

FROM
SILK
TO
OIL

CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIONS
ALONG THE SILK ROADS

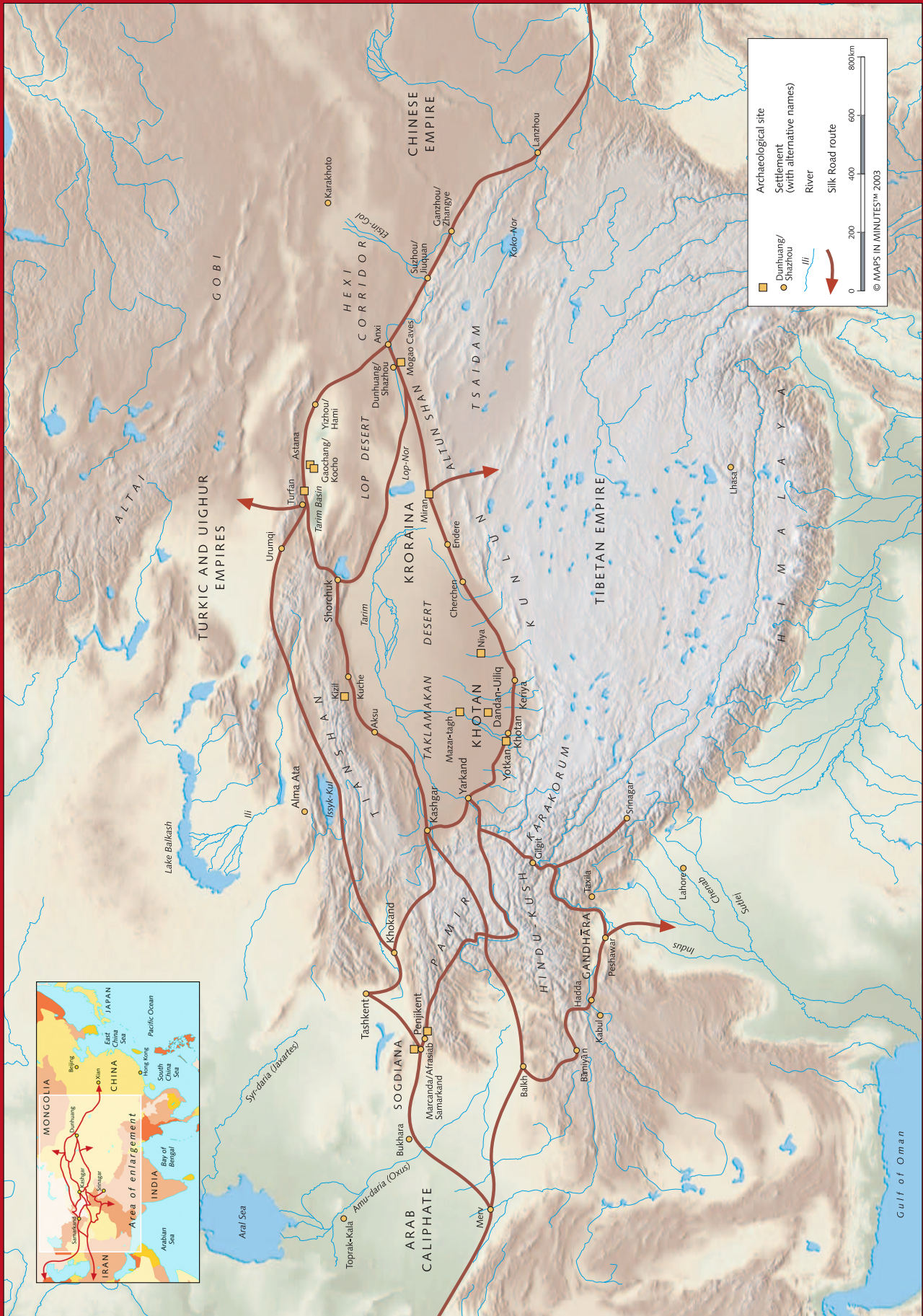
A Curriculum Guide for Educators

China Institute



The Silk Roads in Central Asia, Showing Ancient Kingdoms and Empires

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FROM SILK TO OIL: Cross-Cultural Connections Along The Silk Roads

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China Institute 

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China Institute

About *TEACH CHINA*

The *Teach China* program provides K12 educators with numerous opportunities for professional development. It not only offers courses, workshops, and seminars on traditional and modern China and other East Asia-related topics, but also conducts multi-week study tours for selected groups of teachers. In addition, *Teach China* is involved in the ongoing creation of accurate and up-to-date curriculum in collaboration with an expanding group of scholar-consultants.

About CHINA INSTITUTE

CHINA INSTITUTE IN AMERICA was founded in 1926 by a group of distinguished American and Chinese educators, including John Dewey and Hu Shih. It is the oldest bicultural organization in America focused exclusively on China. China Institute is a non-profit cultural and educational institution that promotes the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of Chinese civilization, and provides the historical context for understanding contemporary China.

Visit the China Institute website
<http://www.chinainstitute.org>

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Nancy Jervis, Vice President and Director of Education, China Institute

Preface

CHINA INSTITUTE'S *FROM SILK TO OIL* PROJECT

Nancy Jervis

What used to be the study of American and European history has increasingly become the study of world history. While nation-states and societies, including great civilizations such as China, were once studied as more or less discrete units, this way of studying history is no longer tenable. Our increased awareness of our own contemporary global interconnectedness informs the study of history today, causing us to re-think much of what we once took for granted. This process of re-thinking history is evidenced in many ways in our classrooms: through the 1996 publication of the *National Standards for History*, through a new Advanced Placement test in World History that reflects these standards, and via the publication of new textbooks that emphasize global interconnectedness.

From Silk to Oil: Cross-Cultural Connections along the Silk Roads was designed with two key features in mind. First, it is *multidisciplinary*, interweaving the themes of geography, ethnic and political history, exchange of goods and ideas, religions, and the arts. Second, it is *historical*, tracing aspects of these different themes from earliest times through the modern period into the contemporary world in which we live. *From Silk to Oil* is especially effective in dealing with conceptual and organizational approaches relating to *comparative civilizations*, *civilizations in global context*, *interregional history*, and *thematic history*, four approaches suggested by the *National Standards for History*.

Resulting from a major attempt at nationwide educational reform, the *National Standards for History*¹ define history as

. . . a broadly integrative field, recounting and analyzing human aspirations and strivings in various spheres of human activity: social, political, scientific/technological, economic, and cultural. Studying history—inquiring into families, communities, states, nations, and various peoples of the world—at once engages students in the lives, aspirations, struggles, accomplishments, and failures of real people, in all these aspects of their lives.²

This human-centered history is divided into nine eras stretching from the beginnings of human society to the twentieth century since 1945. Of these nine eras, *From Silk to Oil* is especially relevant in terms of the following five:

Era 3—Classical Traditions, Major Religions, and Giant Empires, 1000 BCE-300 CE

During this period, Africa and Eurasia together moved in the direction of forming a single world of human interchange.

Era 4—Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300-1000 CE

The spread of Buddhism in the early centuries of the Common Era is perhaps the most important example of cultural exchange along the Silk Roads. Also, the subsequent rise of Islam and Islamic empires indelibly stamped the history of Eurasia and the Silk Roads.

Era 5—Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000-1500 CE

Mongol control of Eurasia in the 13th and 14th centuries made it possible for merchants and travelers to go from the Mediterranean to the China Sea under Mongol protection.

¹ For the electronic version of the *National Standards for History*, visit the National Center for History in the Schools website <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/>

² *National Standards for History*, 47.

Era 8—Half Century of Crisis and Achievement, 1900-1945

Division, conflict, and territorial rivalry are a pervasive element of Central Asia's often tragic modern history.

Era 9—The Twentieth Century Since 1945: Promises and Paradoxes

The promises and paradoxes of the decades following the Second World War indeed are reflected in the serious problems facing contemporary Central Asia.

Each unit in *From Silk to Oil* consists of two parts. The first is a conventional lesson plan: Essential Question(s), Anticipatory Set, Context, Rationale, Time Required, Instructional Resources, Procedure, Whole Group Reflection, Instructional Modification, and Application. These are followed by classroom material for students: written and visual primary documents, maps, tables, even a Silk Roads board game. Together these not only cultivate reading comprehension and visual literacy skills, but also encourage critical thinking and stimulate interest in major issues that bridge past and present.

The volume also contains a glossary; lists of additional resources including readings and websites; and a CD with the entire text and color images—including hotlinks to relevant websites—in PDF format.

From Silk to Oil is designed to be self-contained, that is to say, teachers can, if they wish, prepare for class without needing to seek outside information. The units also stand alone in that all the information needed to teach a unit will be found within that unit.

From Silk to Oil is the result of the past successes of China Institute's *Teach China* professional development program for educators. In 2001, *Teach China* conducted two related institutes for teachers, a four-week NEH Summer Institute entitled *China and the World*, and a week-long institute on the Silk Roads, both taught by the lead scholar and co-project director of *From Silk to Oil*, Morris Rossabi. Out of these institutes and a subsequent study tour to the Silk Roads region, a group of specially trained high school master teachers evolved. These teachers have been instrumental in creating dynamic, timely, and accurate curriculum units for use in the classroom. An academic advisory committee led by Morris Rossabi oversaw the project through all phases. They also wrote introductions for each unit and, together with the editor, vetted for accuracy all materials written by the master teachers. Upon completion of the first draft, the materials were pre-tested and evaluated nationwide in classrooms and then revised based upon the results of the pre-test.

As a multidisciplinary curriculum complying with the *National Standards for History*, *From Silk to Oil* will be useful to educators in the social studies, arts, and humanities all across the country. The key intended audience is high school teachers of world history, global studies, social studies, geography, literature, and art. However, sections of the curriculum will also be suitable for use in advanced middle school, community college, as well as lower level university survey courses.

China Institute has designed the project to be utilized in many ways. *From Silk to Oil* can be used as the main set of materials for a course on China and the Silk Roads through history, or educators can select individual themes to teach specific topics of interest (each unit is designed to stand alone). They may also choose to use individual documents as supplements to existing textbooks and classroom materials. They may also elect to use the background readings to enhance their own knowledge of a particular topic. Finally, the list of resources will aid students in doing individual research projects or term papers.

China's inner Asian frontier, the land-locked area serving as the geographical setting for the Silk Roads, provides us with an excellent case study of global interconnectedness over time. This region of dramatic landscapes inhabited by peoples of various cultures and religions will grip the imaginations of both students and teachers. What better subject to bring to life the modern telling of history?

Introduction

THE SILK ROADS

An Educational Resource

by Morris Rossabi

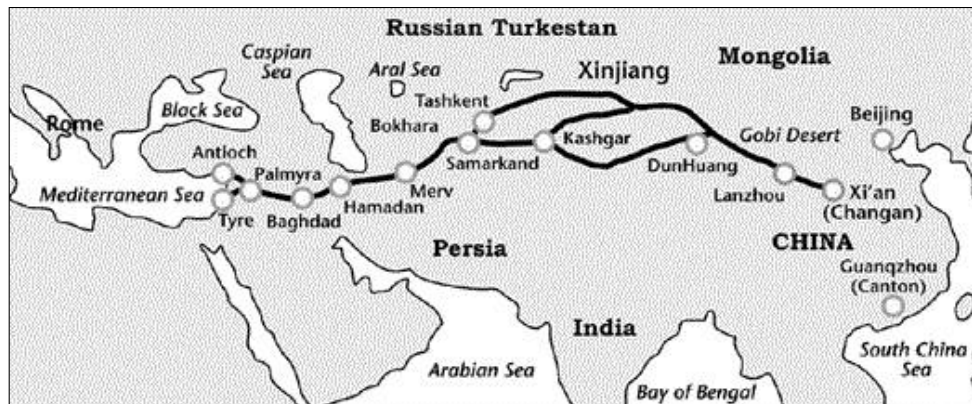
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The Silk Roads, an incurably romantic subject, which offers a splendid source for secondary school teachers and students alike, linked the civilizations of Eurasia for much of premodern history, starting as early as the second century B.C.E., if not earlier. China, Central Asia, West Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Europe, were in touch with each other via the Silk Roads. The economic significance of their contacts in pre-1500 history may have been exaggerated, but their cultural impact can hardly be overstated, and the political influences, particularly during the era of the Mongol empire, have only, of late, received much attention.



