Silk as a Tie: An Overview of the Exchanges Held by the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles

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Silk, tracing its origin to China, provides a vital link between East and West in terms of cultural exchanges in ancient times. Situated in Hangzhou, the China National Silk Museum (CNSM) is one of the leading academic institutions committed to the preservation and study of traditional Chinese silk technology and heritage. Under the theme of “Silk Road Textiles” (Si lu zhi chou 丝路之绸), the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles (IASSRT, 国际丝路之绸研究联盟) was co-founded in 2015 by the CNSM and multiple global counterparts. For the past few years, the IASSRT has carried out a series of international academic activities, delivering successful outcomes for cultural and academic exchanges. A panorama of the IASSRT, its annual symposia, and other academic events are presented below.

1 The founding of the IASSRT and its purpose

On October 12, 2015, the China National Silk Museum (CNSM), together with twenty-four professional institutions from twelve countries, signed an agreement to establish the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles (IASSRT) (Figure 1). The CNSM in Hangzhou serves as the secretariat of the IASSRT, the president of which is CNSM Director Zhao Feng.

The IASSRT aims to carry out cooperative research and resource sharing for textiles (including silk), craft techniques, and cultural heritage, by bringing together research institutions situated along the Silk Roads or those with related interests. It is dedicated

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This overview was translated into English by Lü Xin 吕昕 and copyedited by John Moffett.

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to advancing the study of Silk Road textiles in all respects through the investigation of resources and database construction, research on cognition and conservation of key technologies, personnel exchanges, construction of shared laboratories, joint exhibitions on Silk Road textiles, and preservation and innovation of traditional textile crafts.

Figure 1: The signing ceremony of the IASSRT held in Hangzhou on October 12, 2015.

In the almost seven years since its founding, the IASSRT has developed into a professional network for international cooperation encompassing over forty institutions in seventeen countries around the world. These include, but are not limited to: the State Hermitage Museum (Russia), International Dunhuang Project of the British Library (UK), Needham Research Institute (UK), British Museum Department of Asia (UK), Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Germany), Korea National University of Cultural Heritage (Republic of Korea), National Museum of Denmark (Denmark), Musée des Tissus (France), Padova University (Italy), Israel Antiquities Authority (Israel), Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (Thailand), and Institute of Archaeology of Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences (Uzbekistan), as well as seven institutions from China: the Committee of Museums along the Silk Road, ICOMOS International Conservation Center-Xi’an, Institute for the History of Natural Sciences (Chinese Academy of Sciences), Center for Research on Ancient Chinese History (Peking University), Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Chengdu Museum, and Collaborative Innovation Center for the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhejiang University).

2 Annual symposia of the IASSRT

Each year since 2016, as the secretariat of the IASSRT, the CNSM has held an annual academic symposium with a member institution and the country involved, inviting
member institutions, as well as experts and scholars from all over the world. Although COVID-19 meant that the two most recent meetings had to move online, this annual event has gradually established itself as a regular exchange program in the field of international textile history, garnering growing attention from the academic community. On September 23–24, 2016, the First IASSRT Symposium “A World of Silks” was convened at the CNSM, assembling a total of nearly eighty participants (among whom nearly thirty were Chinese) (Figure 2). Intensive discussions were conducted on textiles from Europe, East and South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and China, as well as the construction of an academic platform for Silk Road research (Figure 3). As well as pictures, actual silk fabrics from the participating countries were displayed at the symposium for attendees to see with their own eyes.

![Figure 2: Group photo of the First IASSRT Symposium.](image)

From November 29 to December 3, 2017, the Second IASSRT Symposium “Dialogue with Silk between Europe and Asia: History, Technology and Art” took place in Lyon, France, co-chaired by Xavier de la Selle, director of the Musée d’Histoire de Lyon. Twenty-three experts from around the world in the fields of textiles, art history, and the history of technology gave papers on such subjects as important silk traditions, and the functions, technologies, and artistic characteristics of silk products in Europe, Asia, and beyond, as well as the instrumental role that silk played in cultural dialogue along the Silk Roads (Figure 4).

During November 5–10, 2018, the Third IASSRT Symposium “Silk Road Textiles: Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage” was held in Buyeo, Republic of Korea. The symposium was organized by the CNSM and Korea National University of Cultural Heritage (NUCH), with the support of the National Intangible Heritage Center, the
Figure 3: A glimpse of the First IASSRT Symposium.

Figure 4: A visit to the exhibition hall and restoration room of the Musée des Tissus in Lyon.
National Museum of Korea, and the Kyung-woon Museum. The Korean convener and cochair was Professor Sim Yeonok from NUCH. More than 130 participants from 13 countries attended (Figure 5), 31 of whom reported their research findings.

