The Silk Road

How did the Silk Road promote an exchange of goods and ideas?

Introduction

Under Han rule, new trade routes allowed the Chinese to trade with other ancient cultures. This network of trade routes became collectively known as the Silk Road.

The Silk Road stretched for more than 4,000 miles across Asia— from Luoyang (lwaw-yahng) and the Han capital of Chang'an (chahn-ahn) in China to Mediterranean ports such as Antioch (AN-tee-ahk) in Syria. By the first century C.E., the Roman Empire, and its capital, Rome, **dominated** the Mediterranean region. The Silk Road connected the Han and Roman empires.



Both goods and ideas traveled along the Silk Road. The Chinese traded silk and jade for spices from India and glassware from Rome. Ideas, like Buddhism, entered China along with these exchanges.

However, this route was not easy to travel. Those brave enough to journey the Silk Road had to cross both very hot deserts and brutally cold mountains. Many travelers lost their lives on this route.

The Silk Road **linked** the peoples of the East and the West for more than a thousand years. Despite the dangers involved in traveling this route, the exchanges between the East and the West brought great benefits, too.

In this lesson, you will explore the great trade route known as the Silk Road and the dangers travelers encountered on it. You will learn how the Silk Road connected different cultures and led them to exchange goods and ideas.

1. The Opening of the Silk Road

The expansion of the Han empire made the **Silk Road** possible. The military campaigns of the Han drove back nomadic peoples in northwestern China, opening up **trade routes** to the west.

The Father of the Silk Road A Chinese explorer named Zhang Qian (jahng chee-ehn) is often called the Father of the Silk Road. His travels opened the way for trade between China and its western neighbors.

In 138 B.C.E., a Han emperor sent Zhang Qian and 100 men west to persuade western peoples to form an alliance against China's northern enemy, the Huns. Zhang Qian traveled across Central Asia to what is now the country of Iran. Twice, he was captured by the Huns, but he was able to escape both times.

Zhang Qian never achieved an alliance. Still, his trip helped the Chinese learn about many cultures to the west. Zhang Qian brought back word of such places as Persia, Syria, India, and Rome.

Some years later, Zhang Qian went on a second journey to the west. This time, he learned about a type of horse that was more powerful than the smaller Chinese horse and better suited for war. He also discovered grapes, which were unknown in China. Most important, he was able to establish trade relationships with some of the Central Asian peoples he met along the way.

Over time, Chinese traders traveled farther west. Smaller trade routes connected to form larger networks. The most famous of these routes became known as the Silk Road, named after the product that traders valued most of all: Chinese silk. Chinese officials gave gifts of silk cloth to the Parthians, Kushans, and other Central Asian states.



Silk as a Trade Good Silk is a fiber used to make cloth. Silk cloth is strong, but also warm, light, and soft.

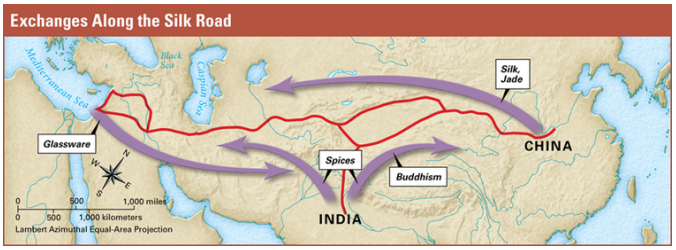
Silk was a valuable good for trade because, at first, only the Chinese people knew how to make it. The

Chinese had discovered how to make silk out of the fibers taken from the cocoon of the silkworm. To protect the trade value of silk, the Chinese tried to keep their production process a secret. Under Han rule, revealing the silk-making process was a crime punishable by death.

Rome Trades Glassware for Silk When people of other cultures learned about silk, it became a highly prized material. The Romans, in particular, eagerly traded valuable goods for silk.

The first time the Romans saw silk is likely during a battle near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. At a key point in the fighting, the enemy unfurled many colorful silk banners. The Romans lost the battle, but this experience led them to want to **acquire** this remarkable new material.

Chinese silk was a luxury item because it was rare and expensive. Even some of the richest Romans could afford to wear only a strip or a patch of silk stitched to their white togas, or robes. Silk was so highly valued that traders willingly made the dangerous journey eastward to obtain it.