Major themes of cultural borrowing, interactions of civilizations, and the development of new economic institutions and technologies to facilitate commerce, together with the sheer excitement of travel and adventure, can be conveyed through historical descriptions of the Silk Roads. East and West Asian civilizations that have often received short shrift in the secondary-school curriculum can be brought to life through study of the history of the Silk Roads. Even nineteenth and twentieth-century relations between Asia and Europe, when the Silk Roads appear to have lost much of their significance,

can be profitably analyzed through examination of clashes of interests along these old East-West caravan routes. As oil and gas have been discovered in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, major thoroughfares on the old Silk Roads, these regions may become known as the “Oil Roads” and could become as significant as in the past.

A good pedagogical device in teaching about the Silk Roads is to focus on specific individuals or occasionally composites—travelers, merchants, missionaries, adventurers, entertainers, and others—who embody the central historical themes. Teachers are blessed with a panoply of fascinating figures who played roles in the long history of the Silk Roads. More fortuitous still, quite a number either wrote accounts of their travels or were themselves the leading figures of contemporaneous histories, diaries, or biographies. Primary sources, often laced with excitement, humor, and insights, thus can constitute the core of a unit on the Silk Roads. The teacher naturally may need to select and edit these accounts to eliminate unfamiliar names of persons or places or irrelevant recital of events that might encumber or deflect the students’ interest.

Early 1900s Camel Caravan



(Photographer: Harold Loucks)

Growing scholarly and pedagogical concern for global history has resulted in the writing of secondary studies of great value to teachers seeking to impart educational themes related to the Silk Roads. Jerry Bentley’s *Old World Encounters*, with its emphasis on cultural relations and interactions, offers compact surveys of religious and technological diffusion, while Philip Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* focuses on commerce, with descriptions of trade in specific commodities. S. M. Adshad’s *Central Asia in World History* demonstrates the significance of that relatively unstudied region, which travelers and caravans needed to traverse, and my own “The ‘Decline’ of the Central Asian Caravan Trade” analyzes the essential conditions for the proper operation of the Silk Roads. In *Plagues and Peoples*, William McNeill describes the diffusion of diseases both via the Silk Roads and seaborne commerce. Though Janet Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony* makes a compelling argument for the importance of the Silk Roads trade, it is marred by factual errors and must be used with care. All these works are available in paperback editions and are thus accessible to teachers who seek additional information.

Silk Roads history may be conveniently, if somewhat artificially, divided into four periods. Teachers may not wish to be bound to this scheme, but it offers a useful means of describing the ebbs and flows of this link between the East and the West. The first period lasted from around the second century, B.C.E. to the second century, C.E., the era of the initial development of the various Silk Roads and the establishment of the oases and towns which connected the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-C.E. 220) of China with Central Asia and West Asia. The collapse of the Han and of the Parthian Empire of Persia diminished commerce and travel along the East-West trade routes. The second period stretched from

the seventh to the late ninth century, the time of the cosmopolitan Tang dynasty of China and of the expansion of Islam from the Arab world through Persia to Central Asia. The gradual decline and downfall of the Tang in the late ninth and early tenth centuries and the growing turbulence in Central Asia resulted in virtual cessation or at least dramatic reduction of commerce on the Silk Roads.

The third period, which encompassed the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, coincided with the rise and expansion of the Mongol empire, whose leaders favored trade and whose conquests led to a Pax Mongolica over much of the traditional Silk Roads, facilitating trade and travel along many of these routes. The disintegration of the Mongol Khanates, together with the discovery of the sea routes from Europe to Asia in the late fifteenth century, disrupted the Silk Roads trade and led to decline in parts of Central Asia. Ocean-borne commerce superseded overland trade on the Silk Roads.

The fourth period, which spans the late nineteenth century to the present, started with the Tsarist Russian expansion into Central Asia in the 1850s and 1860s and with the explorations and other activities of Western and Japanese scientists, adventurers, and scholars in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It then continued into Nationalist Chinese, Tsarist Russian, Japanese, USSR, and Chinese Communist rivalry and domination in Central Asia, the indigenous ethnic and religious revival in response to such foreign control, and the establishment of independent countries in the area in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Silk Roads may at present witness a resurgence, but they must now be referred to as the Oil and Gas Roads, as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and perhaps Mongolia gush forth with the new gold of petroleum, a resource which offers the region greater significance in the modern world.

Study of the Silk Roads offers opportunities to consider major themes in Asian history—the significance of trade, the spread of religions, the diffusion of technologies and artistic motifs, and the development of powerful military forces and empires. Yet perhaps even more appealing for students is the cast of characters directly involved in Silk Roads history. Teachers will want to select their own casts, but a brief description of figures in each of the four periods designated earlier may prove useful. One caveat: four of the following eight are real figures, and the rest are composites, though the latter reflect the activities and times of attested individuals who traveled along the Silk Roads but who did not leave written accounts.

BEGINNING OF THE SILK ROADS

Setting the stage for the first period is a Princess of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–C.E. 220) sent to marry the Shanyu or ruler of a pastoral nomadic people known in the Chinese sources as the Xiongnu, who tended their animals in the area of modern Mongolia and southern Siberia. This group, which needed trade with China, became increasingly bellicose when denied such commerce. Ecological crises also could have prompted them to raid Chinese settlements to obtain the goods they required. The Han leaders, who professed to be economically self-sufficient, tried to limit commercial and diplomatic relations with these peoples, whom they perceived as “barbarians.” Yet awareness of the threat posed by the Xiongnu cavalry and armies compelled the Chinese dynasty to seek peace. One of their tactics was marital alliances, and thus the dispatch of the Princess.

The story of the Princess may be used to illustrate Chinese attitudes towards foreigners as well as the differences between sedentary agricultural civilizations and nomadic pastoral societies, differences that would have a dramatic impact on the Silk Roads trade. The elaborate philosophical systems, the well-planned capital cities, the carefully devised hierarchical and social structures, the luxury products (jade, silks, etc.), and the sophisticated cuisines of the sedentary civilizations can be contrasted to the animal-centered economy, the more independent and mobile lifestyle, and the less luxurious and more precarious existence of the pastoral nomadic societies. The Princess’ initial distaste for her new, rougher sur-

roundings and her eventual accommodation and even admiration for the tribal society into which she was adopted offer useful illustrations of tolerance for and adjustment toward other styles of life.

Marital alliances aside, the Han-Xiongnu relationship remained fraught with conflict, partly because the Chinese denied badly needed trade to the pastoral nomads. At the same time, economic difficulties, on occasion, compelled the Xiongnu to raid Chinese border settlements. Deciding to seek assistance against its bellicose neighbors, around 139 B.C.E. the Han sent Zhang Qian, the second of our Silk Roads figures, to Central Asia to forge such an alliance. Zhang traveled through the oases and towns that would eventually constitute the Silk Roads and reached Central Asia but was rebuffed in his efforts to secure allies. Nonetheless, his mission promoted trade because he described the coveted “blood-sweating” horses of Central Asia to the Han court and brought silk to the wider attention of the peoples residing west of China. Thus demand for Chinese silk increased in Central and West Asia, leading to the development of the first epoch in the Silk Roads trade.

Not only would the story of Zhang Qian be absorbing to students, but they could also, through reading accounts about Zhang and other early travelers, recognize the complexities entailed in the proper operation of the Silk Roads trade, which required (1) a string of oases and towns offering shelter, food, and water to travelers; (2) guard stations to warn merchants of dangers en route; (3) interpreters and translators; (4) guides and camel grooms; (5) capital to fund the caravans; (6) written or oral descriptions of the routes; and (7) stable governments in at least China and Persia to keep the caravans free of bandit harassment. These conditions persisted for several centuries or until the collapse of the Han. Without a central government in China, commerce along the Silk Roads steadily diminished.

HEIGHT OF THE SILK ROADS TRADE

However, cultural contacts among civilizations, via the Silk Roads, endured, and Xuanzang, the third of our figures, reflects such continued relations. Facing a fragmented and politically unstable world, the post-Han Chinese sought solace in Buddhism, a religion that reached China from India along the Silk Roads oases and towns. Seeking greater understanding of Buddhism, Chinese monks traveled to India. Xuanzang, the most renowned of these Chinese Buddhist monks, journeyed to India in the seventh century to study with Buddhist masters, visit important religious sites, and gather Buddhist texts and artifacts. His travel account and his adventures provide teachers with a lively means of explaining Buddhist principles as well as showing Buddhist art and ritual objects. Xuanzang’s voyage ushered in a flourishing era in the history of the Silk Roads. The Tang dynasty (618-907) of China welcomed foreigners and foreign trade. A Persian merchant and a Central Asian dancer, the next two of our figures, represent the travelers of this time. The Persian merchant, a Muslim, can be used to indicate the rapid spread of such religions as Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorianism throughout Asia along the Silk Roads. Accounts based on the travels of such traders yield descriptions of the lively bazaars in the Central Asian towns and in the great Chinese capital of Chang’an (or modern Xi’an), of the products exchanged, and of the conditions of commerce. The instructor can use the Central Asian dancer, who can be visualized through the Tang tricolored ceramic figurines of foreign entertainers (examples of which may be found in almost any U.S. museum with a significant collection of Chinese art), to reveal cultural diffusion—in this case, of music and dance—and to show activities at the court.

MONGOL HEGEMONY

After the fall of the Tang, trade along the Silk Roads declined, and it revived only with the rise of the Mongols. During this time, China was a “lesser empire” and could neither dominate the nearby oases

and towns nor protect caravans heading westward. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols erupted from Mongolia and created the largest contiguous land empire in world history. They conquered and ruled much of the territory through which the Silk Roads traversed and encouraged the greatest flow of merchants, craftsmen, and missionaries across Eurasia until that time.

Marco Polo, the next of our figures and arguably the most renowned traveler ever, was one of these merchants, and his account, which was actually written by the storyteller Rusticello, provides teachers with lively and colorful anecdotes with which to describe and address such themes as: (1) the organization of empires; (2) Mongol military structure and strategy; (3) the status of women in nomadic pastoral societies; (4) technological diffusion; (5) toleration of the religions of subjugated peoples as a tactic for governance; and (6) the Mongol invasions as a possible source of the Black Death. Errors of commission and omission in Marco Polo's work have spurred some to question whether he actually reached China, a subject that could also stimulate lively discussion in the classroom.

The collapse of the Mongol empire and the late fifteenth-century discovery of the sea route from Europe to Asia led to a precipitous decline of the Silk Roads trade in Central Asia, the crossroads for this commerce, until the late nineteenth century. The flourishing oases and towns sank into poverty, and nomadic empires, such as the Xiongnu and the Mongol, could no longer match the advanced military technology (guns, rifles, cannons, etc.) and the growing populations of the neighboring civilizations. In fact, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Qing China and Tsarist Russia gained control over these regions and ruled what was by then a mostly Turkic Muslim population. Central Asia and the Silk Roads seemed to disappear from the historical stage.

SILK ROADS IN MODERN TIMES

The late nineteenth-century scramble for colonies in Asia revived interest in Central Asia and the Silk Roads region. Great Britain and Russia were the first to compete for influence in the zone in a struggle referred to as the Great Game. Later, Japan joined in the competition. Diplomats and soldiers were not the only participants: scientists, geographers, adventurers, and archeologists were lured by the treasures of the Silk Roads.

Albert Von Le Coq (1860-1930), our next protagonist, was an amateur explorer and archaeologist who was drawn to the art and artifacts of the region. He gathered precious manuscripts and chipped out Buddhist and Manichaean cave paintings in Bezeklik and Kharakhojo and sent them to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, justifying what appeared to be theft by asserting that he was saving these works from defacement and vandalism. Ironically, the Allied bombing of Berlin in World War II destroyed much of his collection. Von Le Coq's story lends itself to provocative classroom discussion of the ethics of the late nineteenth-century archaeologists and, for that matter, twentieth-century museum curators from the so-called developed world who have either spirited out or purchased works of art, regarded by some native peoples as part of the national patrimony, from so-called underdeveloped countries.



The German amateur explorer and archaeologist Albert Von Le Coq (standing, far right) on the Silk Roads expedition

Photo courtesy of Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin

One twentieth-century reaction to such foreign cultural hegemony and political domination has been an explosive rise of nationalism among the previously subjugated peoples who resided along the Silk Roads. The five Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, which had been ruled by Russia and later by the USSR, each declared independence in the

early 1990s. Simultaneously, Mongolia broke away from Soviet overlordship. Stirrings of discontent have appeared in the Chinese-dominated lands of Xinjiang (with its largely Turkic population), Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, but the People's Republic of China has managed, by alternate use of force and persuasion, to retain control.

Our final protagonist, a Uyghur nationalist from Xinjiang, could embody the recent transformations in the region. Born in 1960, this man's early education was disrupted by the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-early 1970s) when his school was closed and by the government's mandating use of the Chinese language in Xinjiang. Repressive measures against Islam during this period prevented him from observing his faith. However, the liberalization after the Cultural Revolution benefited the young Uyghur because the government wished to portray itself as a protector of the ethnic minorities within China. It reopened mosques and permitted the reprinting of *The Qur'an*.

