



The Silk Road: Connecting People and Cultures

by Richard Kurin

The Silk Road spanned the Asian continent and represented a form of global economy when the known world was smaller but more difficult to traverse than nowadays. A network of mostly land but also sea trading routes, the Silk Road stretched from China to Korea and Japan in the east, and connected China through Central Asia to India in the south and to Turkey and Italy in the west. The Silk Road system has existed for over 2,000 years, with specific routes changing over time. For millennia, highly valued silk, cotton, wool, glass, jade, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, salt, spices, tea, herbal medicines, foods, fruits, flowers, horses, musical instruments, and architectural, philosophical, and religious ideas traveled those routes. The roads themselves were generally in poor condition. Travelers in caravans had to brave bleak deserts, high mountains, extreme heat and cold. They had to face bandits and raiders, imprisonment, starvation, and other forms of deprivation. Those going by sea braved the uncertainties of weather, poorly constructed ships, and pirates. Yet because the goods and ideas were in great demand and commanded high prices, courtly rewards, or spiritual benefits, they were worth the trouble of transporting great distances.

Since the concept of “*Seidenstrassen*” or “Silk Roads” was first invented by the German geologist and explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, the “Silk Road” has been used as a metaphor of European and Asian cultural interchange. While largely commercial, the Silk Road provided the vehicle for all sorts of creative exchange between tremendously diverse peoples and cultures.

Given the Silk Road’s symbolic meaning of sharing and exchange, it is somewhat paradoxical that the desire to control its namesake commodity, silk, was so strong. The ancient Chinese guarded the secret of silk production for centuries. The Ottoman Turks and the Persians fought a war over it. The English and French competed to restrict its markets. But despite such attempts, silk moved across the planet with remarkable ease and was a vehicle of cultural creativity wherever it went. The degree of borrowings and choosing of techniques and patterns, the invention and discovery of uses and styles is incredible. Every culture that touched silk added to its adornment of humanity.

And silk turns up everywhere — aboard medieval Viking ships sailing out of Constantinople and as kerchiefs from India (bandannas, from *bandhana*) around the necks of cowboys in the American West. The terms used for silk reveal its history and influences. Damask silk, referring to the style of Damascus, Syria, is actually Chinese in origin. Silk *chinoiserie* is not Chinese but a European imitation of Chinese style. Martha Washington wore a dress of Virginia silk to her husband’s inauguration, and Native Americans learned silk embroidery to decorate traditional apparel. In the 19th century Paterson, New Jersey, of all places, declared itself “Silk City.”

What is so special about silk? How did it go around the globe, and connect diverse civilizations for millennia? And what is the current significance of the Silk Road?

Chinese Silk Cultivation

Silk cultivation and production is such an extraordinary process that it is easy to see why its invention was legendary and its discovery eluded many who sought its secrets. The original production of silk in China is often attributed to Fo Xi, the emperor who initiated the raising of silkworms and the cultivation of mulberry trees to feed them. Xi Lingshi, the wife of the Yellow

Emperor whose reign is dated from 2677 to 2597 B.C.E., is regarded as the legendary Lady of the Silkworms for having developed the method for unraveling the cocoons and reeling the silk filament. Archaeological finds from this period include silk fabric from the southeast Zhejiang province dated to about 3000 B.C.E. and a silk cocoon from the Yellow River valley in northern China dated to about 2500 B.C.E. Yet silk cloth fragments and a cup carved with a silkworm design from the Yangzi Valley in southern China dated to about 4000–5000 B.C.E. suggest that sericulture, the process of making silk, may have an earlier origin than suggested by legend.

