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## **The War of Resistance Against Japan: Re-imagining the Sven Hedin's Special Contribution to the modern Northwest Highway**

### **Abstract**

The study tries to understand the significance of the construction of the rails and roads—a chain of the Silk Route, which enabled China to re-emerge as an ancient civilization. In this regard, one name is the most unforgettable in carrying on the old tradition. Undoubtedly, this is him, Mr. Hedin. Relive Sven Hedin's life and work in China and see his unique contribution to the War of Resistance Against Japan through the Northwest Highway built in China in the 1930s. Speaking of the Silk Road, everyone will naturally think of the prosperity of this ancient commercial road connecting the Chinese and Western civilizations during the Han and Tang Dynasties, and also links it to the Belt and Road Initiative implemented by the Chinese government, the initiative has brought great opportunities for common development and common prosperity to countries along the Belt and Road. However, in the 1930s, few people would realize the high value of this nearly deserted ancient trade route, but Sven Hedin discovered its practical significance. His proposal to the Chinese government to build a northwest highway and a railway system, it is an explorer who uses his wealth of knowledge and perspectives beyond the times to guide China to the right path. Compared with the ancient Silk Road, this is the first modern road from Xinjiang to the interior land. In the 1930s, this was already a great progress, although it is not a highway in the sense of modernization, its construction and impact on the coming decades is beyond imagination. Through this northwest highway, the Chinese government connected the interior land with Xinjiang and strengthened its control of the northwest frontier, this northwest highway delivered a large number of military material from the Soviet Union to China, making a great contribution to the War of Resistance Against Japan. Hedin's life and works in China in the 1930s are a crucial case study to understand modern-day China and to learn lessons from it. By reviewing his involvement in northwest China transportation planning and reading his works, we can understand the true purpose of his grand plan and why it still affects China today. The main argument of this paper is the extent to which Hedin's legacy can help China build modern roads and railways to revive the Silk Road.

**Keywords:** Sven Hedin, the Silk Road, the northwest highway, the War of Resistance Against Japan

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### **Introduction:**

Sven Hedin, the well-known Swedish explorer and geographer of the Far East and Central Asia. In his long academic career, he had made remarkable academic achievements. When he was 68 years old, he began another investigation in Xinjiang of China, serving as the captain of the China Railway Ministry's highway survey team. He said that he hoped to do something real to repay this country because he loved it. He knew that people of China feel proud and become rejuvenate when hearing about the ancient Silk Road. In "History of the Expedition in Asia 1927-1935" he wrote: "I am happy that I can serve the Chinese government, and I will do my best to repay the friendly reception that the Chinese have given me since 1890. It is not an exaggeration. I said I have life experience in Central Asia. No one would sincerely hope to accomplish this as much as I would to bring some practical benefits to China."<sup>1</sup> The northwest transportation exploration by a survey team headed by Sven Hedin, showed in government level the transportation construction was also considered as an important method to unify Xinjiang. After the road surveyed by Sven Hedin was completed, it became the only significant channel for the maintenance of smooth international military supplies during the War of

Resistance Against Japan, which effectively supported the Anti-Japanese War. This road accompanied China through the most challenging and darkest moments. Sven Hedin proposed to China the construction of northwest highways and railways. From the proposal of this plan, the implementation of the plan and the historical role of this huge project, we sorted out this process and reviewed reading his works, we will find the true motives of his grand plan, as well as the rigorous work attitude and true selfless character of a great explorer. In the mind of Sven Hedin, the Silk Road was closely linked with the destiny of China, the demise of the Silk Road also meant the decline of China. He longed for the ancient Silk Road to regain its vitality like ancient China

