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My interest in *Letters from the Silk Roads* stems from my experiences living in Hiroshima, Japan, for two years as a teacher and in Gaza, Palestine, for one as an intern for an aid organization. I have entered graduate school at American University in Washington, D.C., in Comparative and Regional Studies and U.S. Foreign Policy.

In a carefully crafted epistolary style, Eiji Hattori describes the history of interaction among different peoples and diverse cultures along "silk roads" - not any one specific route, but a system defined by exchange. Also, mutual benefit, equity, and mutual respect characterized this exchange. The author paints a historical picture of these Eurasian silk roads along with significant residues found in the "invisible threads" that even today still connect civilizations.

Hattori sees a sharp contrast between these routes at their peak performance and the elitist, exploitative, unilateral communication characterizing Western activities throughout the colonial era. Such ethnocentrism still permeates the current world order in destructive ways. He is making an appeal for a more egalitarian practice of cultural dialogue and a worldview that is less "West-heavy" and more open to other ways of living and thinking.

The author makes his point by painting a picture of a historical Asia in a Eurasian continental landmass. He shows how, for the majority of history, Civilization has called Eurasia home, with diverse cultures linked together by trade, religion, and even common origins. These "invisible threads" are very ancient and still interconnect various points in Eurasia in fascinating ways. Hattori finds the common linkage among the great empires (Chinese, Persian, Islamic, and Mongol—and, to some extent, the later Roman) to display many-sided democratic participation in trade and in the creation of cultural contributions that continue even today to bless posterity. These contributions include both the visible archaeological monuments and the invisible but just as real philosophic, religious, and scientific traditions that were emerging interactively.

One good example is the evident Altaic link between Eastern and Western Asia. It is fairly well accepted that Japanese sumo, as well as other aspects of ancient Japanese culture, originated north of China, in the Altai region of Mongolia and Central Asia, then traveled south through China and the Korean Peninsula. These Altai mountains are also thought to be the place of origin of the Turkic peoples, some of
whom migrated west to Anatolia and live in modern-day Turkey. Besides the similarities between the Japanese and Turkish languages, Hattori offers another "invisible thread" in support of this Altaic connection.

In ancient Japanese tombs can be found a symbol incorporating four creatures situated on the four points of the compass. The black Genbu (a mythical Turtle-Dragon) is to the North, the Red Phoenix to the South, the Blue Dragon to the East, and to the West, the White Tiger. Now think about a map of Western Asia, featuring Anatolia (Turkey), Syria/Palestine, and Egypt. There are three seas featured, the Black Sea to the North, the Red Sea to the South, and to the West, the Mediterranean, or in Arabic and Turkish, Bahar Abbayad (the White Sea). Dollars to pesos that if there were a sea to the East (bigger than the Dead Sea), it would be the Blue Sea. Intriguing and obscure historical references to a surprisingly socially integrated past offer challenges to the notion of a linear-progressive development of civilization. For all our technology, we are forced to consider how people long ago and far away were more advanced in at least one basic thing, getting along together. This stands in stark contrast to the 16th and 17th centuries, or the "Western Era," in which the Hispanic and British empires were marked by a lack of dialogue, sharing, and equitable trade involving many nations.

The author's over twenty years of experience working for the UN in 80 different countries and his wealth of historical illustrations help to paint a vivid portrait both of the Silk Roads and an Asia of the past. However, our usual dichotomies may tempt us to read too much into the language of "East vs. West," "past vs. present." Certainly the silk roads as he sees them (the market place of exchange in ideas as well as goods) did exist to some extent throughout central Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Seas. It is also true that the contribution of Eastern cultures, the value to humankind of their philosophy, and the extent to which they are connected culturally and by trade has been drastically understated and undervalued by Western historians. In discussing cultures associated with East or West, it is easy to make politically sensitive statements.

One of Hattori's examples, standing alone, lends itself to misunderstanding. In his brief account, he suggests a similarity between poison gas and the powdered milk donated by Western countries to Cambodian refugees. We are not given much information, just that the so-called emergency help turned out to be "as lethal an instrument as
poison gas" in situations where the availability (even awareness of need) of sanitation and drinkable water was lacking. Having worked for an NGO distributing powdered milk and other food and medical aid in the Gaza Strip, I was particularly interested in how this story may be used either to help raise awareness and safeguards in distributing emergency aid, or to polarize and vilify "The West."

Hattori has no such polarizing aim. His criticism must be seen in its full context - that of a Japanese intellectual working for an international organization in a world where American preeminence characterizes the current global system. He wishes to address this system from a diametrically opposite direction. His work, overall, is an attempt to strike a humanely viable balance.

It is probably impossible and undesirable to escape entirely our individual cultural or national identities. We get a very concrete glimpse of Hattori the man, especially when he is trying to characterize his own country, Japan, in the broad context of the historical free-flowing exchange as opposed to the worst aspects of the current order of nationalistic and economic competitiveness.