Our protagonist capitalized on the new policies to gain admission to university to study the history and archaeology of Xinjiang and eventually, after graduation, to take part in several excavations in his native region. Paradoxically, with success came his awareness that the Chinese occupied the leading positions in government and the economy in Xinjiang. He joined an underground nationalist movement that sought greater autonomy or independence from China and participated in demonstrations in Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang, during the Tiananmen protest movement in 1989. Despite the government's suppression of the movement in Tiananmen and other locations throughout China, he persists to the present in his efforts to achieve greater independence for the Uyghurs.

The growing economic significance of the old Silk Roads gives him confidence for the future. The oil and gas discovered in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Mongolia have inspired visions of a revival of the Silk Roads in the form of oil pipelines and of a resurgence of trade throughout the region, potentially offering great economic leverage to him and his people.

The Silk Roads, from their inception to the present, provide the teacher with an ideal vehicle to introduce students to Asian cultures. Political history, economic institutions, art, religions, technology, and geography all can be discussed courtesy of the Silk Roads, and many Asian civilizations can be interrelated through this glorious and colorful vehicle.

This work is intended for secondary-school teachers, but students might find it useful as well. Both teachers and students can make use of the introductory essays, which are written by scholars in the field. The lesson plans and the bibliography are designed for teachers.

Sources for Teachers

I. GENERAL

Good maps, bibliographies, and photographs and descriptions of the art and artifacts produced or traded along the Silk Roads may be found in the catalogs as well as the associated websites for five Silk Roads exhibitions:

Susan Whitfield, ed., *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (London: The British Library, 2004); Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002); Anne Wardwell and James Watt, with an essay by Morris Rossabi, *When Silk Was Gold* (New York: Abrams, 1997); John Vollmer, et al., *Silk Roads, China Ships* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983); and *Along the Ancient Silk Routes* (New York: Berlin State Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982). NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation (1177 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10036) has produced 12 fifty-minute videos entitled “The Silk Road: An Ancient World of Adventure.” The Department of Education at The Asia Society (725 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021) has produced a prototype CD-ROM on the travels of Xuanzang. The American Forum for Global Education has compiled a resource guide entitled *Spotlight on Inner Asia: The Bizarre Bazaar* (2000), which incorporates a lengthy section on the Silk Roads.

Useful websites with links to numerous additional sites include <http://www.silk-road.com> and <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/>

Other valuable works, most of which are profusely illustrated, include: Frances Wood, *The Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Luce Boulnois, et al., *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors, and Merchants in the Silk Road* (Hong Kong: Odyssey, 2004 rev. ed.); and Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road: Art and History* (Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2003).

II. SPECIFIC ERAS

On Xiongnu-Chinese interactions, see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, rev. ed.); Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Yu Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); and Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). On nomads in general, see Anatoly Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994, 2nd ed.). A primary source for Zhang Qian has been translated in Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) vol. 2, 264-274. One useful secondary account is Jeannette Mirsky, *The Great Chinese Travelers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 13-25.

Sally Wriggins has written a readable book on Xuanzang entitled *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996). The great Chinese novel translated as *Journey to the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977-1983, 4 vols.) by Anthony Yu offers a fictional portrait (along with much else) of the Buddhist pilgrim. *Art Treasures of Dunhuang* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1981) is one among many works with splendid plates of the Buddhist art that Xuanzang might have seen on his travels. Also useful is Liu Xinju, *Silk and Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Richard Foltz offers a survey in his *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2000)

For visual representations of the Persian merchant and the Central Asian dancer, see Ezekiel Schloss, *Foreigners in Ancient Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute, 1969) and Jane G. Mahler, *The Westerners Among the Figurines of the T'ang Dynasty of China* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1959). Morris Rossabi, “China and the Islamic World” in Bernard Lewis and Edmund Leites, eds., *As Others See Us: Mutual Perceptions, East and West* (New York: International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, 1985) provides background for the role of Islam on the Silk Roads, and Edward Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) offers a wealth of information on the products, the people, and the cultures of the Silk Roads during Tang times. Susan

Whitfield provides a composite portrait of travelers along the Silk Roads in her *Life Along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

For sources (including translations of his work, novels, films, and plays) on Marco Polo, see Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 261-262, footnote 170. Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) argues that Marco Polo never reached China, a contention that has been refuted by specialists on the Yuan dynasty. On the Mongols, see David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986); and Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005 reprint, with new preface by Morris Rossabi). The A & E television network (235 East 45 Street, New York, New York 10017) has produced *Marco Polo* and *Genghis Khan*, two 50-minute videos, for its Biography series.

Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (London: John Murray, 1980) is a highly readable account of the exploits of Von Le Coq and other adventurers on the Silk Roads in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Susan Whitfield, et al. provide views of another explorer on the Silk Roads in *Aurel Stein on the Silk Road* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004). A personal view of developments among the Uyghurs at present is Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Latest developments along the contemporary Silk Roads can be followed in the <http://www.eurasianet.org> website; its Central Eurasia Project provides information on the latest news, international involvement, and cultures of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Silk Road Foundation publishes a very useful newsletter, with excellent articles, which is available on line at <http://www.silkroadfoundation.org>

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Morris Rossabi is Professor of Chinese and Inner Asian History at the City University of New York and author of *Khubilai Khan* (1988), *Voyager from Xanadu* (1992), and *China and Inner Asia* (1975). He has contributed to *The Legacy of Genghis Khan*, an exhibition of Ilkhanid Iranian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and has also published *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

PART I

Essays

FROM SILK TO OIL

Essay 1

GEOGRAPHY ALONG THE SILK ROADS . . . Morris Rossabi

Essay 2

ETHNIC RELATIONS AND POLITICAL HISTORY ALONG THE SILK ROADS . . . Morris Rossabi

Essay 3

EXCHANGE OF GOODS AND IDEAS ALONG THE SILK ROADS . . . George Saliba

Essay 4

RELIGIONS ALONG THE SILK ROADS . . . Chun-Fang Yü

Essay 5

ART ALONG THE SILK ROADS . . . Stefano Carboni



1. Geography Along The Silk Roads

Morris Rossabi

The Silk Roads, which linked China, India, West Asia, and Europe, via Central and Inner Asia¹, are an “incurably romantic subject.”² Over the centuries, caravans that traversed part or all of this vast territory encountered some of the world’s most daunting terrain. Treacherous deserts and lofty mountains impeded travel, yet merchants, missionaries, entertainers, craftsmen, and other voyagers continued their journeys along these roads from the second century, BCE on, particularly when powerful dynasties, which could deter bandits, ruled China and Persia.

Four ecological zones, all of which were landlocked, marked Inner Asia. Forests and lakes characterized southern Siberia, northern Mongolia, and northern Manchuria, fostering a nomadic hunting and fishing economy. Grasslands dominated the areas to the south and were peopled by pastoral nomads, principally in Mongolia, northern Xinjiang, and Kazakhstan. The inhospitable Gobi and Taklamakan deserts were still farther south, with oases and even large towns, whose inhabitants survived on a self-sufficient agriculture and both short-distance and Silk Roads trade. Melting snow from the Tianshan, Nanshan, and Hindukush mountains provided water for the oases and, in the lower elevations, offered grass for herders in summer. Indeed, these zones were not mutually exclusive. Farmers and herders often shared the steppes, and herders frequently hunted and fished to supplement their incomes. Inhabitants of all four regions shared one characteristic—a need for commerce. Eking out a fragile existence and unable to maintain a surplus to survive droughts or heavy snows, pastoral nomads had to trade either with China or Persia, the two mostly sedentary civilizations. They also benefited from the long-distance trade in such luxury items as silk, transporting these goods through Inner Asia, particularly after the second century BCE missions of Zhang Qian initiated commerce between China and Central Asia.

Zhang Qian and the Western Regions

The development of the Silk Roads trade stemmed from defensive measures against the Xiongnu, a pastoral nomadic confederation based in Mongolia and stretching all the way to northern Xinjiang. Commercial and territorial disputes between China’s Han dynasty and the Xiongnu resulted in repeated battles. Such conflicts prompted Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 BCE) to dispatch an expedition of approximately a hundred men to Central Asia to forge an alliance against the Xiongnu. However, one of the Xiongnu tribes captured Zhang Qian, the leader of the embassy, and detained him for ten years. He finally managed to escape and reached the territory of a group whom the Xiongnu had expelled from northwest China. The group’s leader rejected Zhang’s offer of an alliance.

Nonetheless, Zhang’s mission was not a failure. He returned to China following recapture and a second escape from the Xiongnu, and offered a report on his travels. The Emperor was delighted with the report, specifically Zhang’s account of the superior, so-called “blood-sweating” horses of Central Asia. Simultaneously, the peoples of Central Asia learned about silk from Zhang’s mission and developed a craving for it, both for themselves and for trade with peoples farther west. Shortly thereafter, commerce was initiated, and the Silk Roads trade was born.

¹ Central Asia comprises the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang and the currently independent countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as northern Afghanistan. Inner Asia is more inclusive and includes Central Asia, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, southern Siberia, and Tibet.

² Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954-), IV:3, p.17.



I. The Silk Roads in Traditional Times

The courses of the Silk Roads varied according to the paths across the Taklamakan desert. All followed the same route from Chang'an (modern Xi'an) to Dunhuang, which eventually emerged as a center of Buddhist learning and art. The southern route then entered the Tarim river basin and skirted the northern flanks of the Kunlun Mountains. The most renowned oasis on this route was Khotan, the source of some of China's finest jades and still another important Buddhist center. From there, travelers either journeyed to India or continued adjacent to the Kunlun until they reached Kashgar and joined voyagers who had taken the northern route. The latter had made a sharp detour to the north from Dunhuang and crossed a section of the Gobi desert, where water was available approximately every other day, before reaching safety at Hami. They then followed the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains to Turfan and reconnoitered with the southern route travelers at Kashgar.

More desert, mountain, and river crossings awaited the intrepid traveler. Journeying through the Terek-davan pass, he reached Samarkand and Bukhara, two great commercial emporia that eventually became twin jewels of Islamic architecture. After trading with local merchants, he traveled south to Merv and, through desert terrain, to Nishapur. Heading south of the Caspian Sea, some travelers headed to Damascus and the Mediterranean, others to Arabia and Egypt, and still others to Constantinople. One variation was an even more southerly route from Samarkand to Isfahan and Shiraz, in Iran, and then to the Persian Gulf.

Such long-distance trade required time, capital, and halting places. One writer estimates that the average journey from Beijing to Samarkand in Ming times (1368-1644) took six months. Governments defrayed the costs of official embassies, but merchants and other private individuals bore the expenses of most caravans. Oases and towns, free from bandit harassment, were essential because they offered supplies, fresh pack animals and horses, and hostelries for fatigued travelers.

Oases and Towns Along the Silk Roads

When Chinese dynasties controlled Hami, an oasis situated along the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains, the Silk Roads trade flourished. The Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and the Tang (618-907) dynasties and the Mongols either conquered or dominated it, facilitating its use as an important halting place for travelers. Through the Tang, records indicate that its population amounted to about 10,000 people and also mention that the inhabitants were ethnically heterogeneous. A variety of ethnic and religious groups lived in or passed through the oasis, meaning that merchants traveling through Hami could often find inhabitants who spoke their language. Inhabitants were so hospitable that, according to Marco Polo, they lent their wives to weary travelers. Though the oasis was in the midst of a desert, the melting snows of the Tianshan provided sufficient water for the inhabitants to cultivate wheat, millet, and peas. It did not have extraordinary resources or a large population but owed its importance to its fortuitous geographical location.

The Silk Roads trade required measures other than pacification of a few oases or towns. Bandits who harassed and plundered caravans and tribes which exacted stiff tariffs from merchants had to be controlled. The Chinese first sought to protect the caravans by stationing garrisons and erecting watch towers beyond the Great Wall. They also set up a postal station system designed to facilitate the conveyance of official mail, but private merchants could also use the facilities. Caravanserais, stopping places built especially for caravans, performed the same functions for merchants in West Asia.



Even with these institutions, caravans faced innumerable hardships on the Silk Roads. “Roads” is perhaps a misnomer; indeed the word “trails” might be more accurate because the so-called “roads” were difficult to traverse and not easy to follow. Sandstorms, hallucinations in desert travel, bitter cold, avalanches, mountain sickness, and predatory animals were only a few of the dangers confronting travelers. Accidental spillage of much-needed drinking water could also be disastrous. Travelers’ reports of corpses of men and animals observed along these trails attest to the hardships of Silk Roads travel.