Many insects from all over the world — and spiders as well — produce silk. One of the native Chinese varieties of silkworm with the scientific name *Bombyx mori* is uniquely suited to the production of superbly high-quality silk. This silkworm, which is actually a caterpillar, takes adult form as a blind, flightless moth that immediately mates, lays about 400 eggs in a four- to six-day period, and then abruptly dies. The eggs must be kept at a warm temperature for them to hatch as silkworms or caterpillars. When they do hatch, they are stacked in layers of trays and given chopped up leaves of the white mulberry to eat. They eat throughout the day for four or five weeks, growing to about 10,000 times their original weight. When large enough, a worm produces a liquid gel through its glands that dries into a thread-like filament, wrapping around the worm and forming a cocoon in the course of three or four days. The amazing feature of the *Bombyx mori* is that its filament, generally in the range of 300–1,000 yards — and sometimes a mile — long, is very strong and can be unwrapped. To do this, the cocoon is first boiled. This kills the pupae inside and dissolves the gum resin or seracin that holds the cocoon together. Cocoons may then be soaked in warm water and unwound or be dried for storage, sale, and shipment. Several filaments are combined to form a silk thread and wound onto a reel. One ounce of eggs produces worms that require a ton of leaves to eat, and results in about 12 pounds of raw silk. The silk threads may be spun together, often with other yarn, dyed, and woven on looms to make all sorts of products. It takes about 2,000–3,000 cocoons to make a pound of silk needed for a dress; about 150 cocoons are needed for a necktie. The Chinese traditionally incubated the eggs during the spring, timing their



hatching as the mulberry trees come to leaf. Sericulture in China traditionally involved taboos and rituals designed for the health and abundance of the silkworms. Typically, silk production was women's work. Currently, some 10 million Chinese are involved in making raw silk, producing an estimated 60,000 tons annually — about half of the world's output. Silk is still relatively rare, and therefore expensive; consider that silk constitutes only 0.2 percent of the world's textile fabric.

There are other types of silkworms and of silk. Indian tussah silk dates back possibly to 2500 B.C.E. to the Indus Valley civilization and is still produced for domestic consumption and

foreign trade in various forms. Since traditional Hindu and Jain production techniques do not allow for the killing of the pupae in the cocoon, moths are allowed to hatch, and the resultant filaments are shorter and coarser than the Chinese variety. The ancient Greeks, too, knew of a wild Mediterranean silk moth whose cocoon could be unraveled to form fiber. The process was tedious, however, and the result also not up to the quality of mulberry-fed *Bombyx mori*.

On this postcard (date unknown), women are shown in costume feeding mulberry leaves to silkworms. DOE Asia: Japan: General: NM 90351 04668700, courtesy Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives

Silk has been long thought to be a special type of cloth; it keeps one cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It is extremely absorbent, meaning it uses color dyes much more efficiently than cotton, wool, or linen. It shimmers. It drapes upon the body particularly well. Silk is strong enough to be used for surgical sutures — indeed, by weight it is stronger than steel and more flexible than nylon. It is also fire and rot resistant. All these natural characteristics make silk ideal as a form of adornment for people of importance, for kimonos in Japan and wedding saris in India, for religious ritual, for burial shrouds in China and to lay on the graves of Sufis in much of the Muslim world.

Early in Chinese history, silk was used to clothe the emperor, but eventually it was adopted widely through Chinese society. Silk proved to be valuable for fishing lines, for the making of paper, for musical instrument strings. Under the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), silk became a great trade item, used for royal gifts and tribute. It also became a generalized medium of exchange, like gold or money. Chinese farmers paid their taxes in silk. Civil servants received their salary in silk.

Silk on the Road

Evidence of trade in ancient Chinese silk has been found in archaeological excavations in Central Asian Bactria (currently the region around Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan) dating to about 500 B.C.E. Strands of silk have been found in ancient Egypt from about 1000 B.C.E., but these may be of Indian rather than Chinese origin. Alexander the Great, who ruled much of the known world from the Mediterranean to India in the late 4th century B.C.E., wore robes of deep purple-dyed silk. The silk was probably from China, which the Greeks knew as *Seres* — the place where *serikos* or silk was made — and made optimum use of the rare and expensive purple dye that was produced by the Phoenicians of Tyre from the secretions of sea snails. Yet, in the West, knowledge of silk and its trade were relatively limited. So, too, in the Far East. Sericulture was carried to Korea by Chinese immigrants in about 200 B.C.E. Though silk was extant in Japan at the turn of the millennium, sericulture was not widely known there until about the 3rd century C.E.