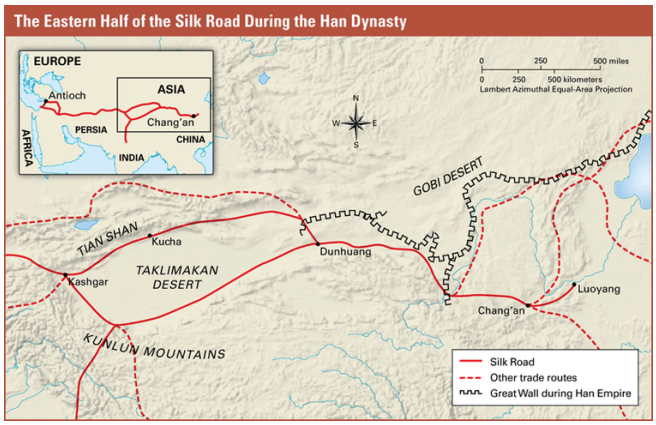




Besides having gold to trade, the Romans had something else the Chinese prized: glassware. The Romans knew how to blow glass into wonderful, delicate shapes. Just as the Romans had never seen silk, the Chinese did not know the method for glass production. The Romans were happy to trade glassware for silk.

2. The Eastern Silk Road

The Silk Road was not one continuous route, but rather a network of shorter trade routes between various stops. Most traders moved between these stops, rather than journeying thousands of miles along the entire length of the route. Goods changed hands many times before reaching their final destination.



The two major parts of the route were the Eastern Silk Road and the Western Silk Road. The Eastern Silk Road connected Luoyang to Kashgar (KASH-gahr), in the western part of the Taklimakan Desert. The Western Silk Road ran from Kashgar to Antioch and other Mediterranean ports.

Traveling the Eastern Silk Road From Luoyang, the Silk Road led west along the Gobi Desert to Dunhuang (dun-hwang), in northwestern China. This part of the route was protected by the Great Wall to the north.

From Dunhuang, travelers could choose either a northern or a southern route across the Taklimakan Desert to Kashgar. Many chose the northern route, where they could rest at oases like Loulan and Kucha.

Several dangers faced traders crossing the Taklimakan Desert.Bandits often attacked travelers on the northern route between Dunhuang and Kucha. Throughout the desert, sudden sandstorms sometimes buried travelers in sand. Mirages may have lured travelers off the main path to their deaths.



To protect themselves before entering the desert, travelers often formed long **caravans** of camels. One type of camel was especially suited for desert travel. Bactrian camels have a second row of eyelashes and nostrils that can close to keep out blowing sand.These camels could also carry enough food and water to ensure a traveler's survival from one oasis to the next.

Goods Exchanged Along the Eastern Silk Road It was costly to carry goods over the Silk Road. For traders to make a profit, goods had to be valuable. They also had to be easy to carry so that merchants could transport more goods on fewer animals.

Silk was the perfect trading good because it was both light and valuable. Huge quantities of silk traveled along the Eastern Silk Road from China. Traded for other goods, the silk eventually reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, where it was then taken by boat to Rome and other Mediterranean cities.

Besides silk, the Chinese also traded fine dishware (which became known as china), ornaments, jewelry, and cast-iron products. In return, the Chinese received a variety of goods from other traders. The Chinese particularly valued horses, jade, furs, and gold from places in Central Asia, such as the Kushan Empire. Traders from India brought various goods north to Kashgar. These included cotton, spices, pearls (from oysters), and ivory (from elephant tusks). From Kashgar, the goods made their way east to China.



3. The Western Silk Road

Kashgar was the central trading point at which the Eastern Silk Road and the Western Silk Road met. Goods from various areas were exchanged there and sent in both directions along the trade route. Traders traveling westward often carried goods by yak rather than camel. The Western Silk Road ended in Mediterranean ports like Antioch.

Traveling the Western Silk Road The journey west from Kashgar began with a difficult trek across the Pamir (pah-meer) Mountains. Some of these mountain peaks rose over twenty thousand feet. Travelers often experienced headaches, dizziness, and ringing in the ears caused by a lack of **oxygen** in the thin air of the high mountains.