Camels and cooperative economic arrangements facilitated such travel. Camels could carry more weight than other pack animals and required less water and less pasture than horses or mules did; they were ideally suited for desert travel. Yet camel raising and training required expertise.³ The gestation period for camels is long, and many of the beasts are sterile. The death rate in infancy is high, so that the rearing of camels is expensive and time-consuming. Similarly, the caravans themselves were expensive and, as noted above, risky. To spread the risks and avert bankruptcy for an individual merchant if his caravan failed to reach its destination, Islamic traders organized *commenda*, and the Mongols established *ortogh*.⁴ The *commenda* has been described as “an arrangement in which an investor or group of investors entrusts capital or merchandise to an agent-manager, who is to trade with it, and then return to the investors the principal and a previously agreed share of the profits. As a reward for his labor, the agent receives the remaining share of the profits.”⁵ On the other hand, if the caravan was attacked by bandits or fell prey to disaster, the risks were spread widely enough that no single investor would be wiped out. The *ortogh* was a similar arrangement.

The economic value of the Silk Roads trade has probably been overrated, but its cultural significance cannot be overemphasized. Silk, glass, tea, porcelain, rhubarb,⁶ and other products conveyed by caravan were luxury products and did not dominate the economies of the civilizations and political entities en route. Individual merchants, innkeepers, investors, camel grooms, and travelers benefited, but the economic positions of societies as a whole were not affected. Cultural impact, on the other hand, was a different matter. The Silk Roads linked the major civilizations in Asia and acted as conduits for the transmission of ideas, technologies, and artistic motifs between them. It is no accident that Buddhism and Islam, not to mention Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity, spread across the oases and towns along the Silk Roads and then reached the dominant civilizations. Merchants and missionaries introduced these ideas on their travels from west to east. Persian astronomy and medicine reached China; Persians translated Chinese texts on agriculture; and Chinese prisoners introduced paper to the Islamic world. Similarly, such Chinese motifs as the dragon and the phoenix influenced Persian miniature paintings and tile-work, and Central Asian designs would be incorporated into Chinese textiles.

Starting in the early sixteenth century, such rich cultural interactions eroded with the decline of the Silk Roads trade. The discovery of the sea route from Europe to Asia undermined the Silk Roads trade, as ocean-going vessels could carry bulkier items more cheaply than the still risky, long-distance caravan trade across Asia. In addition, political turbulence in Central Asia, the conversion of the Persians to the Shi’ite form of Islam (which created conflicts and thus interrupted trade with the mostly Sunni peoples of West Asia), and the rise of Ming imperial power—a less foreigner-friendly dynasty in China—impinged upon and eventually undermined Silk Roads trade. Central Asia, which had been the cross-roads of civilizations for more than a millennium, became a backwater that stagnated for several centuries before new possibilities emerged.

³ See Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁴ On the *ortogh*, see Morris Rossabi, “The Muslims in the Early Yuan Dynasty” in John Langlois, ed., *China under Mongol Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 282-83 and Elizabeth Endicott-West, “Merchant Associations in Yuan China: The *Ortogh*,” *Asia Major*, 3rd. ser., 2.2 (1989), pp. 127-154.

⁵ Abraham Udovitch, “Commercial Techniques in Early Medieval Islamic Trade” in D. S. Richards, ed. *Islam and the Trade of Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 47.

⁶ For centuries, powdered rhubarb root was a much-valued medicine in that it was used for everything from digestive ailments to venereal disease. Rhubarb first became popular as a food plant in Europe during the early 1800s.



***Built in the Fifteenth Century, Jiayuguan in Gansu Province
Is the Westernmost Section of the Great Wall***



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh, 1998)

II. From Silk Roads to Oil Roads

In the late nineteenth century, Russia and Great Britain capitalized on Central Asia's weakness to dominate the region. Russia converted the self-sufficient agriculture in the oases and towns to an export-oriented agriculture, emphasizing cotton. Great Britain challenged Russia in a so-called Great Game, preventing the Tsarist regime from approaching India, the crown jewel of the British Empire.

In the twentieth century, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China expanded into Inner Asia. The U.S.S.R. organized socialist republics in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, encouraging Russian migration into the region and, like the Tsarist government, fostering cotton cultivation, an economic policy that proved disastrous. Cotton required massive infusions of water, which the State farms and collectives obtained from the Aral Sea. By the end of the century, the Aral Sea had virtually dried up as a result of the extraordinary demand for water in cotton cultivation. In addition, the chemical fertilizer used in the cotton fields drained into the nearby bodies of water and into the aquifers, causing birth defects, illnesses, and even deaths among the unsuspecting population that drew drinking water from these sources. Chinese expansion into the so-called Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region also gave rise to ecological problems. Chinese peasants who moved into the Inner Mongolian steppes and farmed land more suitable for a pastoral economy contributed to increased desertification. The growing Chinese population in Xinjiang placed enormous burdens on the limited water supply in a region that consisted mostly of deserts. Water in Northwest China and indeed in all of North China may prove to be one of the pressing problems faced by Chinese governments in the twenty-first century.

These problems notwithstanding, Inner Asia has witnessed a political and economic revival from the early 1990s on, particularly due to its abundance of natural resources. The five Central Asian republics have become independent countries, Mongolia has become independent of U.S.S.R. political leverage, and China has adopted a policy of greater investment in its Western regions, including Xinjiang. Equally important, significant deposits of generally untapped mineral and natural deposits have been discovered. Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan (a new country adjacent to the Caspian Sea), and northern Xinjiang (the Karamai region, in particular) are awash in oil. Southern Siberia and Turkmenistan have substantial deposits of gas; Mongolia has gold, copper, fluorspar, and molybdenum deposits. Because Inner Asia is landlocked and plagued with bitterly cold winters, transport of these resources to market will prove challenging. The U.S., Russia, and China, among other countries, have vested interests where oil and gas pipelines are constructed. The oil and gas roads will doubtless precipitate more controversies than the Silk Roads.





2. Ethnic Relations and Political History Along The Silk Roads

Morris Rossabi

I. Early Contacts

Numerous different peoples, cultures, and societies have participated in the interactions along the Silk and Oil Roads. This stretch of Eurasia witnessed repeated migrations and intermingling of the diverse groups that inhabited the vast terrain. Conflicts over trade and land prompted some tribes and societies to flee from their native lands and to settle or roam in new territories where they influenced or were, in turn, influenced by their new neighbors. On occasion, they overwhelmed the native inhabitants, compelling the defeated people to assimilate or to accept foreign control or to abandon their lands and to move farther west. However, such conflicts or forced migrations were not the rule. Trade and cultural exchanges most often characterized relations among the diverse peoples. Semitic, Indo-European, Turkic-Mongolian, and Sinitic language speakers frequently maintained peaceful relations.

China, as the principal producer of silk and the starting point for commerce, was at the center of the Silk Roads trade. It often portrayed itself as economically self-sufficient and sought to limit contact with foreigners. However, its need for self-defense prompted it to develop a means of dealing with its primarily nomadic pastoral or oasis-dwelling neighbors. China's neighbors, on the other hand, required trade for their very survival. If the Chinese denied them commerce, they would simply seize the Chinese goods they needed. In order to deflect raids, attacks, and incursions, the Chinese organized the tribute system of foreign relations.¹

The tribute system facilitated Silk Roads trade because it laid the foundations for the peace essential for commerce. When China was ruled by powerful dynasties, the tribute system worked well, peace generally prevailed in Central Asia, and the Silk Roads trade flourished. The Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and the Tang (618-907) exemplified such dynasties. Good relations with many foreign groups and cultures and intimidation of the remaining belligerent ones set the stage for extensive trade and cultural contacts throughout Asia. Persian craftsmen, Central Asian dancers and other entertainers, and Arab merchants reached China, while Chinese Buddhist pilgrims traveled to Central Asia and India. When China was weak or decentralized and could not maintain the tribute system, such exchanges ended or at least diminished.

Little is known of the pastoral nomadic or oasis-dwelling peoples because most had not developed written languages. The Xiongnu, whose history is known principally from Chinese accounts, was the first of these confederations to challenge and eventually to develop a commercial relationship with China. Based in Mongolia, these pastoral nomads sought and received silk, grain, and other commodities from Han China. Japanese excavations of Xiongnu tombs in the 1930s and a recent discovery of a Xiongnu cemetery attest to the large number of Chinese products in their domains. Like pastoral nomads before and since, however, unity proved elusive for the Xiongnu. A tribe is the optimal unit for a pastoral economy, and confederations generally fragmented because they could not secure the loyalty of individuals and tribes. A proper and orderly succession to leadership also proved unattainable for the Xiongnu and later confederations, resulting in internal conflicts and, finally, collapse. The Sogdians, an Iranian-speaking people, were more important than the Xiongnu in the Silk Roads trade because, as the Chinese sources observed, the men of Sogdiana "have gone wherever profit is to be

¹ For a description of the tribute system, see Morris Rossabi, *China among Equals—The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th -14th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 1-4.



found.” They dominated the silk trade from the second to the seventh centuries from their bases in Samarkand and Bukhara. Sogdian merchants were found everywhere from Merv (in Persia) to Mongolia and because of them, Samarkand became renowned as a commercial emporium. Culture accompanied trade, the Sogdians helped first to promote Buddhism throughout Inner Asia and later to spread Manichaeism to China and Mongolia. Simultaneously, they adapted the Aramaic script for their written language and transmitted artistic motifs west to east.²

The Chinese and Uyghur Languages Attempt to Coexist throughout Xinjiang



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Marleen Kassel, Xinjiang, 2001)

II. The Uyghurs and Islam

The Uyghur confederation (744-840), composed of a Turkic-speaking people based in Mongolia, benefited enormously from the Sogdians, particularly after the Arab invasions of Central Asia prompted many of these quintessential merchants to move eastward. The Uyghurs' commercial relationship with the Sogdians introduced them to Buddhism and then Manichaeism, which subsequently became the court religion. Starting as pastoral nomads, the Uyghurs, through trade with the Sogdians and Tang China, developed a mixed pastoral-agricultural economy. As they became more sedentary, they built a capital, the first such city in the steppelands. The new city dwellers craved luxury items, creating a demand for Chinese silk and silver. After the Uyghurs helped the Tang quell a rebellion in 763, they demanded a substantial increase in trade with China. The pastoral nomads became disenchanted, as “the discrepancies between life in the cities and away from them grew wider. Two quite distinct and utterly different societies grew up within the same empire...[and] the empire had hardly been founded before the divisions set in and it did not have the strength to overcome them.”³ Such divisions between the pastoral nomads who espoused the traditional lifestyle and values and their increasingly sedentary brothers who recognized that they needed to adopt new institutions and ways to rule weakened both and contributed to the fall of the confederation. The Uyghurs were compelled to migrate to Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, Islam was gaining adherents in West Asia, and as the religion spread to Central Asia, it facilitated Silk Roads trade. Arab and Persian merchants reached China as early as the seventh century and established virtually self-governing communities there by the eighth century. They continued to trade with West and Central Asia, performing useful services for the Tang court. Although the Confucian elite considered trade demeaning and depicted merchants as parasites who merely

² See Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001).

³ Colin Mackerras, “The Karakhanids and Early Islam.” In Denis Sinor, ed. *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 341.



exchanged, rather than produced, goods, they profited from commerce by receiving both luxury goods and necessities while imposing stiff tariffs and taxes on trade.⁴ Moreover, the government no doubt received its share of the profits and enjoyed the fruits of cultural exchange, including exposure to West and Central Asian music, dance, spices, and medicines and as well as the ability to obtain the works of Persian silversmiths and weavers. Thus the court tolerated the establishment of Muslim communities in oases along the Silk Roads and in the port cities of Southeast China as long as those communities did not proselytize or provoke hostilities. Chinese merchants, innkeepers, and craftsmen profited from this foreign trade and relished the goods imported by the Muslims. They did not share the Confucian elite's scorn for commerce.

The xenophobia of late Tang, which included persecution of the “foreign” religion of Buddhism in 845 and turbulence in Central Asia, subverted the Silk Roads trade. Jealousies and disputes generated rifts between the Muslim and the Chinese merchants, and animosity toward the Muslims and other foreigners surfaced during a ninth-century rebellion against the Tang. According to the reports of Abu Zayd (878-916), the Chinese rebel Huang Chao massacred over 100,000 Muslims, Nestorians, and Jews in Canton in 878.⁵ The figure that Abu Zayd cites is an exaggeration, but the Muslims were attacked, probably because of economic grievances rather than religious discrimination. The later Tang hostility toward foreigners, which coincided with the decline of the dynasty, resulted in the cessation of Silk Roads trade.