Conventionally, historians refer to three periods of intense Silk Road trade: 1) from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., between the



ancient Chinese Han dynasty and Central Asia, extending to Rome; 2) from about 618 to 907 C.E., between Tang dynasty China and Central Asia, Byzantium, the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the Sasanian Persian Empire, and India, and coinciding with the expansion of Islam, Buddhism, Assyrian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Judaism into Central Asia; and 3) during the 13th and 14th centuries, between China, Central Asia, Persia, India, and early modern Europe, made possible by Mongol control of most of the Silk Road. Some would add a modern Silk Road period, beginning in the 19th century with the “Great Game” — the competition between Russian and British colonial powers for influence over Central Asia — and extending through today.

From Han China to Rome

In 198 B.C.E., the Han dynasty concluded a treaty with a Central Asian people, the Xiongnu. The emperor agreed to give his daughter to the Xiongnu ruler and pay an annual gift in gold and silk. By the 1st century B.C.E. silk reached Rome, initiating the first

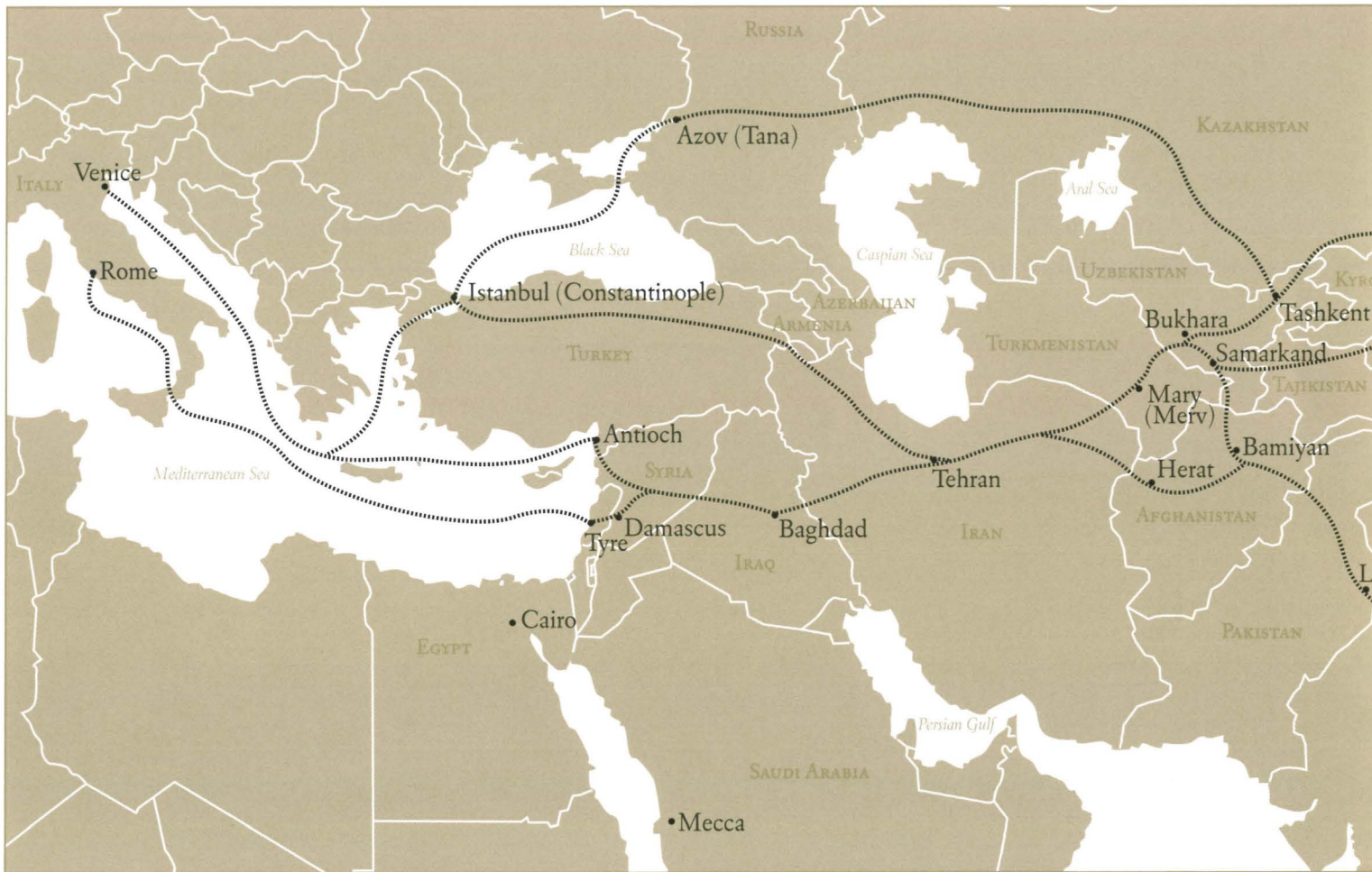


“Silk Road.” Pliny, writing about silk, thought it was made from the down of trees in Seres. It was very popular among the Romans. People wore rare strips of silk on their clothing and sought more; they spent increasing amounts of gold and silver, leading to a shortage in precious metals. Coinciding with the development of ruling elites and the beginnings of empire, silk was associated with wealth and power — Julius Caesar entered Rome in triumph under silk canopies. Over the next three centuries, silk imports increased, especially with the Pax Romana of the early emperors, which opened up trade routes in Asia Minor and the Middle East. As silk came westward, newly invented blown glass, asbestos,

amber, and red coral moved eastward. Despite some warnings about the silk trade’s deleterious consequences, it became a medium of exchange and tribute, and when in 408 C.E. Alaric the Visigoth besieged Rome, he demanded and received as ransom 5,000 pounds of gold and 4,000 tunics of silk.

(Opposite, above) When silkworm eggs hatch, they are placed on trays or frames, fed for several weeks, and then, when they have grown to about 10,000 times their original weight, they form cocoons. Both of these photos are from Karnataka State, India. One is a close-up of silkworms and cocoons in a specially woven frame; the other shows the full frames.

Photos © Jean-Luc Ray, Aga Khan Foundation



Silk Road Travelers

BY JAMES DEUTSCH AND STEPHEN KIDD