I believe that some aspects of his own cultural origin and identity lead him to talk of a unique "Japanese brain" and a "Japanese soul" that is somehow intrinsically incompatible with Western modes of communication and certainly with Western logic. He once points to Western influence to help explain Japanese "discrimination, segregation, and ignorance of the people of Arabic, Asian, and African civilizations." In this context, he says that Japanese translations of Western history led to Japanese textbooks being written, "just as if Japan were outside of world history." Of course, good old homegrown Japanese ethnocentrism need not be explained by Western influence, though it may be increased by it. Yet he always describes ethnic identity in ironic terms rather than the simplistic terms of superior vs. inferior. He is rather careful to treat meritorious and universal characteristics in close proximity to more limiting or problematic aspects.

Pride, fear, and insecurity are components of all people's sense of identity. In Japan people often refer, in hushed tones, to a "konpurekkusu", or Japanese "Complex" that relates to the search for Japanese identity in the post-war and now the global era. This is the context with which all contemporary Japanese scholars, politicians, and traders must struggle. At the same time, Cornel West reminds us, in his book Keeping Faith, that "Self-confidence, discipline, and perseverance are not ends in themselves, rather, they are the necessary stuff by which
enabling criticisms and self-criticisms are made."

Truly, the only other leg that the moral-social critic has to stand on, other than truth, is objectivity and the ability to turn the critical eye onto oneself. Hattori's fine sense of irony, which the careless reader may miss, enhances the critical and self-critical eye's ability to see clearly without losing its power to appreciate, enjoy and sometimes even appropriate.

This book is important because it helps us in both the Occident and the Orient to see our world in a different way. Just as the Peters Projection Map presents a much different image of the world than we are used to seeing, here we have the perspective and interpretation of a uniquely intelligent and curious man who has been the beneficiary of many unique opportunities overseas. His passion and intellect are transmitted through his sincere public letters, which were in part written on the UNESCO vessel Fulk-al-Salamah (Ship of Peace) as it sailed through the Indian Ocean, retracing the ancient "Silk Road of the Sea."

Dr. Hattori, having served the UN for many years working in so many different countries, decries the elitist, unbalanced, and sectarian ways in which people see each other. In a world so blighted by misunderstanding and persecution of "others," Dr. Hattori was no doubt looking for hope. As I've already intimated, he found hope in his vision of a world in which nations co-existed and even prospered by sharing ideas, cultural artifacts, and goods in a system of trade. The model for this was the ancient silk roads going East and West in which "everyone went seeking something." The many historical references to invisible threads that connect civilizations not only shed light on a much-neglected past, but also give us hope for the future by making us realize how connected we really are.

Hattori's book richly illustrates a historical and multi-perspectival dialogue not only about civilizations but also among civilizations. It is a corrective measure for our myopia concerning contributions of culture and civilization from the East. It is also reveals some of the inner dynamics of a Japanese working in a global context. The book assists the reader's integration of histories through the introduction to more about the history of others; satori comes when one realizes that the only thorough way to validate our own cultural identity and history is to recognize its indebtedness to others. Too many times self-flattering history is misused as a crutch for weak national identity, be it in the West, where we mistakenly think progress began with the age of Europe, and even in the East, where Japanese history text books are edited to make
their own national narrative.

A Word on the Translation.

A wonderful aspect of this book is the translation itself. This English version enjoys increased balance due to Dr. Wallace Gray's sedulous efforts as seen in the index which involves the setting of a standard for the spelling in English of many confusing geographical and biographical names. Gray has both preserved the historical content, familiar language, and artistic aspects of the wording while "filling out," in footnoted exposition, places where the reader might be puzzled. The English edition flows naturally while at the same time accomplishing something quite rare - turning intellectual Japanese into intellectual English.

One example, "Ten no ishi o shiro to shita," might initially be translated as "trying to figure out the will of heaven," whereas Gray preserves the atmosphere of the original by his, "to discern the will of heaven." Great care was taken with the inflection and subtle meaning of every word and phrase, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. For example, when Hattori compares the misuse of powdered milk with murder ("TV ads advertising the powdered milk in this situation were a form of murder" - "Konna senden wa satsujin da"), Gray clarifies in his footnote: "We cannot qualify every social criticism in this book," He goes on to make clear the context in which comments were made as well as alternative explanations of what may have brought about the fatally unsafe use of a product. After all, it was a product intended to nourish infant life.

Having met at a meeting of the ISCSC, Dr. Gray and Dr. Hattori's collaboration grew out of their alignment on the issue of the need for a truly global history of philosophy, for a higher level of civilizational exchange, and for factually-based revisionist histories. Dr. Hattori traveled to Kansas - the heartland of America - to work with Dr. Gray on the completion of the project finalizing the English text of some of the more difficult passages. The finished product shows the delightful, enlightening sparks engendered by two perspectives rubbing together and ultimately complementing each other.

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