### **From researching the ancient Silk Road to exploring the modern northwest highway**

Sven Hedin was born in Stockholm in 1865. When he was a child, it was the time when Western explorers “discovered” the world, that he was attracted by these expeditions, which also profoundly influenced him, and even affected his entire life. He first studied geology at Stockholm University, and then went to Berlin University, where he studied with the famous scholar Richthofen geography. Richthofen visited China many times for geographical and geological surveys and traveled more than half of China. Richthofen wrote his book “China” which published in 1877. In this book, he named the ancient commercial road that communicated between China and the West in ancient times as the Silk Road. His definition of the Silk Road is: From 114 BC to 127 AD, connecting China, Central Asia and India, this is a transportation route in the Western Regions with the Silk Road trade as the medium. Later, German scholar Albert Herrmann set the western end of the Silk Road in Syria. Herman believes that the cultural exchange on the Silk Road is not limited to China and Central Asia, between China and India. And still exists between China and Rome.<sup>2</sup> Richthofen proposed the Silk Road concept and made a description. Under the influence of Mr. Richthofen, Hedin became interested in ancient Chinese civilization, which also led him to China to investigate the Silk Road in depth. Richthofen gave him a task to find the location of ancient Lop Nur and mark the underlying trend of the Silk Road. He is a strong-willed and full of professionalism, any difficulty in the explore will not make him shrink back. Through laborious field investigations, Sven Hedin discovered the ancient Lop Nur that was claimed to have disappeared. The ruins of the old country Loulan that was disappeared for 1500 years were found it. He introduced them to Europe, this attracted more foreign investigators and researchers to pay attention to China’s northwestern historical sites and the Silk Road. In this sense, The hot road of silk in the past hundred years is also inseparable from his name. The treasures left over from the ancient Chinese Silk Road have achieved Sven Hedin’s reputation. He was named the last nobleman by the King of Sweden. What allowed Sven Hedin to win the trust of the Chinese was the formation of a Northwest expedition in 1927 and a scientific investigation in the northwest. He was the first Western explorer to sign an agreement with the Chinese government and promised to attribute all the cultural relics found in the investigation in China. It was also during this inspection that the idea of resurrecting the ancient Silk Road was germinated again.<sup>3</sup> Later, Sven Hedin published a book under the name *The Silk Road*, which made the concept of Silk Road generally accepted by the academic community. He explored Xinjiang many times, described the Silk Road like this: “It is no exaggeration to say that this main line of traffic is the longest road through the entire old world. From a cultural-historical point of view, this is the most important link connecting peoples and continents that have existed on Earth. Therefore, silk has become a link between different nationalities, and there are endless commercial roads.”<sup>4</sup> The Chinese have also come into contact with Western civilization and opened up new paths for the exchange of materials, art and ideas. It is also important for the introduction of Buddhism into China.<sup>4</sup> Richthofen and Sven Hedin have made significant contributions to the naming, investigation and academic research on the Silk Road. Sven Hedin introduced the Silk Road to Europe in a comprehensive way. He almost dedicated his life to the Silk Road. He also transformed his feelings for the Silk Road into a love for the ancient civilization in China. In return, he wanted to do something real for this old country. It is for this reason that his suggestions also had a profound influence on the history of the War of Resistance against Japan.

In June 1933, Sven Hedin met with Liu Chongjie, vice minister of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, and discussed the situation in China. He said, “Manchuria, Rehe, and Inner Mongolia are also under serious threat. Xinjiang is still in your hands ..... If the government does not take action to save the province, Xinjiang, you will also lose it.” Liu Chongjie asked: “What do you think we should

do?” Sven Hedin replied: “I think the first step should be to open first-class road traffic between the interior land and Xinjiang, which can be done. The next step is to build a railway to the hinterland of Asia.” After a detailed discussion, Liu Chongjie asked Sven Hedin to write a memorandum and draw a sketch of the northwest highway to the central government. His idea was that in ancient times, transportation between inland and Xinjiang was maintained by the famous Silk Road. The journey through the vast Gobi Desert takes about three months. If we imagine using trucks instead of camels, the journey time would be reduced to 10-12 days. In fact, the Chinese are already doing this kind of experiment. The merchants of Guihua City not long ago set up a car transportation company to specialize in the trade transportation between Guihua and Hami. Still, the trucks dispatched broke down because the roads were too bad. He believes that the construction of a Gobi road from Suiyuan to Xinjiang, and the construction of another road from Lanzhou to Xinjiang to revive the ancient Silk Road should also be considered.<sup>5</sup> The road from Suihua to Xinjiang was not built due to the military threat from the Japanese. In 1930s, the National Government, due to regional warlordism and transportation obstacle lacked the strength to unified Xinjiang, so Xinjiang was evident in a loose connection. Media commentary all considered transportation as a method to unify Xinjiang and eliminate the borderland crisis and proposed building a road to connect Xinjiang and the interior. To some extent, these propositions came into practice.

