

By Way of Introduction

The history of civilizations demonstrates that cultures have grown and taken root through the movement of humans and ideas, of values and goods. The notion of movement is therefore central to relations between peoples; it is also a factor that specialists have, for various reasons, not taken sufficient account of. In fact it is because people have uprooted themselves for material, spiritual, or military reasons that encounters with other human beings could take place and that these encounters have assumed the shape of cultures or identities that, in their turn, have influenced others. It is in this context that the Silk Roads Project assumes its significance. Those routes that the German geographer von Richthofen, in the nineteenth century, called the "Silk Roads" in effect constitute an amazing dialectical axis that UNESCO wants to fathom: movement, encounter, mutual cultural fertilization. The name of these roads, to be sure, is related to silk, a quasi-mythical material; but their importance is related to the fact that they have constituted, across the ages, privileged axes for the exchange of goods, but above all – and in much more durable ways – axes for cultural, spiritual, and artistic interaction. At the same time they have been the avenues for great invasions, for military adventures and for territorial conquest.

It is to explore the extensiveness and the consequences of this dialogue between cultures that in 1988 UNESCO launched the "Integral Studies Project of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue." Its approach was scientific and its stakes transcended frontiers; for to highlight the links that history has forged among the peoples of Eurasia means, in an even more profound sense, to emphasize the universal character of a rich and diversified patrimony.

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