***This Food Vendor in Xi'an (Shaanxi province, north central China)
Is a Hui, a Chinese-speaking Muslim***



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Lier Chen, 2004)

III. The Mongol and Post-Mongol Era

The Mongols revived the Silk Roads trade and ushered in a period of global history. Emerging from the steppelands in the early thirteenth century under their leader Temujin (granted the title “Chinggis Khan” in 1206), they carved out the largest contiguous land empire in world history, stretching from

⁴ See Edward Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 23-28.

⁵ See Howard S. Levy (tr.), *Biography of Huang Ch'ao* (Chinese dynastic histories translations, no. 5, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955).



Korea to Russia in the north and from Southeast China to Syria in the south. As I have written elsewhere, “Though their empire lasted less than a century, it inextricably linked Europe to Asia...[leading to] an era of frequent and extended contacts between East and West.”⁶ The *Pax Mongolica* they imposed encouraged and facilitated travel in the sizable domain in Asia that was under Mongol rule, permitting West Asian and even European merchants, craftsmen, missionaries, and envoys to journey as far away as China. Asian goods reached Europe along the Silk Roads, and the ensuing European demand for such products eventually stimulated the search for a sea route to Asia.

The Venetian Marco Polo was the most renowned of the travelers, but the friar William of Rubruck, the Arab jurist Ibn Battuta, the French silversmith Guillaume Boucher, and the Armenian King He'tum also reached East Asia. Like Marco, they wrote valuable accounts of their travels and the regions through which they voyaged. Despite errors of omission (no mention of bound feet, chopsticks, Chinese writing, etc.) and commission (overstating his own position in Khubilai Khan's court), Marco doubtless reached and spent about seventeen years in China. Meanwhile a Nestorian monk named Rabban Sauma traveled from Beijing to Paris, and Zhou Daguan went as an envoy to Cambodia, and both wrote descriptions of the religions, the social life, and the economies of the countries through which they voyaged.

The Mongol era witnessed extraordinary cultural exchanges. Central Asian weavers who moved to China brought new designs and techniques into textile production. Persians translated a Chinese agricultural manual, and Khubilai Khan, the founder of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), invited Persian astronomers and physicians to introduce their innovations into Chinese astronomy and medicine. Chinese motifs, such as the dragon and the phoenix, entered into the artistic vocabulary of Persian ceramicists and miniature painters.

The perennial lack of unity among pastoral nomads as well as an irregular order of succession, which often resulted in bloody conflicts, destroyed the Mongol empire. By 1260, the Mongol domains were fragmented into the Golden Horde of Russia, the Ilkhanate in West Asia, the Chaghadai Khanate in Central Asia, and the Yuan dynasty in China, which were often at war with each other. Moreover, succession struggles repeatedly bedeviled each of these divisions. Such internal rifts, as well as economic problems, contributed to decay and ultimately either to loss of power or to withdrawal and return to Mongolia.

The collapse of the Mongol empire by the mid-fifteenth century undermined the Silk Roads trade. The indigenous Ming dynasty of China imposed restrictions on trade and tribute; the Safavids, who acceded to power in Persia in the early sixteenth century, converted to Shi'ism, which generated conflicts with the mostly Sunni believers of West Asia; and Central Asia devolved into almost constant struggles between various Khans and Emirs. The discovery of the cheaper and more efficient sea route from Europe to Asia also dealt a damaging blow to the Silk Roads trade. The sea routes, in turn, led to the stagnation and gradual impoverishment of the great Central Asian oases and towns such as Samarkand and Bukhara. The Silk Roads regions, which had for centuries been crossroads of trade and cultural exchange, deteriorated into small and weak oases or khanates.

IV. Russia and China Move In

The expansionist Tsarist and Qing (1644-1911) courts capitalized on the ensuing weakness of the Silk Roads domains. By 1760, Qing China ruled Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet; by 1872, Russia had gained control over western Central Asia. Both the mostly Buddhist peoples of Mongolia and Tibet and the mostly Muslim peoples of Central Asia and Xinjiang were exploited and became increasingly impoverished. The Qing encouraged Buddhism, but both Russia and China discriminated against

⁴ Morris Rossabi, Khubilai Khan: *His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.1.



Islam, resulting in major nineteenth-century rebellions. In addition, Russia had to deal with the Great Game, a struggle for domination over Central and South Asia between the Tsarist court and Great Britain, as the English government tried to protect India, its “crown jewel.” The ensuing turbulence in Central Asia and Xinjiang slowed economic and cultural development, and the oases and regions along the Silk Roads were politically and economically stagnant.

The fall of the Qing in 1911 and the collapse of the Tsars in 1917 offered opportunities for independence, but disunity among the various peoples of Central Asia eventually curtailed that option. Chinese and non-Chinese warlords ruled Xinjiang from 1911 to 1949 because neither the Uyghur population in the oases, nor the Kazakh pastoralists in the surrounding mountains and valleys, could cooperate to form one unified opposition. Uyghurs identified with a particular oasis rather than as part of a Uyghur people. They perceived themselves to be Kashgaris or Turfanis, but not Uyghurs. Moreover, they could not forge an alliance with the Hui, their co-religionists, because the latter, though Muslims, were ethnically Chinese and identified with China. Only after more than thirty years did the Uyghurs join together to form a so-called Eastern Turkic Republic, but by then it was too late. The Communists had taken power in China and, by 1950, had occupied Xinjiang. Nor could the peoples of Central Asia unite. The Communists gradually but methodically quelled the major Islamic rebel group, the Basmachi movement. By the mid-1920s, Central Asia was divided into five distinct republics: the Uzbek, the Turkmen, the Kazakh, the Kirghiz, and the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republics. None of the local governments were autonomous. The central government was economically dominant, encouraged Russian migration into the area, and campaigned against Islam and the local languages. Its repressive policies led to the deaths of thousands, if not millions, and devastated the Central Asian environment. On the other hand, that same central government introduced a rudimentary health, educational, and welfare system that improved the lives of most of its citizens.

Like the Soviets, the Chinese Communists emphasized autonomy and protection of the specific cultural characteristics for the so-called national minorities, establishing autonomous regions, particularly in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and parts of Southwest China.⁷ However, their policies over the past fifty years have wavered from support to attacks on Islam and Buddhism and on the local languages, educational systems, and cultures of the peoples along the Silk Roads. Policies have also encouraged Chinese (the Han majority) to move into the minorities’ areas; Inner Mongolia is now predominantly Han, Xinjiang is half Han, and Tibet has a growing Han presence. There have been significant disturbances in these regions, in the form of bombings, pitched battles, and actual rebellions. In the mid-1990s, the Communists responded with a policy emphasizing greater investment and economic development in the West (i.e. Xinjiang and Tibet, the two most restive regions). It is too early to tell whether the new policy will succeed in quelling disturbances. These areas are of strategic importance because they border on India, the new countries in Islamic Central Asia, and Russia. They appear also to have significant mineral and natural resources.⁸

The collapse of the U.S.S.R. in the early 1990s led to the establishment of independent countries in Central Asia. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan emerged from the old Soviet Union and achieved political independence. Each has experienced significant political turbulence, but several have major reserves of oil and natural gas, offering them great opportunities in the future. However, they are landlocked and will require cooperation from China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, or Turkey to market their resources. The next decade or two will witness intensive negotiations and perhaps conflict to determine the routes of the pipelines that will transport these resources to market. It will also be useful to see whether these Central Asians, as well as China’s minority peoples, can preserve their identities and cultures in this era of globalization.

⁷ China has five autonomous regions where ethnic minorities are a large part of the population. In general, “autonomy” refers to policies that preserve minority languages and customs.

⁸ See the introduction to Morris Rossabi, *Governing China’s Multiethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).





3. Exchange of Goods and Ideas Along The Silk Roads

George Saliba

Whether by land, along the famous ancient silk route, or by sea, the age-old route since antiquity through the Persian Gulf (once called the China Sea), China seems to have been in continuous contact with the other two ancient and contemporary civilizations of the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia. On the whole, those contacts were conditioned by trading exchanges, and thus rarely developed into more systematic appropriations of scientific or technological ideas from one culture to the other.

China's image in what is now called the Middle East was that of an affluent, exotic, sophisticated, and yet a very far land. In early seventh-century Arabia, for example, one could indeed speak of "seeking knowledge even if it takes one as far away as China," as the prophet of Islam was supposed to have said in the first quarter of that century. Two centuries later, we could still hear of someone saying that a specific book is so valuable "that it is worth a trip to China to get it." These statements, of course, stress the remoteness of a distant land.

In Islam's holy book, the *Qur'an*, the mythical lands of Gog and Magog are supposed to be located in China, at the farthest edge of the East. And in the same colorful and legendary references, even one of the Israeli tribes that was supposed to have converted to Islam and believed in the mission of the prophet of Islam was also said to reside on the farthest eastern edge of China. All of these impressions constitute the quasi-legendary reality of old Chinese contacts with the civilizations of the Middle East.

The situation changed with the advent of Islam in the seventh century and its rapid spread in the seventh and the eighth. China came into direct contact with an empire that by then had quickly stretched from its western border in modern-day Central Asia, all the way to the Iberian Peninsula, the underbelly of Europe. In that new setting, more realistic visions of each other's cultures began to emerge, despite the fact that the sources in both cultures still spoke of the immense distances between the two. And yet, despite the impression of distance, the presence of each culture in the mind of the other became more immediate.

***Invented in China, Paper Became Widely Used in Central Asia,
And from There Spread to the West
This Book Has Both Chinese and Turkic Writing***



(Source: TB Stein: 4.0339)



We are told, for example, that the second Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754-775) had specific reasons for laying down the foundations of his new city Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq, where he did. He believed he would gain a tremendous advantage on account of its proximity to the Tigris River. Since the Tigris emptied into the modern Persian Gulf, it would in turn give him ready access to trade with China. The other reason was to collect taxes from the western Muslim lands through the equally nearby Euphrates River. His foresight led to that same city, Baghdad, eventually becoming the bustling center of the Islamic Empire for some seven centuries.

Two centuries after al-Mansur, a biographer and intellectual historian named al-Nadim preserved for us a report of a Chinese student in Baghdad, toward the beginning of the tenth century. The student requested the famous Muslim physician Abu Bakr al-Razi (Latin: Rhazes) to dictate to him the works of the Greek physician Galen¹ as fast as he could and used a remarkable system of shorthand to take a copy of those works back to China with him. The student took down al-Razi's words using that method. The story may be completely apocryphal, yet it confirms the frame of mind of a Baghdadi intellectual who was apparently full of admiration for the ability of the Chinese student to write down every word in his shorthand system. Furthermore, the story confirms the sense of immediate presence of the Chinese in the mind of the early Muslim intellectuals.

This impression could have also been strengthened by the marvelous techniques that the Muslims brought back from China along with their trade objects. Whether in the art of navigation, or the instruments of the same, such as the magnetic compass first invented in China, or by the acquisition of paper—a Chinese invention admittedly appropriated by the Muslims towards the middle of the eighth century—or the manufacture of the fine silk and art objects in imitation and adaptation of the Chinese examples, or the development of block printing in almost complete imitation of the Chinese practice, or the use of gunpowder, to name only a few, one cannot but admit the fascination with things Chinese that must have been circulating in early Islamic times.

Such impressions of the superior Chinese craftsmanship must have given rise to the widely disseminated Arabic adage that “God has granted his beneficence to three human organs: the brains of the Greeks, the hands of the Chinese, and the tongues of the Arabs.” The acquisition of paper itself was of such momentous importance and must have spread so quickly in Islamic lands, that it generated a true revolution of knowledge during the early ninth century. The same person who reported the story of the Chinese student was also called “al-warraq—the paper maker.” By reading Arabic sources that speak of Chinese things, one gets the impression that Muslim authors were simply enamored with the fantastic technological skills and inventions that were imported from China to the lands of Islam.

But the story was slightly different when it came to the matter of theoretical sciences. In contrast to the quick dissemination of Chinese technological inventions in the Muslim world, and the eventual passing along of those inventions to Europe through Muslim contacts, there seems to have been a virtual “wall” when it came to the theoretical sciences—not too different from the physical Great Wall of China. Even if we believe the story of the Chinese student managing to copy down the whole of the Galenic medical works circulating in tenth-century Baghdad, all in a period of a month as the story goes, we are still pretty certain that Galenic medicine did not make much of an impact on the independent Chinese medicinal system.