Sven Hedin was a person who called for strengthening northwest transportation, and given his reputation, he quickly received a response from the government. What Sven Hedin did not expect is that the National Government attaches great importance to his proposal, but believes that the construction of the railway has a long construction period and a considerable investment. The first step should be to build a highway that connects the interior and Xinjiang. Two months later, Sven Hedin was appointed by the National Government as a consultant to the Ministry of Railways and as the head of the Northwest Highway Survey team of the Ministry of Railways. At nearly 70, he firmly accepted his appointment and set out on the northwest expedition. The inspection team went through numerous hardships and overcame difficulties such as war, bandits, car accidents and bad natural environment. The inspection mission took more than two years. The completed report wrote, The road survey team traveled a total of 15,444 kilometres, and the planned repair route was 6,999 kilometres after repeated surveys, and 1,100 kilometres were not surveyed. The team completed the route map 350 pages, 58 pages of the table book, 140 frames of photos. The landforms and altitude along the way are all recorded in detail.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Sven Hedin introduced the Silk Road concept into northwest transportation, hoping to highlight the practical value of the Silk Road in construction. The Ministry of Railways focused on repairing the northwest road according to the report of the investigation team. “For China, it is vital to extend and maintain the significant route that connects it to the territory within the hinterland of Asia. If the roads that are suitable for transportation are not built, the situation in Xinjiang is politically and commercially precarious. I heard from different sources that the government had started this huge project, and I am delighted.”<sup>7</sup> In May 1935, the XiLan road (Xi’an to Lanzhou) was opened to traffic, and in November 1937, the LanXin road (Lanzhou to Xinjiang) was opened to the China-Soviet border. In 1938, after the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, China already had a highway running through the hinterland of Asia to the China-Soviet border. It was a vital artery for the supply of Chinese Anti-Japanese forces.<sup>8</sup>

### **A lifeline at the beginning of the War of Resistance Against Japan**

Why Sven Hedin received a positive response to the government proposal of the Republic of China, it is related to the international situation at that time. After the September 18th Incident in 1931, Japan invaded Northeast China. Japan attempted to seize North China after occupying the Northeast, and the comprehensive war was imminent. Northwest and Southwest have become the great rears of the country, and their strategic value is prominent. It is imperative to build highways inland to communicate with Northwest.<sup>9</sup> At that time, the British and American on which the government of the Republic of China relied on pursued the appeasement policy and adopted a palliative attitude towards Japanese aggression. The National Government tried to seek a new diplomatic breakthrough. They believed that only by improving relations with the Soviet Union would it be possible to obtain Soviet military assistance and contain Japan. The Soviet Union was also threatened by the Japanese in the Far East, while in Europe, Hitler’s assumption of power brought the situation to a sharp turn. The Soviet

