

Original Paper

Yungang's Silk Road Spirit and Its Enlightenment for the Joint Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative

Hongtao Chen^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi Datong University, Datong, China

* chenhongtao415@126.com

Fund Project

Special Project on Yungang Studies of Shanxi Datong University “Yungang’s ‘Silk Road Spirit’ and Its Enlightenment for the Joint Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative” (Project No.: 2022YGZX052)

Received: January 29, 2026

Accepted: March 27, 2026

Online Published: April 10, 2026

doi:10.22158/assc.v8n2p121

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v8n2p121>

Abstract

The ancient Silk Road witnesses economic and cultural exchanges in human history and has important significance. Datong, as the starting point of the Silk Road that connects the Han Dynasty in the earlier period and ushers in the Sui and Tang dynasties in the later period, has the Yungang Grottoes as the most powerful historical evidence left behind. The Silk Road Spirit represented by “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual reference, and mutual benefit and win-win results” has laid the ideological foundation for today’s the Belt and Road Initiative. Under the background of the ancient Silk Road, this paper introduces the connotation of the Silk Road in Yungang and analyzes the great significance of the Belt and Road Initiative. Then, the author elaborates on the relationship between the Silk Road Spirit of the Yungang Grottoes and the construction of the Belt and Road. On this basis, the paper puts forward the enlightenment of the Silk Road Spirit for jointly building the Belt and Road , aiming to provide theoretical and practical references for the construction of the Belt and Road.

Keywords

Yungang Grottoes, Silk Road Spirit, the Belt and Road Initiative

1. Introduction

The ancient Silk Road spanned various civilizations and countries, including Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. Broadly speaking, it can be divided into the Overland Silk Road and

the Maritime Silk Road. The Northern Overland Silk Road consists of the grassland-forest route and the desert-oasis route. The Southern Overland Silk Road began from more than 2,000 years ago, starting from Chengdu, Sichuan, crossing Yunnan, and then reaching India, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe via the Indochina Peninsula. The Maritime Silk Road emerged in the Qin and Han dynasties, with routes from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. The ancient Silk Road witnessed economic and cultural exchanges in history and has great research significance. (Feng, 2015)

Datong, Shanxi Province, served as a starting point of the Silk Road connecting the Han Dynasty and the Sui-Tang Dynasty, among which the Yungang Grottoes stand as the most powerful historical evidence. Entering into the new century, China put forward the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to strengthen policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds among countries along the routes. Later, the Silk Road Spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual reference, and mutual benefit and win-win results was advocated. (An, 2015) The Silk Road Spirit represented by the Yungang Grottoes has important historical and practical values. Studying how to apply this spirit to the current Belt and Road construction is of great theoretical and practical significance.

2. The Connotation of the Silk Road Spirit in Yungang Grottoes

The ancient Silk Road connected Eastern and Western civilizations for thousands of years, stretching across the entire Eurasian continent, and has a profound influence on cultural exchanges and trade in human history. The Yungang Grottoes are closely connected with the ancient Silk Road. This is because the Yungang Grottoes are located in Pingcheng, the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty, which was a key node on the Silk Road. Built jointly by craftsmen and artists from many different countries and regions, the Yungang Grottoes are not only a symbol of cultural exchange along the Silk Road but also an embodiment of the Silk Road Spirit.

2.1 Peace and Cooperation

The peace and cooperation is the foundation of the Yungang Grottoes. Yungang Grottoes were constructed through the joint efforts of various ethnic groups in the Northern Wei Dynasty, including the Xianbei, Han, and other ethnic minorities. Their cooperation in the carving process made the great grottoes possible, reflecting the spirit of peace and cooperation. As an important site of cultural exchange on the Silk Road, the Yungang Grottoes also witnessed peaceful exchanges and friendly cooperation between China and countries in Central Asia, West Asia, and even Europe at that time. Merchants and envoys from various countries arrived in Pingcheng via the Silk Road, bringing diverse cultures and arts, which left traces of integration in the Yungang Grottoes and promoted the spread and development of culture to a certain extent.

2.2 Openness and Inclusiveness

Openness and inclusiveness is a prominent characteristic of the Yungang Grottoes, which integrates a variety of cultural elements. In artistic style, it absorbs the essence of foreign cultures while preserving

and inheriting traditional Chinese culture, achieving a perfect combination of foreign art and Chinese traditional art.