Many of the mountain passes were narrow and dangerous. Along this part of the route, sometimes called the “trail of bones,” animals and people often died. Pack animals such as donkeys may have slipped off the narrow trails and tumbled over cliffs. Sometimes, traders unloaded their animals and hand-carried the goods through the passes.



After the Pamir Mountains, the route took travelers through a fertile valley in what is now the country of Afghanistan. Then the route went across the Iranian Plateau, passed south of the Caspian Sea, and crossed Mesopotamia. An important stop along this part of the route was Ctesiphon (TES-uh-fahn), in what is now Iraq. Ctesiphon was located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, north of ancient Babylon.

From Ctesiphon, the Silk Road turned north and passed through the Syrian Desert. Travelers faced many hardships there. They were threatened by wolves, lions, snakes, and vultures.

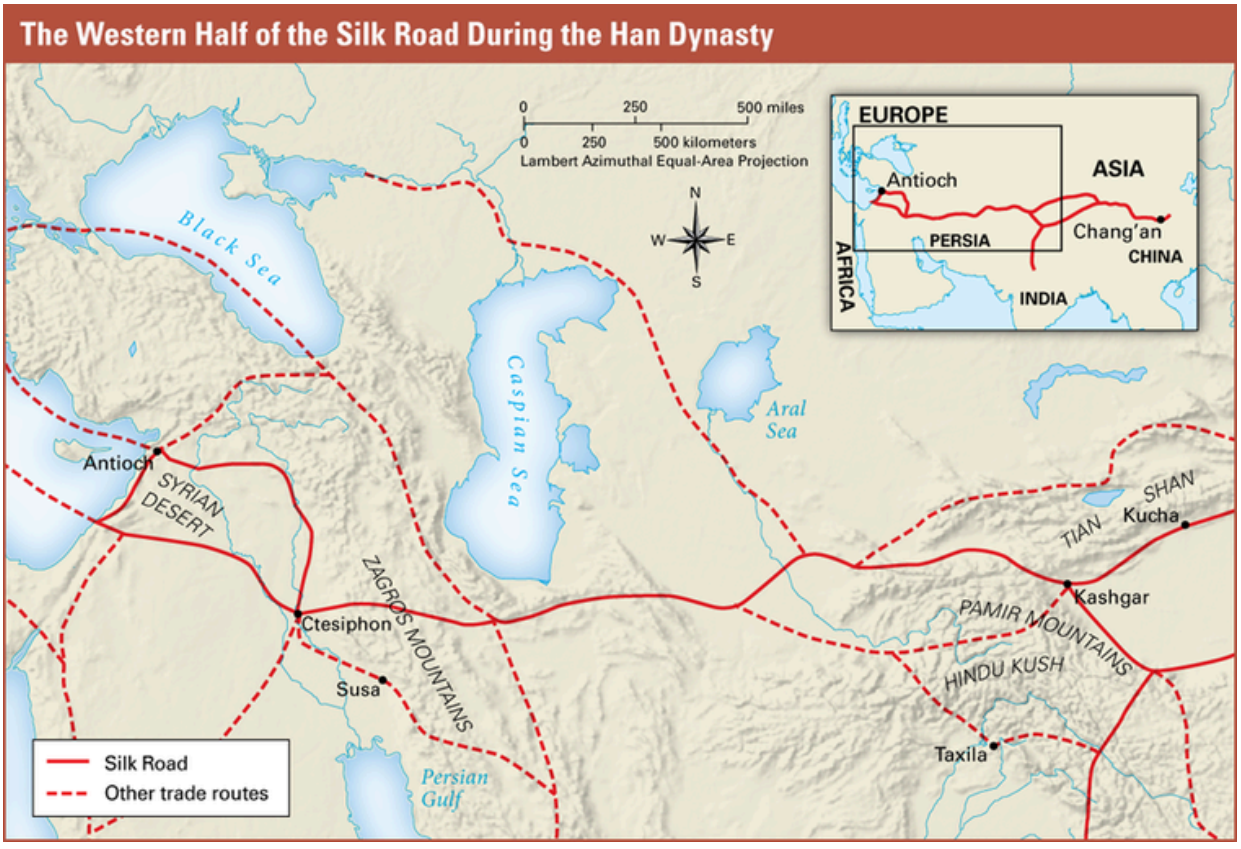
The varied goods finally reached Antioch and other Mediterranean ports. From there, ships carried them throughout the Mediterranean world.