While the vast majority of connections along the Silk Road were made through countless anonymous journeys, several historical travelers have become famous for the scope of their discoveries and their impact on Silk Road cultures.

As China participated in Silk Road trade during the 7th century with the expansion of the Tang dynasty from its seat in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the journeys of one traveler helped to alter the religious beliefs of the Tang leadership. A Buddhist monk, Xuanzang left Chang'an around 629 C.E. in search of greater understanding of Buddhist religious texts that had been brought to China from Tibet and India centuries earlier. Xuanzang's quest took him to the Buddhist center of Dunhuang in western China, across the Takla Makan Desert to the great Central Asian cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and then through present-day Pakistan to the source of Buddhism in India. In

India he studied the most difficult Buddhist texts, which he translated into Chinese and brought back to Chang'an around 645. On his return, he persuaded Chinese elites to embrace Buddhism.

An even more renowned traveler, whose name is familiar to any American child who has ever played the hide-and-seek game of "Marco Polo," is the legendary Venetian merchant who may have been the first to travel the entire Silk Road from Italy in the west to China in the east. Marco Polo (1254–1324) was more than a treasure-seeking trader; he claimed to have lived in China for 17 years, primarily in the court of Kublai Khan, acquiring knowledge that was instrumental in promoting the cultural exchange of ideas and commodities. His detailed travel accounts — compiled during the last 20 years of his life — were carefully studied (albeit sometimes skeptically) by generations of cartographers, merchants, explorers, and general readers who yearned to better



comprehend their world.

One year after Marco Polo's death, Muhammad Ibn Batuta (1304–1368?) left his native Morocco to make the customary Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. Ibn Batuta could not have known then, however, that he would spend the next 24 years continually traveling throughout Asia (particularly China and India), Africa, and the Middle East, before returning to Morocco in 1349. During this time, he recorded everything that intrigued him: from political and economic conditions to variations in human anatomy. Like Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta's reputation rests largely on the published account of his travels (ca. 1354), which served not only to illuminate the depth and diversity of human culture, but also to expand the limited horizons of the medieval European world.