**Figure 5:** A visit to the restoration room of the National Museum of Korea.

During September 22–30, 2019, the Fourth IASSRT Symposium “Textiles as a Historical Source” was hosted in Kislovodsk, Russia. It was organized by the CNSM and the Institute of Ancient History and Archaeology of the Northern Caucasus in Stavropol, Russia, co-organized by the State Hermitage Museum, and the Pyatigorsk Local History Museum. The symposium was co-chaired by Zvezdana Dode, senior researcher at the Institute of Ancient History and Archaeology of the Northern Caucasus, and Maria Menshikova, senior researcher at the State Hermitage Museum. Over sixty scholars from eighteen countries came to the symposium (Figure 6), and thirty-eight gave academic presentations in seven panels.

The Fifth IASSRT Symposium had to be postponed due to COVID-19 to November 15–16, 2021. Under the theme “Textiles on the Silk Roads: from Medieval to Industrial Periods,” it was organized by the CNSM and Centro Studi Martino Martini (Martino Martini Research Center), University of Trento, Italy, in hybrid online and in-person format. The conference was co-chaired by Riccardo Scartezzini, director of the Scientific Committee of Centro Studi Martino Martini. Among over seventy participants from twelve countries, twenty-two shared their reports (Figure 7). There were a keynote
speech and four panels, including “Early Period of the Silk Roads,” “Textiles in Italy and Europe,” “Traditional Techniques,” and “The Maritime Silk Road.” During the conference, Centro Studi Martino Martini screened seven videos on local Italian silk, such as Museo della Seta Como (Como Silk Museum), Venice, Antico Setificio Fiorentino (old silk factory in San Frediano, Florence), the San Leucio Complex (World
Heritage Site), and Lucca (a medieval European silk textile center), revealing the importance of Italy for the Silk Roads.

The Sixth IASSRT Symposium is expected to be staged in many places in the fall of 2022. The conference will be co-hosted by the CNSM, the Department of Textile Conservation, Metropolitan Museum of Art (US), Tracing Patterns Foundation (US), Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (Thailand), and the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences. Solid progress has been made in the conference preparations.

3 Cooperation among IASSRT members

The IASSRT, among other organizations, has been making crucial contributions to research on the Silk Roads. For example, the CNSM provides technological support for the research and restoration of excavated textiles from countries along the Silk Roads in many ways (Figure 8). On the one hand, workstations have been established overseas, such as the Workstation for Textile Conservation in the North Caucasus, Russia in 2019. On the other hand, cooperation on major projects has been driven forward, such as "Wool on the Silk Road: Research on Eurasian Wool Textiles of the Bronze to Early Iron Ages" (with the Centre for Textile Research, Danish National Research Foundation), and "Studies of Medieval Textiles Excavated in the North Caucasus" (with the State Unitary Firm “Nasledie” of the Ministry of Culture of the Stavropol District, Stavropol, Russia). To develop academic databases, thirty IASSRT members from thirteen countries have jointly launched the “World Map of Silk” project. This aims to collect data worldwide on silk-related heritage and to study and uncover the spatial and temporal patterns of the origin, dissemination, and exchanges of silk. In 2018, supported by this project, the first version of the World Looms Map came out online. By the end of 2021, the project had garnered 10,443 pieces of information on 8176 silk artifacts, 482 images, 435 documents, 900 tools, and 450 sites.

Furthermore, the IASSRT has boosted other forms of cooperation and exchanges among its members in a multi-level and wide-ranging fashion. This is showcased by the International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road (IAMS) jointly founded by the IASSRT in 2017. The IAMS endeavors to explore thematic exhibitions, information sharing, joint research, exchanges among professionals, and training in the field of cultural heritage in countries and regions along the Silk Roads. It also aims to deepen international cooperation among museums in the countries and regions involved, and to strengthen communications and cooperation between museums and related international institutions and organizations. In 2021, three IASSRT members, the CNSM, the British Museum, and the British Library, having invited contributions from more than forty museums from China and beyond, unveiled the world’s first Silk Road
Online Museum. Meanwhile, there have been abundant exchanges of cultural relics within the IASSRT, including exhibitions such as “Life along the Silk Road: Little Stories during the Great Era” and “Traditional Korean Costumes and Textiles.” In 2019, the IASSRT and the Chinese Museums Association’s Committee of Museums along the Silk Road jointly issued the Hangzhou Initiative for Dissemination and Promotion of the Silk Road Spirit. Driven by this initiative, from 2020 onwards, “Silk Road Week” has become an annual event spanning a week around June 22, encouraging museums worldwide and pertinent cultural institutions and museums along the Silk Roads to host activities. This event also publishes an annual report, *Cultural Heritage on the Silk Roads*, edited by IASSRT President Zhao Feng, which includes contributions by many institutions. With the event having been successfully held for two years, the Silk Road Spirit has begun to take root among the public.