2.3 Mutual Learning and Mutual Reference

Mutual learning and mutual reference has run through the entire development of the Yungang Grottoes. During their construction, the grottoes continuously drew on foreign cultures, integrated them with local culture, and carried out innovations. Craftsmen of the Northern Wei Dynasty combined traditional Chinese carving, painting, and architectural styles with foreign cultures, forming the Yungang artistic style with distinctive regional and era features. This style spread to other regions via the Silk Road and influenced their grotto art, forming two-way cultural exchange and advancing the development of human art.

2.4 Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Results

The prosperity of the Yungang Grottoes is inseparable from Silk Road trade. The flourishing Silk Road provided material support and opportunities for cultural exchange for the carving of the Yungang Grottoes. As an important carrier of cultural exchange, the Yungang Grottoes further boosted economic and cultural exchanges and development in regions along the Silk Road. (Zhao, 2015) The construction of the grottoes and the spread of culture strengthened connections and cooperation among different regions, promoting mutual benefit in commodity trade, technological exchange, and cultural communication.

Besides the direct economic support for grotto construction, the Silk Road trade also drove the development of related industries in Pingcheng. Merchants from Central Asia and West Asia brought not only art and ideas but also high-value goods such as spices, gemstones, and textiles, which stimulated local handicraft production and commercial prosperity. Local craftsmen in Pingcheng learned foreign textile and metalworking techniques through exchanges, improved product quality, and sold their works to other regions along the Silk Road, forming a virtuous cycle of cultural exchange and economic growth. The Yungang Grottoes, as a cultural landmark, also became a gathering place for merchants, driving the development of catering, accommodation, and transportation services around the grottoes. This historical model of “cultural heritage driving economic development” has important reference significance for the current development of cultural and tourism industries in regions along the Belt and Road.

Meanwhile, the cultural value and artistic charm contained in the Yungang Grottoes have also brought the development of tourism and other related industries to the local area, promoted the prosperity of the regional economy, and realized the mutual promotion and common development of culture and economy.

3. The Proposal and Significance of the Belt and Road Initiative

3.1 The Proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative

In the early 21st century, the global economic structure underwent profound adjustment. On the one hand, emerging economies rose rapidly, increased their share in the world economy, and became a major engine of global growth. However, they also faced bottlenecks such as inadequate infrastructure and trade and investment barriers. On the other hand, traditional developed economies suffered slow growth and urgently needed new markets and cooperation space. Against this background, strengthening regional economic cooperation and promoting the free flow and optimal allocation of resources became an urgent need of global economic development.

From a geopolitical perspective, Eurasia, the world's largest continent, connecting the Pacific and the Atlantic, has abundant resources and a huge market. Nevertheless, due to unbalanced development, insufficient transportation infrastructure, and political and cultural differences, economic ties across Eurasia have long been weak, and regional economic integration has progressed slowly. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative was launched to promote economic cooperation and connectivity among countries along the routes and build a community of shared development for all.

3.2 The Significant Value of the Belt and Road Initiative

Firstly, from an economic perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative promotes regional economic integration. It advocates the removal of trade barriers and the advancement of trade liberalization and facilitation. Through measures such as establishing free trade zones, simplifying customs procedures, and strengthening quality inspection cooperation, trade costs among countries along the routes have been significantly reduced, and trade scales have been continuously expanded. The trade volume between China and the countries along the routes keeps growing, creating more market opportunities for enterprises of all countries and promoting the optimization of the global trade pattern.

The Belt and Road Initiative also boosts investment cooperation among various countries. It provides broad investment space for countries along the routes and attracts huge capital inflows. Chinese enterprises actively participate in investment in infrastructure construction, energy development, manufacturing and other fields in countries along the routes, which not only drives local economic development but also expands new development space for Chinese enterprises to "go global", thus achieving mutual benefit and win-win results. In addition, it has promoted the transformation and upgrading of China's economy. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese enterprises can better participate in international competition and promote industrial upgrading.

Secondly, from a cultural perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative facilitates cultural exchanges. It connects multiple civilizational birthplaces in the world and promotes the interaction and integration of different cultures. By holding Cultural Years, art exhibitions, academic exchanges and other events, countries along the routes have enhanced mutual cultural understanding and recognition, and advanced the diversified development of world culture. At the same time, it has strengthened people-to-people bonds. People-to-people and cultural exchanges are an important part of the Belt and Road construction.