Similarly, the far more sophisticated astronomical system of the ancient and medieval Chinese, which used our very modern equatorial system instead of the ecliptic system of the Greeks and the Muslims,² could not pass westward through that wall until perhaps the most recent times, well after the Jesuits landed in China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even a deliberate attempt to transfer to

¹ Galen (129-2210 CE) was a physician and philosopher. His medical writings were highly influential in the West until the advent of modern medicine in the nineteenth century.

² Our solar system—the sun and the planets orbiting around it—is almost flat. This flat plane is called the ecliptic. The celestial equator is the earth's equator projected onto the sky. The Chinese divided the sky up into twenty-eight segments by drawing imaginary longitudinal lines from pole to pole through the equator. They used these divisions to mark the location and movement of stars and planets.



China some of the latest state-of-the-art astronomical instruments of thirteenth century Muslim lands was an apparent failure.

Historical sources tell us of a sample of about a dozen instruments that were carried from the site of a thirteenth-century Ilkhanid observatory in the city of Maragha in northwest Iran, by the Persian astronomer Jamal al-Din (whose name is preserved in the Chinese sources as Zha-ma-lu-ding) from around 1267. Still, “the direct effect [of those instruments] upon Chinese astronomical practice seems to have been nil,” as was correctly surmised by Joseph Needham in his most celebrated work, *Science and Civilization in China*.³

The reason for the celebrated success of the transmission of Chinese technological innovations westwards and the apparent total failure of transmitting fundamental scientific ideas to China from the western domain, may have had something to do with the manner in which Chinese science itself developed, and to a much greater part due to the very antiquity of that science.

When China came in contact with Islamic civilization during the seventh and eighth centuries, Islamic civilization was becoming a melting pot of all sorts of other scientific traditions. In contrast, Chinese scientists, whether in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, or chemistry (then called alchemy), were already set in their ways and had formed a coherent explanation of the universe around them. Unlike Islamic civilization that had no worldview of its own to defend against incoming ideas, Chinese civilization was by then of a great antiquity. It had already achieved the required harmony between its social and scientific needs. At that stage, foreign ideas would naturally have had little effect to speak of.

Silk Fabric Begins with Silkworms
The Chinese Guarded the Secret of Raising Silkworms
and Silk Manufacture for Many Centuries



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Denis Titchenell)

That does not mean that a technique here or a solution of a specific problem there could not be passed on from one culture to the other. All it means is that individual technological ideas that did not incorporate a change in one’s worldview could be adopted without greatly affecting the normal practice of science or its fundamental scientific beliefs and concepts. The Chinese could actually adopt, as they did, the screw, or the clock, or the crankshaft without changing their minds about the nature of the heavenly bodies.

³ Joseph Needham. *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. 3, “Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth.” Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959.



None of the travelers who went to China from the Muslim lands during the middle ages ever seem to have brought back impressions of scientific ideas or actual scientific texts, but they always brought back scores of medicinal substances and drugs, metallic and porcelain objects, descriptions of items of clothing as well as the cloths themselves, and all sorts of techniques that could be emulated—and, of course, many stories of the exotic lands they had visited.

The twelfth century geographer and traveler al-Idrisi lists some twenty-five trade items that were brought by sea from China to Aden in southern Arabia, starting with iron and ending with lead, and including such things in between as spices, camphor, coconuts, and items of fine clothing and velvet. When al-Idrisi spoke of the Chinese rhubarb, which was regularly imported by Muslim merchants, he spoke of its physical and medicinal qualities. The Chinese had obviously passed on information about its medicinal values.⁴

During the fourteenth century, the famous Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta brought word of the Chinese innovation of paper money that had been up till then unheard of anywhere else. He also brought back stories of the huge Chinese chicken that was much larger in size than the geese with which he was familiar. What seems to have impressed him most was the fantastic ability of the Chinese to paint the likeness of a person, and to do so with such incredible fidelity that such paintings were used to locate and arrest foreign visitors who committed crimes—something probably similar to our modern mug shots, but apparently with much better accuracy. Their kings, just as with Indian kings, says al-Idrisi, were highly interested in painting and took care to teach this art to their children. They even went as far, he says, as choosing the best painter among their children to succeed them.

In other scientific areas such as alchemy, one can say that Chinese alchemy did not owe much to Islamic alchemy, nor did the mostly Hellenistic-based Islamic alchemy owe much to Chinese alchemy. Islamic alchemy was, on the whole, attempting to transmute the base metals to produce gold, while Chinese alchemy was seeking drugs or other methods that would lead to longevity or even ensure immortality. Still, one has to wonder about the possible transmission of ideas when such alchemical concepts began to appear in both cultures at almost the same time, or slightly after Muslim ships first landed in China in the early eighth century.

One would think that cultures with such deeply diverging orientations regarding the purpose of alchemy would have little to borrow from one another. But in terms of techniques and individual concepts and processes it is quite plausible that the early Muslims who heard of the Chinese enterprise—the search for longevity or immortality—would add this project to their program as long as it did not require a major shift in their system of thought.

We have already noted that early Islamic culture, unlike that of China, did not have a well-formulated system of philosophical thought when it came in contact with the Chinese culture. Thus it could freely borrow ideas and techniques from China, such as the elixir, rather than the other way around. One could easily trace scientific developments in both cultural spheres and at times see similarities that invite speculation as to who was borrowing from whom. One can never be certain of the direction of such influences if there were any.

One thing seems certain, however, and that is that technological inventions that were produced in China during the first thirteen centuries of the Christian era—such as the discovery of earth magnetism and the use of the compass for navigation, the invention of paper, printing, gunpowder, wheelbarrow and the like—all seemed to have swept through the rest of the world thanks to the mediation of the vast Muslim empire on the western border of China. Precious little hard core scientific knowledge followed.

⁴ For centuries powdered rhubarb root was a much-valued medicine. It was used for everything from digestive ailments to venereal disease. It first became popular as a food plant in Europe during the early 1800s.





4. Religions Along The Silk Roads

Chun-Fang Yü

The Silk Roads were a complex international “highway” connecting three centers of civilization in the first millennium: China, India, and the Mediterranean. Used not only by caravan traders, diplomats, soldiers, and adventurers, but also by missionaries of several religions, it started from the Chinese capital of Chang’an (modern Xi’an) in the east and ended at the Roman Empire in the west, passing along the way through western China, Central Asia and Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle East. Until Islam became the dominant faith in Central Asia in the tenth century, Buddhism—along with Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, and Nestorian Christianity—was practiced in the oasis kingdoms along its length. Of these religions, it is Buddhism that became domesticated in China and subsequently has existed as one of the three main religions (the other being Confucianism and Taoism) of China to the present day.

Although the once-flourishing Buddhist presence in Central Asia is now attested to by only a few remaining cave temples and excavated sites of ruins, we are fortunate to have a living museum represented by some 500 caves at the site called Mogao gu or Peerless Caves, located in Dunhuang, which had developed into an important trading center in western China by the late fourth century. Travelers departing for and arriving from Central Asia, which the Chinese called “Western Regions,” all stopped here to rest, stock up or replenish their supplies, and either pray for a safe journey or give thanks for having survived it. Traveling monks dug the first caves in the late fourth century; the last were completed in the mid-fourteenth century under the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols (1279-1368).

In the course of a thousand years, more than one thousand caves were dug into the cliffs, and perhaps half of them were decorated. Used as places for meditation, ritual worship, and living quarters for monks, the caves varied in size and were decorated with wall paintings depicting scenes from the past and present lives of the Buddha, Buddhist paradises, and parables from famous Buddhist scriptures. Clay statues of guardian deities, heavenly musicians and *apsaras* or flying celestial nymphs, and illustrious disciples and bodhisattvas attended those of the Buddhas. Long before the site was abandoned in the fifteenth century, some fifty thousand documents and artifacts were stored in one of the caves, which were then sealed around the year 1000, probably out of fear of an invasion. In 1900, this cave (Cave 17), which came to be known as the Library Cave, was discovered. News about the hidden treasures brought the British explorer Sir Aurel Stein to the Mogao Caves in 1907. He succeeded in buying seven thousand complete manuscripts and six thousand fragments as well as several cases of paintings, embroideries, and other artifacts, for the price of 130 British pounds. He was soon followed by French, German, Russian, Japanese, and American explorers, who made the same trip and carried away as many documents and silk paintings as they could. In the 1920s, the Chinese government finally intervened, putting a stop to it.

Among the treasures of the Library Cave, there are thousands of copies of Buddhist sutras as well as contracts, medical recipes, poems, letters, prayer sheets, ritual diagrams, and official documents. There are also silk banners, paintings on paper and hemp, wood-block printed sutras, the copy of the *Diamond Sutra* dated 868—being the oldest surviving printed book in the world—and documents written in Tibetan, Uyghur, and Khotanese.¹ Scattered in several world museums, these documents have been assiduously studied by scholars for close to a hundred years. Together with the art *in situ* at Dunhuang, they serve as indispensable resources for our understanding of the religions of the Silk

¹ Susan Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.), pp. 5-6, 41-49.



Roads. They supplement and complement what we can learn from traditional historical records which, being written by literati-officials, are generally concentrated on secular matters.

***The Pagoda Is a Chinese Version of the Indian Stupa,
a Shrine Housing Relics
Associated with the Buddha Or Other Sacred Figures***



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Lier Chen, Chengdu, Sichuan, 2004)

Early Buddhist missionaries and translators were Indian as well as Central Asian. For instance, An Shigao, the first translator of the *Pure Land Sutra*,² was a Parthian, a state which controlled Iran, most of the Middle East, and parts of Central Asia. Zhi Qian's ancestors were from Yuezhi (Scythia), and Kang Senghui was a Sogdian.³ Dharmaraksha, who was born in Dunhuang in 230 and was the first translator of the *Lotus Sutra*, also had Scythian ancestry. The case of Kumarajiva, one of the most celebrated translators, is another example. Born in Kucha, Kumarajiva's father was a Brahman and his mother a Kuchean princess. The mother became a Buddhist nun and the son followed her into the order. The two traveled to Kashmir to study texts of early Buddhism for three years. They then went to Kashgar and studied there for another year. While there, Kumarajiva was introduced to the literature of Mahayana Buddhism, which he compared to gold in contrast to the "stones" of early Buddhism. His fame reached China, and the ruler of the Former Qin dynasty⁴ invited him to the capital in 379. However, due to a general who was hostile to Buddhism, Kumarajiva was held up in Liangzhou to the east of Dunhuang for seventeen years. Finally, an army had to be sent to defeat this general in order to bring him to Chang'an in 401. From 402 until his death in 413, Kumarajiva translated many of the most important scriptures in Chinese Buddhism, with the help of some one thousand assistants.⁵

The traffic of Buddhist faithful was by no means one way. As early as 260, an eighty-year-old Chinese Buddhist monk by the name of Zhu Shixing went to Central Asia in search of "more complete" texts of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. He found it in Khotan and gave it to his disciple to take back to

² Pure Land is one of the most widely practiced forms of Buddhism in East Asia. Through faith in, and devotion to Amitabha (the Buddha of Infinite Light), it holds out the promise of rebirth in the Pure Land, also called the Western Paradise.

³ Kenneth Ch'en. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 16.

⁴ Former Qin is one of the short-lived states that ruled north China during the period of disunion between the third and sixth centuries CE.

⁵ Kenneth Ch'en. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 81-83.



China, he himself being too weak to make the trip. For the same reason—that of finding more accurate texts, this time those of the Yogacara school⁶—the famous pilgrim Xuanzang journeyed through the desert sands between 629 and 645. Several hundred Chinese pilgrims made the same pilgrimage to India both in search of scriptures and in order to study Buddhism under Indian teachers. In time, the figure of the pilgrim became a holy icon. Xuanzang's record of his travels, written at the bequest of the emperor Taizong (r. 626-649), was eventually fictionalized by the popular sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*. The monk and his travel companions, the most notorious being the trickster Monkey, have since become household names through storytelling, Peking opera, and more recently, movies and television programs.