In our own time, when the countries of the Silk Road can be traversed in a single day, there is another traveler who has begun to

explore the complexity of the Silk Road. Tracing the roots of European classical instruments to Asia, cellist Yo-Yo Ma was inspired by the cultural connections made as diverse peoples met along the Silk Road. In 1998 he founded the Silk Road Project to celebrate and foster the traditional cultures found along the ancient trade route. Today, fulfilling this mission, the Project's Silk Road Ensemble crosses the globe performing both traditional works from Silk Road cultures and new commissions from composers who hail from Silk Road countries. In an era of supersonic journeys, Yo-Yo Ma travels in search of lasting cultural connections.

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The Tang Silk Road: Connecting Cultures

Silk continued to be popular in the Mediterranean region even as Rome declined. In Byzantium, the eastern successor of the Roman state, silk purchases accounted for a large drain on the treasury. In 552 C.E., legend has it that two Assyrian Christian monks who visited China learned the secret of silk production and smuggled out silkworms and mulberry seeds in their walking sticks. They returned to Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, and provided the impetus for the growth of a local silk industry. Under Emperor Justinian I, Constantinople's silks were used throughout Europe for religious vestments, rituals, and aristocratic dress. The Persians, too, acquired knowledge of silk production; and Damascus became a silk center under Arab rulers. By the time the second Silk Road developed under the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.) in China, Central Asians had also learned silk cultivation and developed the famed *abr* technique of silk resist dying generally known today by the Indonesian term *ikat*. Chinese silks, though, were still in demand for their exceptionally high quality. The Tang rulers needed horses for their military. The best horses were in the west, held by the Turkic Uyghurs and the peoples of the Fergana Valley. The Tang traded silk for horses, 40 bolts for each pony in the 8th century.

Not only did silk move, but so did designs and motifs as well as techniques for weaving and embroidering it. The Tang Chinese developed a satin silk, readily adopted elsewhere. Chinese silk weaving was influenced by Sogdian (Central Asian), Persian Sasanian, and Indian patterns and styles. For example, Chinese weavers adapted the Assyrian tree of life, beaded roundels, and bearded horsemen on winged horses from the Sasanians, and the use of gold-wrapped thread, the conch shell, lotus, and endless-knot designs from the Indians. Byzantines were also influenced by the Persians, weaving the Tree of Life into designs for European royalty and adopting the Assyrian two-headed eagle as their symbol. The Egyptian draw loom, adapted for silk weaving, was brought to Syria, then to Iran and beyond. Japanese weavers in Nara developed tie-dye and resist processes for kimonos. In some cases, weavers were uprooted from one city and settled in another; for example, after the Battle of Talas in 751, Chinese weavers were taken as prisoners of war to Iran and Mesopotamia. During the Tang dynasty, cultural exchange based upon silk

reached its apex. Discoveries of the silk stowed in the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang in about 1015 C.E. reveal the tremendous richness of silk work of the time, as well as an archaeology of shared styles of silk weaving and motifs.

The growth of silk as a trade item both stimulated and characterized other types of exchanges during the era. Curative herbs, ideas of astronomy, and even religion also moved along the Silk Road network. Arabs traveled to India and China, Chinese to Central Asia, India, and Iran. Buddhism itself was carried along these roads from India through Central Asia to Tibet, China, and Japan. Islam was carried by Sufi teachers, and by armies, moving across the continent from Western Asia into Iran, Central Asia, and into China and India. Martial arts, sacred arts like calligraphy, tile making, and painting also traversed these roads. The Tang capital city of Chang'an, present-day Xi'an, became a cosmopolitan city — the largest on earth at the time, peopled with traders from all along the Silk Road, as well as monks, missionaries, and emissaries from across the continent.

The Mongol Silk Road and Marco Polo

Though some new silk styles such as silk tapestry made their way eastward from Iran to Uyghur Central Asia to China, the transcontinental exchange of the Silk Road diminished in the later Middle Ages and through the period of the Christian Crusades in the Holy Land from 1096 to the mid-1200s. Yet Crusaders, returning home with Byzantine silks, tapestries, and other spoils, rekindled European interest in trade with Asia. Moorish influence in Spain also had an enormous impact. It was through Arab scholars that Europeans gained access to Indian and Chinese advances in medicine, chemistry, and mathematics, and also to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that had survived in Arabic translations and commentaries. This flow of knowledge eventually helped to fuel the Renaissance.