Through cooperation in education, tourism, media and other fields, interactions among people of all countries have become increasingly frequent, deepening mutual friendship and trust. People-to-people bonds provide a solid public and social foundation for the Belt and Road construction.

Meanwhile, the Belt and Road Initiative has created new opportunities for the development of cultural products of all countries. Taking the cultural heritage of Yungang Grottoes as an example, it can be developed into a series of products such as digital exhibitions, art derivatives and cultural tourism experiences, which can be exported to countries along the routes. This not only spreads Chinese culture but also drives the development of local cultural industries and creates a large number of jobs. At the same time, cultural industries of other countries along the routes, such as Indian handicrafts, Persian carpets and Greek artworks, can also enter the Chinese market through the Belt and Road platform, realizing the two-way flow of cultural products and economic mutual benefit.

The proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative conforms to the trend of the times and injects new vitality into global economic development and international cooperation. Its great significance is reflected not only in the economic field but also in the far-reaching impact on the cultural field. With the continuous progress of construction, the Belt and Road will continue to show strong vitality and broad development prospects.

3.3 The Relationship Between the Silk Road Spirit and the Belt and Road Initiative

3.3.1 Continuity Between Historical Heritage and Contemporary Development

The Silk Road Spirit reflected in the Yungang Grottoes is an important part of ancient Silk Road culture, and the Belt and Road Initiative is the inheritance and development of the ancient Silk Road in the new era. The values of the Yungang Silk Road Spirit are highly consistent with the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits advocated by the Belt and Road Initiative. Historically, the Belt and Road construction follows the ancient trade and cultural routes, aiming to strengthen economic and cultural cooperation for common development. As a key witness of ancient Silk Road culture, the Yungang Grottoes provide historical and cultural roots for the Belt and Road Initiative, enabling it to gain new vitality from history.

3.3.2 A Bond for Cultural Exchange and Economic Cooperation

The Silk Road Spirit of the Yungang Grottoes serves as an important bond for cultural exchange and economic cooperation, consistent with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative. Culturally, as a world cultural heritage, the Yungang Grottoes attract tourists, scholars, and artists from Belt and Road countries with their unique charm and artistic value. Economically, the region of the Yungang Grottoes can develop cultural tourism, attract investment, and boost local economy by using its cultural advantages. Meanwhile, cultural industries represented by the Yungang Grottoes can also carry out cooperation with countries and regions along the Belt and Road, promote the prosperity and development of the cultural industry, and achieve win-win economic cooperation.

3.3.3 A Bridge for People-to-People Bonds

The Silk Road Spirit of the Yungang Grottoes stresses exchanges and integration among different ethnic groups and regions, contributing to enhance people-to-people bonds, which is vital for building a community with a shared future for mankind. People-to-people bonds are the key to the Belt and Road construction. Only by strengthening mutual understanding, trust, and friendship can a solid public foundation be established. As an important platform for cultural exchange, the Yungang Grottoes help people from Belt and Road countries understand China and help Chinese people learn about foreign cultures. Such cultural communication and interactions build consensus among countries and pursue common development and prosperity.

4. The Enlightenment of the Yungang Silk Road Spirit on the Belt and Road Construction

4.1 Promoting Cultural Exchange and Integration

The Yungang Grottoes integrate Indian, Persian, Greek, and traditional Chinese cultural elements, forming a unique artistic style and cultural connotation. This multicultural integration is reflected not only in carving and architecture but also in music, dance, and costumes.

In building the Belt and Road, we should learn from the spirit of openness, inclusiveness, and mutual learning embodied in the Yungang Grottoes to strengthen cultural cooperation among countries along the routes. Through cultural events, art exhibitions, and academic seminars, we can enhance mutual respect, remove cultural barriers, promote cultural diversity, and create a favorable cultural atmosphere. (Wang, 2024) For example, we can hold Belt and Road art festivals, set up cultural exchange centers, and carry out joint archaeology and heritage protection to explore and pass on Silk Road culture.

