

Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences

Lecture “China and the new Silk Road: Inheriting the past; opening the future” by Dr. Johnny Hon, Armenia, 30th September 2015

Your Excellencies

Distinguished scholars and Faculty members

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Friends

It is really an honour to address you today at the Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences, a distinguished academic institution in Armenia, a land of learning. I have visited Armenia several times and each time I have been moved by its industrious and friendly people and by its great history and civilisation. Thank you again for your warm welcome.

Since, Mr Deng Xiaoping put forward the policy of reform and opening up just over three-and-a-half decades ago, China has been transformed. From an economic backwater, the country has become the world’s second largest economy. In this process, hundreds of millions of Chinese people have been lifted out of poverty, thereby making by far the biggest single contribution to humanity’s efforts to reach the targets set out in the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations.

We have, therefore, long since reached the point where events and developments in China have a global impact and where no major global issue can be satisfactorily addressed without China’s input.

It is against this background that China has advanced the concepts of a global community of common destiny, of shared prosperity, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. China understands that sustainable and lasting prosperity has to mean prosperity for all.

This is the thinking behind a whole range of China's recent initiatives – of the development of BRICS, along with Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa, and the creation of its New Development Bank; of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); and especially of the great vision of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

This is a new idea but with ancient lineage. As the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China have jointly observed:

“More than two millennia ago the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges that linked the major civilisations of Asia, Europe and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road by later generations. For thousands of years, the Silk Road Spirit – ‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’ - has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilisation, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road. Symbolising communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.”

It is shared not least by China and Armenia. The peoples of China and Armenia are friends and that friendship dates to the ancient Silk Road. The first references to Armenian-Chinese relations are to be found in the works of Moses of Khoren, the fifth century historian and

author of the classic work. 'History of the Armenians', and of Anania Shirakatsi, the seventh century geographer, mathematician, philosopher and astronomer, a man generally considered as Armenia's first scientist.

Armenian merchants travelled to and lived in China long before the 12th century and many left their mark on the country. Over the centuries, Armenian merchants and communities established themselves in various places in China, including Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Harbin, Shanghai, and even in Tibet.

Allow me here to briefly mention and pay tribute to two famous Armenians who have left a lasting legacy in China.

Professor Hovhannes Ghazarian, was an Armenian born and educated in Macau, and was the first person to translate the Holy Bible into Chinese. According to the Soviet Armenian Encyclopaedia, Ghazarian translated the Gospel by St. Matthew in 1807. Later on, he travelled to India to continue working on the Bible and its translation. The New Testament was published in Chinese in 1813, and his translation of the whole Bible was issued in 1822 by the British and Foreign Bible Society. These editions are recognised as the first known complete print version of the Christian Scriptures in the Chinese language.

Sir Paul Catchik Chater was born to Armenian parents in India in 1846. Orphaned at the age of eight, Chater received his education in Calcutta before arriving in Hong Kong in 1864. He became one of the most successful businessmen in Hong Kong's history and founded Hong Kong Land in 1889, which remains one of the territory's largest and most prestigious companies. In 1896, Chater was appointed to the Executive Council of Hong Kong and served there until his death in 1926. He was knighted in 1902. Some of Hong Kong's main streets, including Chater Road and Catchik Street are named after him.

Finally, in this briefest of historical overviews, in this the 70th anniversary year of the victory of Chinese people in the war of resistance against Japanese aggression, of the Great Patriotic War of the peoples of the Soviet Union and of the global anti-fascist war, I recall with respect and pay tribute to the more than 6,000 Armenian soldiers from the Red Army, who fought heroically in decisive battles for the liberation of north east China in the summer of 1945.

It is on such solid and deep historic roots of friendship that I believe we can embark on the modern Silk Road together.

China's initiative to jointly build the Belt and Road, embracing the trend towards a multipolar world, economic globalisation, cultural diversity and greater IT application, is designed to uphold global free trade and an open world economy and to enhance regional cooperation. It aims at being highly efficient in terms of the allocation of resources and at achieving a deep integration of markets among the countries along the Belt and Road, thereby jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all.

According to the vision of the Chinese government, the Belt and Road Initiative is in line with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter. It upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, namely mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The initiative is an open one. It covers, but is not limited to, the area of the ancient Silk Road. It is open to all countries, and international and regional organisations, so that the results will benefit wider parts of the globe.

It is harmonious and inclusive. It advocates tolerance among civilisations, respects the paths of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogues among different

civilisations on the principles of seeking common ground while shelving differences and drawing on each other's strengths, so that all countries can coexist in peace for common prosperity.

The new Silk Road follows market principles. It will abide by market rules and international norms, will give play to the decisive role of the market in resource allocation and the primary role of enterprises, and will also let governments perform their due functions.

The new Silk Road is envisaged to go in five directions:

- From north west and north east China through Central Asia and Russia to the Baltic Sea
- From north west China through Central Asia and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean
- From south west China through the Indochina peninsula, Malaysia and Singapore to the Indian Ocean
- From the Chinese ports, through the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca to the Indian Ocean and westwards from there, for example to East Africa;
- And by the same route but then on to the South Pacific from the Straits of Malacca.

Six economic corridors are envisaged:

- From north east China through Mongolia and Russia to the Baltics
- From the coastal provinces through western China to Central Asia and then to Russia and the Baltics
- From north west China through Xinjiang, Central and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean
- From Yunnan and Guangxi Zhuang in south west China through Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia to Singapore
- From China through Pakistan, entering the Indian Ocean through the port of Gwadar;

- And, through Myanmar, Bangladesh and India, entering the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal.

These new silk routes will embrace – and will require major investments in – railways, highways, sea transportation, pipelines and the information superhighway and connectivity.

To translate this grand vision into reality will require trillions of dollars of investment in infrastructure and in all sectors of the economy in the more than 60 countries directly encompassed within the new Silk Road initiative, as well as further afield. Cumulatively it represents the greatest business opportunity in the contemporary world.

Just as Armenia's relations with China began with the ancient Silk Road, so the prospects for their twenty-first century relations will be defined and enhanced by the new silk road. Armenia, with its strategic position between Asia, Europe and the Middle East, as well as its extensive and entrepreneurial diaspora, has an indispensable role to play, for example by strengthening infrastructure and transport links with such neighbours as Georgia and Iran. Armenia's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, together with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, along with its becoming an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are also positive factors for full participation in the new silk road, as is the recent encouraging agreement between Iran and the six powers along with the European Union, which enhances the prospects for peace in the region.

As many of you will know, Chinese culture attaches great importance to historical allegory. In that spirit, I recommend you to watch this year's Jackie Chan film Dragon Blade. Set in 48BC, the film lauds the cooperation and joint efforts of 35 nations along the ancient Silk Road to achieve peace, harmony and mutual prosperity, rejecting aggression, war and power politics. It is indeed a powerful metaphor for our times. We cannot ignore the fact that today much of the Silk Road is torn by often vicious conflicts and that it also faces challenges of

poverty and underdevelopment. Military intervention has singularly failed to resolve such problems. It has only made them worse. With its vision of peace, development, win win cooperation and mutual benefit, drawing on ancient wisdom, the new Silk Road aims to correct the mistakes of the past and open the road to the future.

This new Silk Road, a road of peace and harmony, is therefore truly the road that will bring Beijing and Yerevan ever closer together.

Thank you for your attention.

Dr. Johnny Hon
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