One should not be surprised by the crucial role Central Asia played in the transmission of Buddhism to China. By the beginning of the second century of the Common Era, both Early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism had taken roots in the city-states, which amounted to some twenty-four along the Silk Road.⁷ This was the result of the active promotion of Buddhism by two Indian rulers, Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan dynasty (c. 274-236 BCE) and Emperor Kanishka I of the Kushana dynasty (c. 78-114 CE). Two city-states were particularly famous for being centers of Buddhism: Kucha on the northern branch of the Silk Road and Khotan on the southern branch. While the former followed Early Buddhism, the latter practiced both Early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism and later, completely Mahayana. Buddhist missionaries used Gandhara and Kashmir as bases to spread their religion to Parthia, Sogdia, Khotan, and Kucha in Central Asia.⁸

Why did the missionaries and pilgrims risk their lives for the sake of the Buddha Dharma, the Buddhist teaching? What messages did they find in Buddhism that were so attractive and powerful? Founded by the Buddha, the Enlightened One, who lived during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, Buddhism shared with Brahmanism, the dominant religion of India, basic beliefs about the world and the human condition. Human beings constitute one of six realms of existence, the other five being gods, *asuras*,⁹ animals, hungry ghosts,¹⁰ and hellish beings. One is bound to be reborn in any one of these realms after death, depending on the moral quality of the life lived or one's karma. The perpetual rebirth, or *samsara* was regarded as painful. But unlike Brahmanism, early Buddhism did not rely on religious rituals or gods to gain release from *samsara*. Instead, it was by following the Dharma or the Truth, which the Buddha himself experienced, that one would gain the insight leading to nirvana or the cessation of rebirth. Soon after the Buddha's enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, he preached the first sermon of the Four Noble Truths. The audience for this first sermon was a group of five ascetics. These men had been his disciples in the pursuit of enlightenment through self-mortification, a path the Buddha came to reject for being as extreme as the reckless pursuit of pleasure. The Four Noble Truths state succinctly that human existence is painful, that the pain is caused by desire, that nirvana is the end of pain, and that the way to nirvana is the Eightfold Noble Path. This path includes training in morality and meditation and results in wisdom. With the conversion of the five ascetics, who had left the Buddha when he put aside the practice of self-mortification, the Buddhist Sangha came into being. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are the Three Treasures that all Buddhists of later generations living in different parts of the world honor. By taking refuge in the Three Treasures, one becomes a Buddhist believer.

When Buddha died at the age of eighty, he did not name any successor, but told his followers to be guided by the Dharma and be "lamps to yourselves." Since each monastery was an independent entity, and not under any overarching hierarchical structure, it was inevitable that with time, divergences in both doctrinal understandings and observances of monastic rules would occur. The first split of the

⁶ A Buddhist school known in China as "Consciousness Only." It offered a critique of the way previous schools understood the relation between the human mind and the world.

⁷ Sally Hovey Wriggins, *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996.), p. 25.

⁸ Kenneth Ch'en. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 18.

⁹ *Asuras* were powerful supernatural beings that originated in Hindu mythology. Some were good and some were evil. They are sometimes compared to Titans in Greek mythology.

¹⁰ In Indian religion (Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism), hungry ghosts exist between animals and beings in hell. Forever hungry and thirsty, they can only be satisfied by monks who feed them during a ritual called "feeding the hungry ghosts or burning mouths."



community happened one hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana. Eventually, there were eighteen different schools. Of these, only the Theravada (Teachings of the Elders), which was based in Sri Lanka, has survived to the present. When a new movement identifying itself as the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) emerged in c. 100 BCE-100 CE its adherents referred to Buddhism prior to it as the Hinayana (Small Vehicle). Although Hinayana originally included many different schools, it is now synonymous with Theravada. Instead of using the name Hinayana, which connotes sectarian antagonism, scholars nowadays prefer to use Theravada Buddhism, Nikaya Buddhism, Early Buddhism, or even Foundational Buddhism.

There are a number of significant differences between Early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. While the Mahayanists also honor the Three Treasures and take refuge in them, their interpretation of the three are, however, very different. For the Theravadins, there is only one buddha in any one world cycle. So for our present world cycle, the historical Buddha is the only one. But for the Mahayanists, since our world is only one of many world systems, there are many buddhas in their buddha realms or Pure Lands preaching the Dharma at the same time. The Pure Land of Amitabha is the most famous one. According to the Pure Land sutras which were translated into Chinese in the third century, by sincerely calling the name of Amitabha or visualizing him and his Pure Land, one can be born there after death and have a better chance of achieving enlightenment there. The Mahayanists made new contributions to the Buddhist teaching or Dharma as well. They carried the idea of no-self to its logical conclusion by declaring that not only a person is devoid of a self or essence, but all phenomena are equally devoid of self-nature. This is the teaching of *sunyata* (void, emptiness), which forms the central message of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, the earliest group of Mahayana sutras to appear. Finally, the sangha was understood differently as well. The Buddhist sangha consists of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. However, when one takes refuge in the sangha, one is not taking refuge in the actual sangha, but in the ideal sangha. For the Early Buddhists, the ideal sangha is made up by the arhats or saints. These are monks who achieved enlightenment by following the Eightfold Path and realizing the Four Noble Truths. When he dies, he enters nirvana and is never reborn again. He is thus forever separated from the world of *samsara* and totally indifferent toward the suffering beings. By contrast, the Mahayanists take refuge in an ideal sangha made up by the bodhisattvas or enlightened beings. Although the Early Buddhists already used the term bodhisattva, they nevertheless used it only to refer to the Buddha in his previous lives. The Buddha was called the bodhisattva in his many past lives when he practiced the many virtues that led to his last birth as the Buddha. In this case, bodhisattva means "Buddha-to-be" and has a very specific and limited connotation.

***The Tufts of Hair on the Head of a Buddha Image,
Called Ushnishas in Sanskrit, Are Marks Of Perfection.***



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Lier Chen, Chengdu, Sichuan, 2004)

For the Mahayanists, on the other hand, the term bodhisattva does not have such a narrow reference. A bodhisattva is not confined to any gender, class, or even species. Any being (thus not just human beings) can be a bodhisattva. The most crucial step is to give rise to the mind of enlightenment



(*bodhicitta*) and make vows to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings. This is followed by the practice of the six perfections—giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation and wisdom—which are carried out in many lifetimes traversing the ten stages of the bodhisattva path. A bodhisattva does not wish for his or her own nirvana, but the complete unparalleled enlightenment or buddhahood. There are many bodhisattvas just as there are many buddhas in Mahayana Buddhism. Some of them, those who reached the eighth stage, have distinct identities and are savior-like figures.

For the Central Asian and Chinese Buddhists, the most important one is Avalokiteshvara or Guanyin. He is the all-compassionate and all-powerful savior. Most amazingly, in order to get all these benefits, all one must do is simply to call his name with single-minded sincerity. One does not have to earn his favor by scriptural study, moral perfection, or meditative proficiency. It is no wonder that he won the hearts and minds of numberless believers. Many pilgrims, including Xuanzang, would call the name of Guanyin when their lives were endangered in their journeys. Miracles abound. With the cult of Amitabha Buddha and the cult of bodhisattvas such as Guanyin, Mahayana Buddhism can be called an “other power” religion. Unlike Early Buddhism that stressed “self power,” a Mahayana believer is not alone in his or her endeavors. Through the free gift of divine grace, salvation is no longer beyond the hope of ordinary men and women.

Buddhism is the first world religion. Like Christianity and Islam centuries later, its message is for everyone. In Early Buddhism, although there is a difference in status between the monastics and lay believers, the difference is not hard and fast. If one chooses to lead the life of a monk or nun, one devotes oneself to meditation and study. But if one is not ready to give up the life of a householder, then one can engage in merit-making activities such as feeding the monks, giving donations to temples, having a Buddha image made, or sponsoring sutra recitations. Such merit is believed to bring good fortune in this life and a better rebirth in the next. Through merit making and good karma, everyone can eventually be fortunate enough to become a monk and nun. Good intention and hard work unfailingly bear results. This is a positive and optimistic belief. It offers hope and encouragement to those who must rely on their own efforts to succeed in life. The Mahayana message of compassion is even more attractive.

Central Asia and China experienced many wars and many people fought over the control of the Silk Roads. In China, after the fall of the Han dynasty in 220, there was unrest and turmoil until 589 when the country was united under the Sui dynasty. The Xiongnu, who had long threatened the Chinese from the north, entered Chang’an in 316. The Chinese fled south and did not regain the north for three hundred years. It was during these centuries that Buddhism took root in China. There is good reason why Buddhism could make its conquest at a time of political and social disorder. When the world is in chaos and life is full of uncertainties, how can one live in equanimity? It is perhaps during times such as these that the Buddhist ideals of wisdom and compassion could be truly appreciated.

From the record of Chinese translation of Buddhist sutras, we know that the earliest types of literature translated were the meditation texts of Early Buddhism, which were followed by the Mahayana scriptures known as the *Perfection of Wisdom*. When the Chinese retreated to the south, the study of the latter became the order of the day. What do these scriptures preach? The message, which is reiterated, is that everything is *sunya* or empty. The *Diamond Sutra*, which is the best-known scripture in this group, declares:

This fleeting world is like
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

Wisdom is the realization of the insubstantial nature of all things, including oneself. To view the world in this way will initially lead to detachment and equanimity. But the final realization is not the rejec-



tion of the world but rather the acceptance of all: be it war or peace, misfortune or good luck, foe or friend. This is the wisdom of the Buddha and the bodhisattva.

A Buddha and a bodhisattva are, of course, also beings of compassion. The Mahayana sutras offer a number of such compassionate saviors, among whom Amitabha Buddha and Guanyin Bodhisattva are most popular. The *Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra* was one of the earliest Mahayana sutras translated into Chinese. It was translated twelve times, of which five recensions or versions are extant. In this sutra, Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara) is an attendant of Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise or Pure Land. The sutra declares: “When good men or women meet with a crisis and experience fear, if they take refuge in Avalokiteshvara, none will not receive deliverance.” The interest shown to this sutra was soon reflected in art. One of the earliest Amitabha triads dates to the 420s. Sculpted in stucco, it can be found in Binglin Temple (Cave 169), which is located in eastern Gansu province.¹¹ In the *Lotus Sutra*, another “gospel” of universal salvation, which was translated by Kumarajiva in 406 and become the standard used throughout East Asia, the Buddha appears not as a historical figure but as a cosmic and eternal presence. He proclaims that he has not gone to nirvana, but is ever present and accessible to all of us. The Buddha is declared to be the Father, and sentient beings are his children.

In China, the Rotund Laughing Buddha Is a Symbol of Prosperity and Spiritual Contentment



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Lier Chen, Chengdu, Sichuan, 2004)

A separate chapter devoted to Guanyin, which became so popular that it was circulated as an independent sutra known as “Guanyin Sutra,” is titled “Universal Gateway.” Here, Guanyin appears in thirty-three forms in order to save the faithful from eight kinds of perils, grants them worldly wishes such as children, and helps them achieve enlightenment. Among the documents found in Cave 17 in Dunhuang, there are more than 5,000 extant copies of this sutra held at the libraries in China, England, France, Russia, and Japan. Many contain dedicatory inscriptions explaining why the copy was made. For instance, among the copies made in the seventh century, they express the wishes for the safety and prosperity of the country and the royal family, the hope to recover from one’s illness, or the desire for the welfare of one’s family, and relatives.

¹¹ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 34-35.



There are also texts called “sutra lectures,” which were delivered as “popular lectures” by monks as part of religious services for the people that are expositions in prose and poetry on Buddhist sutras. One of these is the “Sutra Lecture on the *Lotus*,” which has the worship of Guanyin as its central theme. Written probably in the Tang period (618-907), it declares, “the blessings from worshiping Guanyin are the most superior.” The Buddha is made to announce, “If a good man or woman can keep and recite the name of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva, worship and make offerings to him for one day, the person’s merit will be the same as making offerings to 62 billion bodhisattvas.”¹²

Buddhism was not without its rivals in Central Asia and even China. Aside from Islam, which eventually triumphed and became the dominant faith in Central Asia, the two competitors to Buddhism were Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity, the former founded by Mani (b. 216) and the latter by Nestorius (d. ca. 451). Mani, born in Babylonia, had an Iranian father and a Parthian mother. Based on two revelations that he received in 228 and 240 from an angel who was said to be his heavenly twin, he started to preach a new religion. He proclaimed the existence of two opposing eternal principles: light and darkness and the three stages of a cosmic battle. Light will win over darkness in the final stage, and the present world is created to rescue heavenly light scattered as particles in the world. Human beings, recalling the divine origin of their light selves, can help in releasing them. Manichaeism as a religion was propagated through pictures and scriptures in nearly all known ancient languages. It adopted different religious concepts including Platonic, Christian, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim. The community consisted of two groups of believers: the Elects who wore white garments and observed strict ascetic rules, and the Auditors who served the former. Augustine of Hippo was an auditor in North Africa in 373-382. The Uyghurs adopted Manichaeism as state religion in the eighth century. Manichaeism was introduced into China where its existence was reported until as late as the sixteenth century.