government also believed that it should strengthen relations with China and use China's military power to hold back to Japan. Both China and the Soviet Union know the importance of each other, and they need each other's assistance and support to deal with a common enemy, Japan. The strengthening of China-Soviet relations makes the strategic value of northwest highway more prominent during the War of Resistance Against Japan, China and the Soviet Union signed "the China-Soviet Non-aggression Treaty" on August 21, 1937. After the signing of the treaty, the Soviet Union began lending to China, providing military assistance to China, and assisting China in the War of Resistance Against Japan by barter trade. From 1937 to 1942, the Soviet Union granted China a loan of 173 million US dollars for arms purchases, ranking first in aid to China in the same period.<sup>10</sup> According to statistics, from the winter of 1937, the first batch of Soviet aid to China was loaded with Soviet cars through this international transportation line and transported directly to Lanzhou. By the summer of 1938, about 6,000 tons of materials were transported from Xinjiang to Gansu, Shanxi, Sichuan and even the front line of the war. At that time, more than 5,000 trucks transported military supplies on this highway every day. Among them are ammunition, gasoline, medicine and so on. Many of these weapons are transported by road and airport in the northwest. There are 985 aircraft, 82 tanks, more than 1,300 artillery pieces, and more than 1,400 machine guns, as well as a large number of shells and bullets.<sup>11</sup> After Japan blocked China's coastal ports, in 1940, Japan threatened France to cut off the China-Vietnamese road, and Britain also temporarily closed the Yunnan-Burma road. This northwest road became the only smooth transportation route during the War of Resistance Against Japan. "The longest distance, the longest-running time, and the safest international transportation line in China had become a lifeline related to the survival of the Chinese nation." Through this route, China has received a large amount of Soviet aid. In 1944, some US military supplies to China were transported from Karachi Port to Leh and then transferred to Xinjiang three times. They were also transported to the interior through the northwest highway.<sup>12</sup> Now, the road from Pakistan to Xinjiang has been constructed with a modern highway named Karakorum, many of its sections were originally part of the Silk Road to South Asia. During the War of Resistance against Japan, the rapid development of highway, aviation and other transportation undertakings in the Northwest Region not only ensured the smooth flow of the international roads leading to the Soviet Union but also formed a network of links between the Southwest and the Northwest. The development and construction of transportation in the Northwest region played an important role. In 1945, after hard work, the railway connecting Lanzhou and Tianshui was officially opened to traffic, which is also part of the Northwest transportation route. Besides, with the development of transportation and the mining of industry and mining, some emerging industrial cities such as Lanzhou, Yumen, Baoji, Xianyang, Xining, Yinchuan, Urumqi, etc. have risen rapidly. The development of transportation has driven the rise of emerging towns and development, thus changing the distribution pattern of cities and towns in the northwest and promoting the development of cities and towns in the northwest. The development of cities and towns has encouraged the migration of inland schools. The culture and education in the northwest have developed more than before, and its impact is extraordinary.<sup>13</sup> The successful development of this Northwest Highway has played a huge role during the War of Resistance against Japan. Besides, when major Western countries such as the United States, Britain, and France implemented Appeasement Policy, the National Government took the initiative to contact the Soviet Union and obtain military assistance from the Soviet Union. The international transportation line of the Northwest area during the Anti-Japanese War is one of the most secure and reliable aid route. This Northwest Highway delivered a large number of military material from the Soviet Union to China, making a great contribution to the War of Resistance Against Japan and the Northwest development. In June 1938, one year after the outbreak of full-scale war between China and Japan, Sven Hedin commented: "The Chinese have made up their minds to do their utmost to defend their country. The Chinese do not have first-class military performance, but Perseverance allows them to maintain their country for 4,000 years, and other great countries in the ancient world have collapsed. This resilience seems to be the same as in the past, and it has made some achievements in this war." "The new road will be built in a month. The road runs from the Indian Ocean coast through Burma, Yunnan and Sichuan to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, where it connects to the road being built to Lanzhou and beyond that to the Silk Road. ....The road under construction from Burma to Tacheng on the Russian border will add two gates to supply the eroded Chinese territory and China will be able to continue the War of Resistance Against Japan"<sup>14</sup>

### **The idea of reviving the ancient Silk Road is becoming a reality**

Before recommending that the Chinese government build a road and rail system to Xinjiang, he once described the ancient Silk Road he saw: “What we are seeing is the most depressed scene of this Silk Road. We can’t see any vitality. The business is already dying, and the villages and towns along the way are still ruining in addition to ruins. In a tragic situation of poverty and insecurity, the population is getting smaller.”<sup>15</sup> He hopes that through his efforts, the Chinese government can refocus on this nearly abandoned trade road, and through the construction of modern roads and railways, the Silk Road can regain its vitality and glory in the past and benefit the Chinese people and the people of the world.

In his book “The Silk Road” published in 1938, he wrote “Such a longest highway traffic artery in the world will certainly not be built just for pleasure. It should play a greater role than this. This road will not only help trade within the Chinese Empire, but also open up a new transportation line between the East and the West. It will connect the two oceans of the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, the two continents of Asia and Europe, the two races of the yellow race and the white race, and the two civilizations of Chinese culture and Western culture. In this era of suspicion and jealousy that separates nations, anything that is expected to bring different peoples closer and unite should be welcomed and understood. Some people say that such a plan is unrealistic and impossible, but they should not forget that such a plan was implemented two thousand years ago..... because everyone knows that the greatest and most colorful artery in world trade is the most profitable and extremely important.” “Compared with another building completed by the Chinese, the Great Wall, road construction is a trivial matter.”<sup>16</sup> He even predicted this accurately, “We can fully believe that shortly, a car travel enthusiast can drive from Shanghai in his own car, along the Silk Road to Kashi, then through the entire West Asia to Istanbul, and then through Budapest, Vienna and Berlin, Hamburg, Bremerhaven, Calais or Brun. This driver will also have many unforgettable experiences. He took a recent route through the entire cross-section of the old world. He completed one of the most interesting and instructive car trips, and the best travel on this planet.”<sup>17</sup> All of Sven Hedin’s brilliant ideas have come true today, thanks to his love for the silk road and his great vision. His grand plans are still influencing China to this day. Strengthening the ties between Asia and Europe, adhering to peaceful exchanges and common prosperity is one of his ideas, this is also in line with Chinese value judgment, so it still affects the Chinese government’s decision-making and implementation until today. There are many similar propositions in the Chinese government’s the Belt and Road Initiative (Initiatives of building the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, which was proposed in 2013.) The Belt and Road Initiative is a great measure that urges each country in the course of world history to undertake their responsibilities and work together for the goal to realize the common development and to share the results and the common prosperity on the basis of fairness, equality and justice.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Sven Hedin is also one of the advisors or “initiators” of the Belt and Road Initiative.

