencies within the Silk Road's timeline. According to archaeological discoveries and documents such as *Mu Tianzi Zhuan (Biography of King Mu, Son of Heaven)*, the Silk Road existed before Western Han diplomat Zhang Qian's westward journey. Chinese historian Sima Qian recorded that Zhang opened the way to the Western Regions, but it was not true. Hence, accurately dating the pre-Silk Road era is exceedingly difficult.

Other scholars suggested the term "modern and contemporary Silk Road literature," but it's better to adopt the term "modern Silk Road literature", as the "contemporary" time period is rare in foreign literature, and the use of both modern and contemporary Silk Road literature may easily lead to communication barriers between Chinese and foreign researchers. Though Chinese and foreign scholars have different understandings of the beginning and end of ancient and modern eras, this misunderstanding has become common knowledge, and can be clarified among individual researchers.

From a spatial perspective, the genre can be divided into grassland, desert and maritime Silk Road literature in accordance to different geographical routes. This classification method is especially applicable to the works written by monks, emissaries and merchants who traveled along the Silk Road.

For example, Qiu Chuji, an eminent Quanzhen Taoist monk, was ordered by Genghis Khan to travel to his court, which at the time was encamped in Central Asia. He went through the Altai and Tienshan mountains, the southern parts of today's Kazakhstan, through Kyrgyzstan, to Samarkand and then down into Iran and Afghanistan in



Pictured is a stage shot from *Jianzhen's Journey to Japan*, a China-made opera adapted from the legend of Chinese monk Jianzhen's six attempts to travel to Japan to promote Buddhism in the eighth century. Photo: CHINA DAILY

1222. His disciple Li Zhichang, who accompanied him on his journey, left a brilliant account of Central Asia in *The Travels of Qiu Chang Chun to the West*. This memoir provides insight into the grasslands, the lives of ordinary people and their customs; it is an essential part of the grassland Silk Road literature.

Xuanzang was a Tang Dynasty Chinese Buddhist monk and translator who traveled back and forth across the Tarim Basin via the land route. His *Record of the Western Regions* is an excellent example of desert Silk Road literature.

Japanese scholar and writer Ōmi no Mifune composed the work *Tō Daiwajō Tōseiden*, an account of the Chinese monk Jianzhen's six attempts to visit Japan, and eventually, Jianzhen's successful work in Japan. His courageous journey amid violent storms makes this book a dynamic example of maritime Silk Road literature.

Faxian Zhuan (A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms) recorded Chinese monk Faxian's journey to India between 399 and 414 CE. He crossed the Gobi Desert and walked all the way to Mathura, Pataliputra (Patna) and the Madhya Pradesh region. He later returned to China by sea. His description of the desert, the cold and harsh Himalayas and the tough, stormy seas make *Faxian Zhuan* an example of both desert and maritime Silk Road literature.

The Silk Road literature can be divided into four basic genres: poetry, fiction, prose, and drama. Myths and epics, which are more complex and unique, should be studied separately. This classification method applies literary genre to observations of Silk Road literature, breaking the boundaries of time and space, and allowing researchers to draw conclusions and summaries from their respective fields.

However, it is worth noting that an overemphasis on genre should be avoided, and instead, we should highlight the close connection between literary works with the Silk Road landscape, the Silk Road spirit, and the Silk Road cultural exchange.

Significance

The prosperity of Silk Road literature will bring new opportunities for the literary and cultural development of ethnic minorities along the Silk Road, which will help them to explore their own resources, use their unique advantages, consolidate and uplift their positions in the field of Chinese literature, and actively participate in world literature discourse.

German philosopher Hegel argued that Chinese people had no national epics. In fact, almost all ethnic minorities in China have their own epics, such as *Gesar* of the Tibetan people, *Jangar* of the Mongolian people and *Manas* of the Kirgiz people. The spread and variation of these epic works along the Silk Road is an important cross-national, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic and cross-regional phenomenon. If we study these epic works within the framework of Silk Road literature, drawing parallel comparisons between Chinese epics, Western epics, and Indian epics, this would be excellent evidence to refute Hegel's comment.

The study of Silk Road literature opens up a new field within Chinese literature, and also presents a new avenue for dialogue between Chinese literature and world literature. Silk Road literature encompasses a large number of foreign works. The *Record of the Western Regions* is a prime example of this. This famous journey deeply influenced the largest collection of short stories in the history of Japanese literature, *Anthology of Tales from the Past*. It also preserves a large number of written and oral works from Indian literature, such as the stories of Buddha's birth, the legend of the Deer King, and the legend of the Moon Rabbit.

At the same time, the *Record of the Western Regions* is used in comparative literature as a parallel with western apostolic literature. One is the record of toiling on the Silk Road in order to obtain the true knowledge of Buddhism, and the other describes the spread of Christian faith. What they have in common is the pioneering, perseverant, and indomitable devotion for the sake of faith.

Disciplinary attribution

After the emergence of a new academic concept, it is necessary to find a suitable disciplinary affiliation for it. This can not only arm it with theoretical proof, but also foster innovation and development of the discipline. In summary, Chinese literature, Asian literature, and comparative literature are all suitable disciplines for Silk Road literature.

China is the starting point of the Silk Road, so it is natural for Silk Road literature to be included in Chinese literature. By systematically exploring and categorizing Silk Road literature, it can inject new vitality into Chinese literature.

Geographically, the Silk Road extends from China to Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia, linking three Eastern cultural circles. Accordingly, it is reasonable to regard the Silk Road literature within a broader Asian vision and put this important literary and cultural phenomenon under the discipline of Asian literature.

Within current Asian literature, the study of regional literature such as Chinese literature, Indian literature, Japanese literature and Arab literature is more common. Though certain scholars have made outstanding achievements, the overall study of Asian literature is still relatively weak. The rise and development of Silk Road literature could provide a novel perspective and unified academic support for Asian literature.

Last but not least, Silk Road literature is a typical cross-national, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary literature, which yearns for compatibility and openness. In this sense, comparative literature maybe the answer. The relationship between Chinese and foreign literature is not only the starting point for comparative literature, but also its final destination, which is one of the seeds of Silk Road literature. The introduction of Silk Road literature will become a new point of growth for comparative literature.

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