With the Mongol descendants of Genghis (Chinghis) Khan in control of Asia from the Black Sea to the Pacific, a third Silk Road flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries. The emissary of King Louis IX of France, Willem van Rubruck, visited the court of the Mongol ruler in 1253, and, seeing the wealth of silks, realized that Cathay, or China, was the legendary Seres of Roman times. The Venetian Marco Polo followed.



Setting out with his uncles in 1271, Polo traveled across Asia by land and sea over a period of 24 years. The tales of his travels, narrated while a prisoner in a Genoa jail cell, spurred broad European interest in the Silk Road region. He told of the Mongols, who under Genghis and then Kublai Khan had taken over China and expanded their dominion across Asia into Central Asia, India, Iran, and Asia Minor. Polo related fantastic tales of the lands he had visited, the great sites he had seen, and the vast treasures of Asia.

The 13th and 14th centuries were characterized by considerable political, commercial, and religious competition between kingdoms, markets, and religious groups across Eurasia. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus vied for adherents

and institutional support. Conflict between and among the Mongols, European kingdoms, Arab rulers, the Mamluk Turks, Hindu chiefdoms, and others made for unstable states, diplomatic jockeying, alliances, and wars. Yet the Mongols, with their vast Asian empire skirting the edge of Russia and Eastern Europe, were, through a mixture of hegemony and brutality, able to assure a measure of peace within their domains, a Pax Mongolica. They were also pragmatic and quite tolerant in several spheres, among them arts and religion. Their Mongolian capital of Karakorum hosted, for example, 12 Buddhist temples, two mosques, and a church. The Mongols developed continental

In Bursa, Turkey, silkworm cultivators check cocoons that are about to be auctioned at a bazaar. Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

postal and travelers' rest house systems. Kublai Khan welcomed European, Chinese, Persian, and Arab astronomers and established an Institute of Muslim Astronomy. He also founded an Imperial Academy of Medicine, including Indian, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Chinese physicians. European, Persian, Chinese, Arab, Armenian, and Russian traders and missionaries traveled the Silk Road, and in 1335 a Mongol mission to the pope at Avignon suggested increased trade and cultural contacts.

During this "third" Silk Road, silk, while still a highly valued Chinese export, was no longer the primary commodity. Europeans wanted pearls and gems, spices, precious metals, medicines, ceramics, carpets, other fabrics, and lacquerware. All kingdoms needed horses, weapons, and armaments. Besides, silk production already was known in the Arab world and had spread to southern Europe. Silk weavers and traders — Arabs, "Saracens," Jews, and Greeks from Sicily and the eastern Mediterranean — relocated to new commercial centers in northern Italy. Italian silk-making eventually became a stellar Renaissance art in Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Lucca in the 14th and 15th centuries. New stylistic techniques were added, like *alto-e-basso* for velvets and brocades, while old motifs, like the stylized Central Asian pomegranate, took on new life.

Commercial trade and competition was of great importance by the 15th century with the growth of European cities, guilds, and royal states. With the decline of Mongol power, control over trade routes was vital. The motivation behind Portuguese explorations of a sea route to India was to secure safer and cheaper passage of trade goods than by land caravans, which were subject to either exorbitant protection fees or raiding by enemies. Indeed, it was the search for this sea route to the East that led Columbus westward to the "New World." When Vasco da Gama found the sea route to India and other Europeans subsequently opened direct shipping links with China, contact with Central Asia decreased dramatically.