In addition, we can use digital technology to innovate cultural exchange models. For example, we can build a digital Silk Road cultural museum, digitize cultural heritages such as the Yungang Grottoes, and present them to the world through online exhibitions and virtual reality technology. This not only breaks the restrictions of time and space on cultural exchanges but also reduces the cost of cultural communication, allowing more people to understand the charm of Silk Road culture. At the same time, we can strengthen cooperation in cultural education, set up Silk Road cultural courses in universities of various countries, and train professional talents for cultural exchanges and heritage protection. These measures can not only deepen cultural mutual learning among countries but also drive the development of digital cultural industries, realizing the integration of cultural exchange and economic development.

4.2 Promoting People-to-People Bonds

People-to-people bonds are the social foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, the Yungang Grottoes witnessed friendly exchanges among people of different ethnicities and beliefs on the Silk Road. Its spirit of peace and cooperation plays an important role in enhancing people-to-people bonds today.

We can strengthen people-to-people exchanges in various ways. In education, student exchange programs enable young people to broaden their horizons and make friends, laying a foundation for

bilateral friendship. Tourism is also effective; developing special Silk Road routes allows visitors to experience local cultures, taste food, and join folk activities. Exchanges among non-governmental groups, such as art troupes and volunteer teams, are meaningful. Moreover, using modern media and information technology is an inevitable trend to strengthen cultural communication and information sharing.

4.3 Supporting Economic Cooperation and Development

The construction of the Yungang Grottoes relied on economic support, and its development boosted the local economy. On the ancient Silk Road, merchants and envoys promoted trade and commodity circulation while conducting cultural exchanges. The spirit of mutual benefit reflected in the Yungang Grottoes offers historical reference for Belt and Road economic cooperation. We should adhere to the win-win principle and strengthen economic cooperation for common development.

We need to promote the connectivity of infrastructure, which is the cornerstone of economic cooperation. At the same time, promoting the liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment is also a key link. (Bao, 2022) In this way, high-quality commodities from all countries can enter each other's markets more smoothly, and investors can carry out business more confidently.

We should also focus on the development of cultural and tourism integration, taking cultural heritage as the core to drive regional economic growth. For example, we can build a Silk Road cultural tourism economic belt, connect cultural heritages such as the Yungang Grottoes with those in Central Asia, West Asia and other regions, and develop characteristic cultural tourism routes. This can not only promote cultural exchanges but also drive the development of local tourism, catering, accommodation and other industries, creating more economic growth points. In addition, we should strengthen financial cooperation, set up special funds for cultural industry development and infrastructure construction, provide financial support for small and medium-sized enterprises in countries along the routes, and help them participate in Belt and Road cooperation, so as to achieve inclusive and shared development.

4.4 Strengthening Cultural Confidence and Recognition

As an outstanding symbol of Chinese culture, the Yungang Grottoes show the inclusiveness and creativity of the Chinese nation in ancient foreign exchanges and strengthen cultural confidence. In building the Belt and Road, we should inherit and promote fine traditional culture and enhance foreign recognition of Chinese culture through exchanges. For example, we can strengthen protection and research on cultural heritages like the Yungang Grottoes, and carry out cultural exchange programs such as Confucius Institutes and Chinese Culture Years to help the world better understand China.

5. Conclusion

The ancient Silk Road is a model of economic and civilizational exchange in human history, leaving precious heritage for later generations. The Silk Road Spirit represented by the Yungang Grottoes—peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and reference, and mutual benefit—provides significant practical guidance for the Belt and Road Initiative today.

In advancing the Belt and Road construction, we should strengthen cultural exchanges and mutual understanding among countries along the routes, uphold the win-win principle, and deepen economic cooperation for common development. In short, in the new era, we should thoroughly explore and carry forward the Yungang Silk Road Spirit, closely integrate it with the Belt and Road construction, and achieve common development and prosperity for all countries.

References

- An, D. J. (2015). The Silk Road Culture in Yungang Grottoes and the Spirit of the Belt and Road. *Datong Daily*.
- Bao, Y. T. (2022). Innovative Models of Regional Economic Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. *Business Information*, 2022(15), 22-24.
- Feng, G. (2015). From the Ancient Silk Road to the Belt and Road Initiative. *Northern Economy*, 2015(4), 31-33.
- Wang, X. P. (2024). The Belt and Road: Challenges and Strategies for the International Communication of Chinese Culture. *Journal of Guangdong Institute of Socialism*, 2024(2), 85-89.
- Zhao, K. F. (2015). The Strategic Vision of the Belt and Road and the Cultural Tradition of the Silk Road. *Gansu Social Sciences*, 2015(6), 105-109.