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Al-Shajarah is a refereed international journal that publishes original scholarly articles in the area of Islamic thought, Islamic civilization, Islamic science, and Malay world issues. The journal is especially interested in studies that elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, scholarly works that provide fresh and insightful Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world. *Al-Shajarah* will also consider articles written on various religions, schools of thought, ideologies and subjects that can contribute towards the formulation of an Islamic philosophy of science. Critical studies of translation of major works of major writers of the past and present. Original works on the subjects of Islamic architecture and art are welcomed. Book reviews and notes are also accepted.

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SILK ROAD, ISLAM, AND CONFUCIANISM¹

*Osman Bakar*²

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first express my sincere appreciation to Mr. Samuel Lee and his Malaysian Friends of the Silk Road Club for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver the keynote speech at the Silk Road and Asian Civilisation Forum 2024 this afternoon. The organisers would like me to speak on the topic “Silk Road, Islam, and Confucianism.” As a student of history and civilisations, I consider this invitation as indeed a great honour for me that I will never forget. Thank you!

My understanding is that today’s Forum is mainly concerned with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping of China. In other words, with the New Silk Road. Before giving my views on a few things about the New Silk Road, let us revisit the Old Silk Road, which I believe can provide useful lessons to the prime mover of the New Silk Road, namely China, and members of the BRI community.

The history of the Silk Road, or Silk Routes as some historians prefer to call it, is one of the most impactful periods in human history spanning nearly sixteen centuries, from the second century BCE until the fifteenth century CE. It was the opening of trade to the outside world by the Han dynasty in China in 130 BCE that opened the official curtain of the Silk Road history. This Silk Road history may

¹ This keynote speech was delivered at “The Silk Road and Asian Civilisation Forum 2024” at the Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur on 28th March 2024. The Forum’s guests included Yang Amat Berhormat Dato’ Sri Haji Fadillah bin Haji Yusof, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia; His Excellency Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Development, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC); His Excellency Ouyang Yujing, Ambassador of China to Malaysia; and Mr Samuel Lee, Chairman of Malaysia Friends of Silk Road Club

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be regarded as the history of the encounters of the greatest human civilisations before modern times. It is a period of history that witnessed the birth of two great religions and civilisations of the world, namely Christianity and Islam. In the context of our present discussion, it is not the history of the individual religions and civilisations sharing the approximately 6,437 kilometre or 4,000 milelong Silk Road that mainly interests us. Rather, it is the inter-civilisational encounters that went into the shaping of the Silk Road history in question.

Only about 100 years after the opening of the Silk Road an Abrahamic prophet, Jesus Christ, was born in West Asia which Europe and America call the Middle East. Christianity, the religion founded on the teachings of Christ, was identified with a large civilisation, territorially speaking, and a powerful one as well, especially as it existed in the name of the Byzantine Roman Empire, which adopted Christianity as its official religion. Thanks to geographical proximity and even some territorial overlapping between the Byzantine Empire and West Asia, the material and cultural resources of the former, particularly at the heights of its prosperity, greatly impacted the fortunes of the Silk Road. The Silk Road trade flourished as a result.

In 610 CE there appeared another Abrahamic prophet, this time again in West Asia or more precisely the city of Mecca, Arabia. This is Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, whom the Quran claims to be the last in the long line of prophets in human history. The date 610 CE is of symbolic significance, not least from the point of view of the Silk Road history. The date is right in the middle of this historical period that we are presently viewing. Eight centuries of the Silk Road history had passed when Islam appeared on the world scene, and in another eight centuries that followed, Islam was a major civilisational partner in the shaping of the destiny of the Silk Road.

Middleness, the Quranic *wasatiyyah*, appeared to be the trademark of Islam and its new civilisation. Not only, temporally speaking, was Islam in the middle of the Silk Road period of history, but spatially or geographically speaking as well, the lands of Islam came to occupy a middle position between the Far East, of which China is the major component, and the West. But more importantly is

Islam's idea of middleness or the middle path that is understood in moral, cultural, and civilisational terms. Islam refers to itself as the middle community or *ummatah wasatah* in Quranic terminology. When the Quran was yet to be completely revealed it already referred to the Muhammadan community as the middle community. It was in the light of these different senses of middleness that Islam played its role in global affairs as the civilisational bridge between the East and the West. This role was a kind of destiny for Islamic civilisation.

It is well-known that Islam played an important historical role as a civilisational bridge between China and Europe. This is especially true in the field of knowledge and the Silk Road played an instrumental role in the transmission of knowledge from China to Europe via Islam. As a young religion and civilisation with a plentiful spiritual and intellectual energy to spend, Islam brought freshness, innovations, and renewals to many different aspects of what I call the "Silk Road civilisation." A case in point was the renewal or the creation of new centres of knowledge and learning along the Silk routes. A good example was the ancient city of Merv (Marwu in Arabic and Persian), which is situated in present-day Turkmenistan.