The Modern Era

Trade in silks helped fuel the mercantile transformation of Western Europe. French King Charles VII, the dukes of Burgundy, and their successors participated vigorously through markets in Bruges, Amsterdam, Lyon, and other towns. The prac-

tice of emulating Asian silk styles was institutionalized in Lyon, France, with the development of imitative Chinese and Turkish motifs, *chinoiserie* and *turqueserie* respectively. A steady stream of European travelers and adventurous merchants moved luxury goods between Europe, the Middle East, Iran, India, and China. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–98), who traversed parts of the Silk Road on six journeys and witnessed the building of Versailles, Isfahan, and the Taj Mahal, traded in diamonds and pearls, was awarded "Oriental" silk robes of honor by the Shah of Iran and a barony by Louis XIV (for the sale of what later became the Hope Diamond). The English developed their own silk industry and tried silk cultivation in Ireland, and even in the New World. Mulberry trees and silkworms went with settlers to Jamestown in the early 1600s. Silk cultivation was successful but only for a time; other attempts followed later in Georgia, among the 19th-century Harmonists in Pennsylvania, and even among the Shakers in Kentucky. Still, imported silks showed the long reach of an international trade.

Silk styles and fashions were led, in Europe, by royalty, but soon extended to a wealthy merchant class, and were broadened further as a result of new manufacturing techniques. Silk production became industrialized in 1804 with the Jacquard loom. This loom relied upon punched cards to program the complex orchestration of threads into wonderful patterns; the cards later inspired the computer punch cards of the mid-20th century. Throughout the 19th century, chemists developed synthetic dyes. Designers, who could create one-of-a-kind items for the elite but also develop mass-produced lines of clothing, furnishings, and other silk products, set up shop in Paris. Asia was the subject of romantic allure and fascination by elites of the period. In the early 1800s, England's George IV built his Brighton palace in an Indo-Persian style, decorated it with Chinese furniture, and wore silk garments, thereby setting a trend, with his friend Beau Brummel, for men's formal fashion. Declared Empress of India in 1858, Queen Victoria was feted with grand celebrations and a diamond jubilee that included "Oriental" durbars or courtly convocations, replete with marching elephants and parades of Asian troops adorned in native dress. Parisians held costumed balls, dressed up as sultans and Asian royalty. Kashmiri and Chinese silk scarves were a big hit. Jewelers Cartier and Tiffany used Asian gemstones



Polo

In its earliest forms, polo dates back more than 2,500 years to the Central Asian steppes; the first recorded game took place in Iran in the 6th century B.C.E., and by the Middle Ages polo was played across the Silk Road from Constantinople to Japan. The game has a number of variations, including, for example, one played by Chinese women during the Tang dynasty 12 centuries ago. American polo is derived from the game viewed by British soldiers on the northwestern frontier of 19th-century colonial India. There, the game known as *buzkashi* is a raucous, physical exercise of competitive horsemanship. Two teams play against each other. The field might be a large meadow, with an area or pit designated as the "goal." A goat or calf carcass is the "ball." Horsemen from one side must scoop up the carcass, ride around a pole or designated marker, reverse course, and drop the carcass into the goal. The social purpose may be sport, but the game teaches and encourages excellent horsemanship skills — precisely those needed to attack caravans, raid towns, and rout opposing forces. Victorian Englishmen then turned this sport into one that we now think of as very sophisticated and upper class. Polo is a fine example of how meanings and practices can be transformed as they move across cultures, a wonderful Silk Road story.

Polo and variations on the game have been played along the Silk Road for thousands of years. Pictured here is a 1985 game in Susum, Pakistan.

Photo © Jean-Luc Ray, Aga Khan Foundation



and imitated Asian decorative styles. Tiffany and Lalique were designing silk sashes, scarves, and other items. New silk textiles like chiffons and crepes were developed in France, and silk cultivation centers sent raw silk to design houses and production factories to meet demand. This demand extended to the United States, and raw silk was imported from Japan and dyed using the soft waters of the Passaic River in Paterson, New Jersey. Paterson became the U.S. headquarters of silk supply, design, and furnishing companies.

