

A Brief History of the Silk Road

Introduction

Despite the great distance between East Asia and the Mediterranean, the two regions had contact prior to the beginning of the Common Era (CE). Traders, pilgrims, and warriors traveled along the Silk Road from Rome and Syria in the west to as far as China in the east, although the first people to travel the entire length of the Silk Road did not do so until centuries after it was established. Culture spread through interaction among merchants, travelers, and conquerors. The most profound influences of all were those brought by conquering civilizations. To understand the history of cultural diffusion, one must understand the major empires of the Silk Road and the effects that they had on the exchange and spread of culture. The Silk Road enjoyed three “Golden Eras”: 1) the second century BCE through the second century CE, 2) the seventh to tenth century CE, and 3) the twelfth to fourteenth century CE.

First Golden Era: Second Century BCE to Second Century CE

The first major large-scale contact between East and West came with the conquest of Central Asia by Alexander the Great. This brought Greek influence to Central Asia. By 323 BCE, Alexander’s empire stretched from Greece in the west to Egypt in the south and through Iran to northern India. As the empire grew, so did Greek influence in these new areas. Whenever Alexander conquered a new territory, he imported Greeks to set up strategic military towns. They brought with them their own goods and ideas and introduced new plants, such as the grapevine, and new metalworking technologies. Greek influences can be seen in the Central Asian art and architecture of this time period.

Because Alexander’s empire was so vast, his successors could not keep it united. Many regions revolted after his death. As Alexander the Great’s Empire fell, new powers arose to assume control of the lands Alexander had conquered. The Romans took over the western part of Alexander’s empire, and the Parthians (who originated in modern-day Iran) took over the eastern half. At the same time, Zhang Qian, a Chinese general and envoy, became the first recorded Chinese to reach Central Asia. His reports enabled China to extend its influence far to the west, as far as Sogdiana in modern-day Uzbekistan, the easternmost boundary of Alexander’s empire. Chinese control of this vast region lasted less than 100 years, but it established the trade routes for silk and other goods, thus marking the beginning of the Silk Road as an active trade route. Silk—which the Chinese had produced since 3000 BCE—reached the Parthians, who traded it to the Romans for gold. Silk first reached Rome in the first century BCE.

With vast areas of land under Roman, Parthian, and Chinese rule, trade became more predictable and efficient. As trade flourished, different peoples came into contact, leading to cultural exchange and diffusion. For

example, traders and Buddhist missionaries first brought Buddhism to China from Central Asia in the first century CE.

As time went by, however, the three empires began to decline in power, and one by one they disintegrated. It became difficult to predict profits from trade because goods had to pass through many small states, each of which imposed taxes and charged fees. Nonetheless, Silk Road trade continued and remained profitable, and many Central Asian goods reached China between the second and seventh centuries CE. During this period, the secret of how to make silk reached Central Asia. The Chinese had carefully guarded this secret to maintain their global monopoly on silk production, although Chinese immigrants had introduced silk production to Korea around 200 BCE. From Central Asia, the technique for making silk slowly spread westward across the Silk Road and reached Europe centuries later.

Second Golden Era: Seventh Century to Tenth Century

In the seventh century, China was again united and powerful under the Tang Dynasty, and Islam began to dominate Central Asia. This new religion, which originated on the Arabian peninsula, quickly spread throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The conquests of the Arab army unified the area from Arabia in the west to Kashgar, China, in the east. With the safety brought by unity, Muslim merchants traveled freely throughout these regions, trading their wares and spreading their beliefs.

Meanwhile, the Tang Dynasty in China opened itself up to ideas and goods imported from abroad. Xuan Zang, a Buddhist monk, traveled from China to India and back again, introducing new schools of Buddhist thought to China. The Tang Dynasty gradually lost influence over Central Asia, leaving many smaller groups to compete for power there. Dealing with constantly varying intermediaries made it difficult for buyers to estimate the costs of selling their goods and how much profit they could make. In response, Arabic traders relied on sea travel to bring their goods to China, opening up sea trade routes between territories along the Silk Road. While trading along the sea routes was no cheaper than conducting overland trade, sea traders could predict their costs more accurately so they could estimate their profits with some certainty.

Third Golden Era: Twelfth Century to Fourteenth Century

Central Asia and China were next unified as part of the Great Mongol Empire. From 1206 to 1227, Genghis Khan, the leader of the Mongols, conquered most of the Eurasian land mass from China to the Mediterranean. His grandson, Khubilai Khan, conquered and united China in 1279, bringing the entire Silk Road under Mongol control. With one empire controlling China, Central Asia, and the Middle East, the Silk Road was easier to traverse. During Khubilai's reign as emperor, many Europeans visited China, including Marco Polo. At almost the same time, Rabban bar Sauma, a Nestorian Christian who was born in Beijing, reached

Paris and Rome going from east to west. While economic and cultural exchange flourished, there were some negative side effects as well. For example, the Black Death plague that devastated Europe in the fourteenth century is believed to have come via the Silk Road from Central Asia, where plague was endemic among local rodents.

Decline of the Silk Road

The Mongol Empire fell apart in the fourteenth century due to differences between the Mongol rulers of Russia, Central Asia, and China. After this, many European powers hoped to find a sea alternative to the land-based Silk Road so that they could more reliably predict their costs and profits. The desire to establish this sea route in part ushered in the age of European discovery in the early fifteenth century, when Western navigators like Ferdinand Magellan and Christopher Columbus looked for alternative routes to the Silk Road.

Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama became the first European to travel from Europe to India by sea in a voyage that took him two years (from 1497 to 1499 CE). Once this sea route was established, it became the preferred method for conducting trade between Europe and South and East Asia. As the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English gained control of the seas and established colonies in Asia, they also gained predictability over the price for their goods in the target markets. Sea trade thus became the preferred method of economic exchange for the European powers, and the land Silk Road routes were used less.

While trade did continue along certain sections of the Silk Road, most goods passed through the sea, and the land Silk Road routes lost their previous relevance. In fact, China's Ming Dynasty stopped trading silk abroad in the 1400s because silk was produced in Central Asia and Europe by this time. As trade along the Silk Road declined, formerly flourishing cities like Antioch, Baghdad, Samarkand, and Chang'an shrank in size, were destroyed by war, or simply diminished in importance.

Renewed Interest

During the nineteenth century, the Silk Road once again stirred interest in the West as explorers, adventurers, scholars, archaeologists, traders, and travelers heard of the great highway that once linked the two ends of Europe and Asia. They began to explore for the hidden treasures of the Silk Road. Archaeologists and explorers such as Sir Aurel Stein unearthed centuries-old Buddhist manuscripts and statues, removed many large murals from the walls of Buddhist temples, and brought these and other archaeological treasures back to their own countries to be displayed in museums. The Chinese and several Central Asian governments are now demanding that these national treasures, which they claim were stolen by the explorers and archaeologists, be returned to their sites of origin. It is still possible to go to some areas of the Silk Road and dig, but archaeologists cannot take any of the treasures they unearth with them.

Renewed interest in the Silk Road has led to the development of tours along sections of its route. Travelers can now see remains of the grandeur of the civilizations that once ruled the Silk Road. Until recently, however, conflicts along the Silk Road lands prevented anyone from making the long journey across Eurasia that once marked the full extent of the Silk Road. Once a lasting peace endures along the route, travelers will be able to cross the long, storied route and see how centuries of cultural and economic exchange transformed these lands and spread ideas, goods, and art throughout Eurasia and beyond.