Merv was a cosmopolitan city. In pre-Islamic times it was a major centre of Buddhist learning as well as an important Nestorian Christian centre of learning. Given the long Iranian cultural influence in this ancient city, there was also the significant presence of Zoroastrianism. Under Islam the city was rebuilt, first by the Umayyad Caliph in the ninth century CE and later by the Abbasid Caliph in the twelfth century CE. But it was under the Abbasids that Merv became transformed into one of the most advanced centres of Islamic science and culture in the world while tolerating and even patronising cosmopolitanism. Pre-Islamic cosmopolitanism in Merv gave way to an Islamic cosmopolitanism that was new in spirit and form. Islamic cosmopolitanism of the era helped the flourishing of the Silk Road and the various civilisational activities that went with it, especially cross-cultural knowledge activities, trade, and other sectors of economic life. There is an important lesson that the New Silk Road may learn from this and other similar episodes in Silk Road history. This important lesson is that relevant knowledge is

essential to civilisational renewal and so is enlightened cosmopolitanism.

The idea of Islam learning from the Chinese civilisation entered the Muslim consciousness very early in its history. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) told his followers to seek knowledge even to China. His words, as is usually the case, seemed to have an almost immediate impact on his followers. Not long after the Prophet's death, the first Muslim diplomatic-cum-trade delegation arrived in China. They were warmly welcomed by officials of the Tang dynasty. They were permitted to stay in China if they wished. Some of them, in fact, stayed and married with the locals. Unfortunately, we know very little about the early encounters between Islam and the Chinese civilisation, particularly between Islam and Confucianism, which is the main shaper of traditional Chinese thought and civilisation. But we do know much more about their latter encounters from the late Ming period onwards.

We also know something about what Islam as a young civilisation had learned from the much older Chinese civilisation. In the first several centuries of its existence, Islam learned from China scientific knowledge in several fields, particularly astronomy and alchemy. In the field of technology, Islam learned the arts of paper and gunpowder-making. Islam succeeded in further developing and advancing the sciences of alchemy and astronomy and the technology of paper and gunpowder-making that it had inherited from China without ever thinking of patenting them. Significantly and fortunately for the world, Islam shared with Europe the knowledge that it had improved, and to a certain extent with China as well, thereby a kind of returning the latter's civilisational favours it had received in earlier centuries. Islam's sharing of scientific knowledge with both Europe and China is a pertinent illustration of its classical role as the civilisational bridge between the Far East and the West.

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, it was the maritime Silk Road that had a greater impact on its region. To all appearances, it was the voyages of Zheng He in the early fifteenth century that greatly boosted the significance of the Maritime Silk Road. Zheng He is a well-known historical figure in both China and Southeast Asia, especially in the Malay-speaking world. Contemporary China and

contemporary Muslims in the Malay-speaking countries may not have the same appreciation of Zheng He, but there is convergence of views on many things about Zheng He. The important thing for us all today, in China and in Southeast Asia, is that Zheng He may serve as an important cultural bridge between the two sides, especially for our times.

Let me now share my views on the civilisational dimension of the New Silk Road, the BRI. BRI is now more than a decade old. Its physical infrastructure is massive and costly. It is facing many challenges. In my view, BRI needs a cultural or civilisational dimension to match its huge infrastructure. Thus, a corresponding new civilisational initiative is called for. To be sure, China has made some interesting and significant moves in the cultural direction, particularly in initiating dialogues. But these moves appear to lack focus in content and a clear sense of direction. In my view, central to the new civilisational initiative would be an ongoing inter-civilisational dialogue in general and between Islam and Confucianism in particular given their respective dominant influence in China and many members of the BRI community. This inter-civilisational dialogue can move forward from where the UN sponsored Alliance of Civilisations had left off. A point to note is that the large demographic presence of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia would mean that the scholars of Confucianism participating in the dialogue could come from both China and Southeast Asia.

I wish to conclude my speech with the following remarks. There are two good reasons why Muslims, particularly the scholars of Islam, need to be engaged with the New Silk Road discourse. One is historical, and the other is philosophical. As for the historical reason, the Old Silk Road is the main source of inspiration of the New Silk Road. But then the history of Islam and its civilisation was closely intertwined with the Old Silk Road history. Contemporary Islam needs to revisit that history, especially its civilisational aspect. For them, revisiting the Old Silk Road would be revisiting an important part of their own history.

As for the philosophical reason, there is a need for an ongoing civilisational dialogue between Islam and Confucianism pertaining to the New Silk Road initiative. The dialogue should focus on the

civilisational partnership between Islam and Confucianism in the light of the United Nations Agenda on the Alliance of Civilisations, on shared values between Islamic and Chinese civilisations, and on how the New Silk Road would help contribute to the realisation of a new world order based on a common global ethic.

Close to the heart of the present Malaysian Prime Minister, YAB Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, is the idea of the Asian Renaissance and the idea of the dialogical community. The well-known Chinese scholar of Confucianism, Dr. Tu Weiming reminded us that the idea of the dialogical community was first introduced by Confucius more than 2,500 years ago. But good for the world, the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) reaffirmed the universal value of dialogue when he turned his city of Medina into a dialogical community more than fourteen centuries ago. I believe we need to include both Dato' Seri Anwar's idea of the Asian Renaissance and the idea of the dialogical community as emphasised by Confucius and the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in our discourse on the New Silk Road.

Thank you!

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final
² – at in construct state
³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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