It was during this Orientalist period that the idea of the Silk Road as a way of connecting European and Asian culture, history, and art, was articulated by Baron von Richthofen. In 1786 William Jones had found the links between Sanskrit and Latin, devising the idea of an Indo-European family of languages. Throughout the 19th century, European philologists were working on the relationships between European and Asian languages, positing such “families” as Uralic and Altaic. European scholars found common roots in religions and symbols spanning Eurasia and relating Hinduism and Buddhism to ancient Greco-Roman mythology, and with Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Archaeologists had begun to find links between widely dispersed civilizations of Egypt, the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Iran, India, and Central Asia. Cultural diffusion, particularly strong in German and later English social science, became an explanatory model for the similarities found in widely separated societies, and an alternative to cultural evolutionary theories. These connections across cultures, history, and geography still intrigue us today. Consider, for example, the names of a number of stringed instruments with the root *tar* (“string” in Persian), from the *tar* itself to the *dotar*, *dutar*, *lotar*, *setar*, *sitar*, *qitar*, *guitarra*, and the guitar.

Silk became both a component and a symbol of this cultural diffusion. It was seen as a valuable index of civilization with regard to religious ritual, kingship, artistic production, and commercial activity. Silk stood for the higher things in life. It was a valuable, traded commodity, as well as a historical medium of exchange. Silk both epitomized and played a major role in the

Silk turns up everywhere. This Cree caribou hide pouch from Roberval, St. Johns Lake, Hudson Bay, Canada, ca. 1900, is decorated with silk embroidery. Courtesy National Museum of the American Indian

Photo by Katherine Fogden

early development of what we now characterize as a global economic and cultural system. Europeans of the 19th century saw this new globalism not just as an interesting historical occurrence, but also as something that resonated with the growing distribution of silk use and manufacturing of the time.

Central Asia and the Silk Road Today

In formulating the idea of the Silk Road, Richthofen saw Central Asia as not only the land bridge between distant civilizations, but as a source of cultural creativity in its own right. He also saw it as disputed territory, a region that had served as the crossroads of political and military influence. Indeed, control over the Silk Road, particularly its Central Asian link, was serious business for 18th-century colonial powers playing the "Great Game." Both the Russians and the British vied for control over Afghanistan at the limit of their territorial aspirations. Rudyard Kipling, the English colonial writer, set the fictional tale of *Kim* against this backdrop, with the hero traveling one of the historical trade routes along what is now the Afghan-Pakistan frontier and partaking of what we might today call a multicultural adventure.

Though eclipsed in trade volume by sea routes for several centuries, Central Asia has in recent times and particularly after September 11 resumed its historical importance. Its geopolitical significance has grown as a result of the demise of the Soviet Union, the need to achieve stable political states in light of competing interests, and the need to find an appropriate role for religion, particularly Islam, in civic life. Most recently, the entry of the United States in Central Asia, fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, using bases in Uzbekistan and Pakistan, and being drawn into disputes over sovereignty in Kashmir, democracy in Iran, rights for ethnic minorities in western China, and freedom in Kazakhstan, mark a new development in the contemporary jockeying for political influence and control.

The nations of the region are trying to build their own post-Soviet and contemporary economies. They are struggling to develop local markets, industries, and infrastructures, while at the same time participating in an increasingly globalized world economy. Some local entrepreneurs seek to rebuild economies based upon a traditional repertoire of deeply ingrained Silk Road commercial skills. Among emerging markets are those for recently

discovered oil in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and western China. Pipelines are being planned and constructed, constituting new pathways for moving a valuable commodity across the region to the rest of the world.

New social institutions are being built — universities, hospitals, and financial systems. Some leaders like the Aga Khan are encouraging a contemporary renaissance of traditional knowledge, architecture, and artistry embedded in Central Asian history that will allow local citizens the opportunity to flourish. Famed and beautiful Uzbek *ikat* weavings are returning to the world marketplace. Designers from the region are creating their own distinctive fashions. Ancient musics performed by contemporary artists are making their way onto world stages. Historical sites are being restored.

Given the needs in the region, the work to build politically stable nations that are economically healthy, socially secure, and culturally confident is of immense scope, and the prognosis far from certain. But it does seem clear that people in the region stand the best chance of bettering their lives and those of their children by reclaiming their place in a transnational, transcultural flow of goods and ideas exemplified by the historical Silk Road. It is better to connect to the peoples and cultures around them and to participate in the commerce of nations than to withdraw from such interchange. By reclaiming the heritage of the Silk Road, the region may, once again, play an important role in the cultural and economic life of the global community.

For Further Reading

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