The theology of Manichaeism bore much similarity to that of Zoroastrianism, which was founded by the Iranian-speaking prophet Zarathustra (Greek: Zoroaster) who lived sometime in the second millennium BCE. It was the official religion of the Iranians before their conversion to Islam in the seventh century, and it exerted much influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Like Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism was also strictly dualistic in its worldview: good versus evil. Ahura Mazda, who represents good, is god: uncreated, eternal, and omniscient. Angra Mainyu is the Evil Spirit and destructive. The world has a beginning and an end. The final outcome of the battle between the forces of good and evil is not predetermined, but depends on choice. Here, each individual human being plays a vital part, not only to save him or herself, but also to save the world using reason and insight. Good is represented by light and fire. Thus, the fire ritual—the cosmic purification rite—had a central importance.

Nestorian Christians followed the teachings of Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople and a Syrian theologian. He was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431 for two reasons. He declared that Jesus had two natures: one divine and one human; and he believed that Mary was not the “Mother of God,” but rather “the bearer of God.” His followers were persecuted; they moved from Syria to Persia and then to India, China, and Tibet. In the cosmopolitan Chang’an, capital of Tang China, a stone inscription describing their beliefs—still extant today—attested the presence of the Nestorian Christians. Like Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity in Central Asia and China is now no more than a memory of a religion that once competed for converts with Buddhism. Nonetheless, some of the ideas of Nestorian Christians might have influenced Buddhism. For instance, scholars have noted the strong emphasis on light symbolism connected with Amitabha and Guanyin. Might there be some Iranian influence in the rise of Mahayana Buddhism? The Buddhist eschatology of the three ages of the Dharma and its expectation of Maitreya, the Future Buddha, at the end of world cycle also resonates with that of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. The Silk Road thus played a crucial role in the cross-pollination of ideas, just as it did in the exchange of commodities.

¹² Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 75-76.





5. Art Along The Silk Roads

Stefano Carboni

When one reflects about the Silk Roads and cross-cultural connections along its routes, the first images that come to mind are those related to the interaction and exchange between peoples, religions, merchants, and traders. They are images of cultural exchange across borders or of commercial exchange along continuous geographical lines dotted with caravans. Where does art fit in this vast landscape and how and when did artists influence each other to create works that, to different degrees, spoke a common artistic language? The answer can be simple and complex at the same time, ranging from direct contact between craftsmen of different artistic and cultural backgrounds to a combination of motives that include cultural, religious, political, and commercial links at once.

In addition to occasional encounters between artists from different cultures rarely mentioned in original sources, historical reports are dotted with direct contacts caused by the forced relocation of artists from their original workplace to the workshops of the capital of a new regional ruler. A good example in the westernmost area of Asia is provided by the capture of Chinese silk weavers, goldsmiths, painters, and papermakers by the Arab armies after the battle of Talas in Central Asia in 751 CE and their resettlement in the newly founded Abbasid capital, Baghdad. In the easternmost area, the relocation of the celebrated *nasij* (“cloth of gold”) weavers in the second half of the 13th century, from Herat and Samarkand to Dadu (now Beijing), the new capital of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. While the main reasons for such relocations may have been mostly political, commercial, and technological, those craftsmen brought with them the artistic traditions, patterns, and motifs they were accustomed to and that had been transmitted to them for many generations in their ancestral area. This fact, combined with their exposure and (their perhaps reluctant) collaboration with their local counterparts gave birth to new styles that incorporated and, in the most successful cases, assimilated and reinterpreted the imported patterns and motifs. The combination resulted in splendid blends that demonstrated truly novel artistic approaches and perceptions.

Textiles Were an Important Vehicle for the Diffusion of Artistic Motifs across Eurasia



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Marleen Kassel, Xinjiang, 2001)



High-end trade and commerce, however, were probably the single most influential causes for the diffusion of artistic motifs from one end of Asia to the other, and beyond. The name Silk Roads was, of course, not thought up by chance. It reflected the importance given to the most sought-after commodity traveling east to west from the time of the Han dynasty, if not earlier. High quality silks were traded, presented as gifts, worn as a status symbol and as a fashion statement, and hung inside tents and in front of windows in desert palaces to shelter rooms from the sunlight. These silks were elaborately woven in colorful patterns drawn from the visual repertoire known to artists through sketches, drawings, and preparatory designs. These ranged from purely ornamental designs to symbolic animals, flowers, geometric compositions, and calligraphic inscriptions that were meaningful to both the makers and the recipients.

The dragon and the phoenix, for instance, were imperial symbols of the Yuan dynasty and became prominent icons on all textiles associated directly with the imperial house. The wide distribution of silks carrying these motifs became possible during the unification of the continent under the Mongols. However, these imperial animals lost their original significance and were copied in Western Asia as purely decorative patterns. Thus, they lost their original powerful meaning—but effectively turned into an integral part of a common artistic language. Only the Silk Roads could have made that possible. Silk textiles of all types—woven, embroidered, or painted—also played a prominent role in the transmission of specific religious iconographies along the Silk routes. This was especially true regarding Buddhism, the most widespread faith in Central and Eastern Asia, with its important ramifications in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Sutra covers, banners, mandalas, and an entire range of portable textiles produced for Buddhist monasteries traveled back and forth, transmitting the rich visual repertoire of this religion and creating ideal links and analogous images between distant lands, such as eastern China and India. It is not coincidental that Tibetan monasteries have become over many centuries the largest repositories not only of Buddhist textiles but also of many other types of rich fabrics endowed or donated to the monks.

Because of their portability, textiles played a truly unique, pivotal role in the transmission and diffusion of artistic styles across Asia. Although the great oasis cities around the Taklamakan desert, such as Turfan, Dunhuang, Khotan, and Kizil, at the very heart of the Silk Roads, preserve cycles of monumental Buddhist images, it must be emphasized, however, that textiles were more influential than the models provided by these splendid frescoes.

In Western Asia, where Islam became the most prominent religion after the seventh century CE, so-called *tiraz* textiles with woven or embroidered inscriptions in the name of the Caliph (the religious and secular ruler in the Muslim world) were an important means of diffusion of the faith. Keeping in mind that calligraphy has always played the most important role in the arts of Islam, specific calligraphic styles were spread through the same medium across the empire. These textiles, together with *Qur'an* manuscripts copied on vellum and, later, on paper, thus contributed to the artistic unity that is so distinctive of Islamic art.

Beyond the Mongol territories in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, at the western end of the Silk Roads, many types of textiles and their patterns were sought after and imitated. The last Ilkhanid (Mongols ruling the Greater Iranian region) sultan Abu Said, in an effort to conclude a peace treaty, presented his Mamluk (a Turkic dynasty settled in Egypt and Syria) counterpart 700 richly woven “clothes of gold” in the early 1320s. This was one of the most memorable gifts of precious textiles. We also know, however, that high-quality Ilkhanid works reached the Mamluk capitals of Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo on a regular basis through trade and exchange of presents, to the extent that the arts of the Mamluks were strongly influenced by Ilkhanid, and ultimately Eastern Asian, models.

At the end of the Silk Road leading west to Europe rather than Egypt, luxury textiles were highly regarded as a signature product of Asian weavers. They were used to bury royalty—for example, in 1365 the body of Rudolph IV of Austria was wrapped in a cloth woven with the name of the Ilkhanid



Abu Said—and to line reliquaries in which church treasures were stored. Italian craftsmen from Lucca strove to learn the sophisticated weaving techniques and copied Mongol patterns and symbols, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain the origin of some textiles.

Silk textiles were not the only artistic products that circulated along the Silk Roads. Gold jewelry, belt elements, and all kinds of small objects as well as silver cups, plates, and pitchers worked in filigree, openwork, repoussé, and so on were made for affluent people and often changed hands, their patterns and techniques moving around with them. Today we can have only a glimpse of the importance of precious metals manufactured by gold- and silversmiths into expensive works of artistic significance, since objects made of these metals were among the first items to be melted whenever a need of hard currency arose. We must therefore imagine that many of the gold dinars and Chinese coins that survive today once may have been elaborate necklaces, belt buckles, or drinking cups decorated with patterns that became part of the common language of Asian artists.

Whereas we can safely surmise that artistic transmission mostly followed the Silk Roads—that is, a movement east to west, thus suggesting that eastern Asian artists particularly influenced their western Asian colleagues—there are notable exceptions that make this artistic tale more fascinating and intricate. As mentioned before, for example, weavers from Central Asia and eastern Iran were relocated to the Mongol capital, Dadu, in the thirteenth century. In this case, they brought with them ancient western Asian, Iranian motifs, such as lions and griffins either facing each other or back-to-back and other powerful zoomorphic symbols of kingship, in an infrequent reversal of direction. As a result, silks woven in China incorporated these designs, which were combined with the dragon, the phoenix, the lotus, and the peony, equally powerful imperial motifs.

One artistic medium, however, traveled exclusively west to east for many centuries. It was particularly rare and therefore sought after in eastern and southeastern Asia, as well as in Japan, where its manufacture was virtually unknown. Glassmaking was a specialty of Egyptian, eastern Mediterranean, and Iranian craftsmen. It became a particularly important but affordable commodity after the invention of glassblowing in the first century CE. The great majority of glass was made into utilitarian vessels that contained the perfumes, oils, wines, spices, and so forth that were traded east along the Silk Roads. Some of the green, blue, or nearly colorless glass objects were plain. Others showed simple incised or deeply cut patterns. They were hardly regarded as works of art as they are today. Nevertheless, the rarity of the material and its almost magic “translucent man-made stone” quality made glass a prized possession that was included in burial sites or kept as a temple treasure. A good example is the nondescript greenish small flask from the early Islamic period (eighth to ninth century) that is still stored in a decorated gold box in a Buddhist temple in Korea. Probably only a small number of glass objects shipped to eastern Asia were traded as luxury items rather than as containers for other goods—transported along caravan routes and aboard transoceanic ships sailing from the Persian Gulf to southern China, serving both the Muslim communities around Quanzhou and the Chinese traders. But it is well known that mold-blown Roman glass of high quality, expensive facet-cut cups of Sasanian origin, elaborately incised, relief-cut, and luster-painted medieval Islamic glass, and superb enameled and gilded Mamluk vessels found their way to China, Korea, and Japan. The best-known examples are the Sasanian cups in the treasury of the Shosoin temple at Nara in Japan and the eighteen ninth- and tenth-century Islamic vessels that surfaced from the stupa of a Buddhist temple in the Shaanxi province about a quarter of a century ago. In the case of glass, of course, we cannot refer to cross-artistic connections between the two poles of the Silk Roads and in between. With rare exceptions, East Asian craftsmen never seriously undertook glassmaking. Technological challenges and lack of good-quality raw materials, combined with the fact that the import of glass was a well-established trade, prevented the growth of a glass industry in eastern Asia.



Minaret of the Emin Mosque in Turfan



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Marleen Kassel, Xinjiang, 2001)

Another interesting aspect of the artistic connections between distant regions of Asia is the taste for white porcelain decorated with dark blue designs that developed in the Yuan period and became especially popular during the Ming dynasty in China. The so-called blue-and-white ware is usually regarded as one of the most distinctive Chinese artistic products exported and appreciated in fifteenth century Timurid Central Asia, in sixteenth and seventeenth century Safavid Iran, and eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe. Yet the story is not so straightforward; it involves western Asian mineral sources and craftsmen as well. The cobalt oxides that were used to obtain the dark blue color came from eastern Iranian and Central Asian mines, as did lapis lazuli, another intense blue mineral that was among the most expensive minerals exported from the area. In addition, the first examples of the use of cobalt blue against a white tin-glazed background are not from China but from ninth century Abbasid Iraq. A connection between the taste for blue-and-white ware in Iraq in the early medieval period and that of thirteenth century China is not clear, but the ongoing trade of cobalt from western to eastern Asia can be established beyond any doubt. In this case, therefore, it was probably the trade in a sought-after mineral that provided the link between two distant areas of Asia.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the cross-artistic connection along the Silk Roads logically followed the same patterns established for any other type of cultural, political, scientific, and commercial exchanges and was evidently an integral part of the same process. Thus, artistic interconnections were less evident during periods of disruption on the main routes—following, for example, the xenophobic attitude of the late Tang dynasty or the general reduction of the caravan trade after the fifteenth century, particularly under Ming rule. During periods of ease of communication they became more prolific, most notably during the exceptional moment of Mongol domination that unified the entire continent but also, for instance, after the Uyghur empire collapsed and Uyghurs became active traders all over Asia. Artistic exchange distinguishes itself from all other types of cross-cultural connections because its story is told not only through written sources, but also, fortunately for us, through the hundreds, if not thousands, of extant works of art that speak so brilliantly about the fertile imagination of Asian artists. With art, it is so easy to understand connections, reciprocal influences, and cross-fertilization. At the same time, it is a feast for the eye and for the spirit.