This northwest highway saved China’s destiny during the Anti-Japanese War, and also highlighted its great value. It confirmed the correctness of Sven Hedin’s decision to revive the Silk Road from another aspect. Under the ideal guidance of Sven Hedin, the Chinese government unswervingly increased investment and construction in the northwest transportation sector, and made great efforts to revive the silk road. They believe it is about China’s peaceful re-emergence. After eighty years of continuous construction, all-round modernized transportation systems, including modern highways, high-speed railways and airports are all located in Xinjiang. Many of these highways were built based on the northwest road that year. They transport people and commodities around the world quickly and easily. The opening of Chinese and European rail freight trains has greatly shortened the time to transport commodities to Europe by sea. Just as Sven Hedin hoped 80 years ago, the ancient Silk Road has been revitalized, and his vision of a revived Silk Road has become a reality in China and has been realized by the Chinese government. His vision and imagination made him one of the earliest advocates of revitalizing the Silk Road. He has made a great contribution to the Chinese people through his specific investigations and participation in the selection of highway routes in Xinjiang. Sven Hedin resurrected this ancient Silk Road, which originated from his deep love for China and the Silk Road, as he said, he is pleased that he can serve the Chinese government, and he will do his best to repay the friendly reception given by the Chinese since 1890. Hedin’s activities generally engage China in scientific exploration in a strict sense. They do not have other missions, especially not for “treasure hunting”-

grabbing cultural relics. It is different from modern explorers such as Stein and Kozlov, and others. Sven Hedin was a man of integrity whose motives for exploring China were simple, without any political purpose or attempt, and whose behavior there was in keeping with the spirit of the scientist. To this day, we are deeply grateful for his selfless dedication to China. However, due to his close contacts with the German government in World War I and World War II, his reputation in Europe and America was damaged, but he also successfully rescued some people who were persecuted by Fascists.<sup>19</sup> There is consensus among the Chinese people about the outstanding services, that is, Sven Hedin is yearning for the ancient Chinese civilization, and his “Chinese complex” runs through his adventure, just as someone asked him why he never married for life, Say: “I’m married to China!”<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

When we look back on this past event, we feel that Hedin’s services for the construction and rebuilding of rail and road are unusual in the modern history of China. The real value of his service lies in transcending the understanding of the times on the ancient Silk Road. In his book “The Silk Road”, he wrote: “Asia, the most backward region, has once again entered a new era of civilized development. If the Chinese government can revive the Silk Road and make use of modern means of transportation, it will surely make contributions to mankind and build a monument for itself.”<sup>21</sup> Hedin was a great explorer, an eminent designer, a good friend of Chinese people, he accompanied this Silk Road throughout his life, also contributed his wisdom in China he loved. He was particularly eager for the revival of the ancient Silk Road, which also meant that China as an ancient civilization once again shone with dazzling brilliance in the world. Sven Hedin had profoundly influenced the War of Resistance Against Japan by advocating the construction of roads and railways in Xinjiang, which had a significant impact on China’s modern history, it also proves that individuals play an essential role in making history. His idea of promoting racial exchange and solidarity in Asia and Europe is worthy of recognition by future generations and is consistent with the common values of mankind. Now, his marvellous works helped the Chinese government to lay the strong foundations of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is going to become a game-changer in the history of the world. The Silk Road is not only an economic link, but also a carrier of history and culture, glory and dreams. Is it our generation’s responsibility to inherit the civilization of the Silk Road? Sven Hedin gave us the best answer.

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