Goods Exchanged Along the Western Silk Road Many goods traveled along the Western Silk Road and eventually ended up in China. Traders from Egypt, Arabia, and Persia brought perfumes, cosmetics, and carpets. Central Asian traders brought metal items and dyes, and sometimes traded slaves.

Rome sent a number of products to be exchanged for Chinese silk. The Chinese highly valued Roman glass products. These included trays, vases, necklaces, and small bottles. They also prized a mineral called asbestos, which the Chinese used for making fireproof cloth. Coral was also prized because Chinese doctors may have used it to help them treat illness, believing that coral lost its color when placed on the skin of someone who was sick.

The Romans also sent massive amounts of gold to trade for silk. In fact, so much gold was shipped out of Rome that, in the first century C.E., the Roman emperor Tiberius passed a law forbidding men to wear silk. Legend says that the emperor was afraid that wearing so much finery would make the Romans appear soft and weak. It is more likely that he wanted to reduce the amount of gold that was flowing out of his empire.





4. Cultural Exchanges and the Silk Road

The trade between East and West along the Silk Road created**cultural diffusion**, in which ideas and knowledge—as well as goods—spread from one culture to another. For example, China and Rome did not merely trade new products with each other. In time, they learned how to make these products for themselves. By 500 C.E., the Chinese had learned how to make glass. About the same time, the West had learned how to produce silk. Such cultural diffusion **occurs** in many cultures, past and present, and in many different ways.



Diets, gardening, and agriculture also changed as trade introduced new plants into different areas. For example, China imported many new foods and spices. Among them were grapes, cucumbers, figs, pomegranates, walnuts, chives, sesame, and coriander. The West imported oranges, peaches, pears, and different kinds of flowers, including roses, chrysanthemums, azaleas, peonies, and camellias.

The Silk Road also helped spread Buddhist beliefs. Buddhism had its origins in India. Because the Silk Road passed through many different nations, religious travelers using the route shared their teachings.

The spread of Buddhism is a good example of how cultural diffusion takes place. Buddhism was introduced to China around the middle of the first century C.E. Some Chinese Buddhists journeyed on foot across Central Asia to India to learn more about their new religion. They returned to China with copies of sacred Buddhist texts. Buddhism would eventually become a major religion in China.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned how the Silk Road, an ancient network of trade routes, promoted an exchange of goods and ideas between China and the West.

The Opening of the Silk Road The Silk Road was opened during the Han dynasty and remained a major route of trade for more than 1,000 years. The eastern and western parts of the Silk Road presented many dangers and hardships for those who traveled along it. To make a profit from trade, goods had to be valuable and easy to carry. Silk and ornaments traveled from China to Rome, India, and central Asia.Gold, horses, cotton, and spices traveled back to China.

The Eastern Silk Road The Eastern Silk Road connected the capital of China to Kashgar. Travelers formed camel caravans for protection from bandits and the harsh conditions of desert travel.

The Western Silk Road From Kashgar, the Western Silk Road crossed mountains and a desert on its way to Mediterranean ports like Antioch. Travelers faced high, slippery mountain trails and dangerous desert wildlife, such as tigers and lions.

Cultural Exchanges Along the Silk Road Many goods were exchanged along the Silk Road, including both silk from China and glassware from Rome. In addition to new products, ideas and knowledge were exchanged. In this way, trade brought cultural changes to both East and West. One of the most important examples of cultural diffusion was the introduction of Buddhism to China.

How Did Geography Affect Travelers

Along the Silk Road?

What would it have been like to travel along the 4,000-mile ancient Silk Road? It was not anything like traveling by plane, train, or cars today. You will examine three primary sources to help you understand the geography of the Silk Road. Then you will use these sources to explain how geography affected travelers along the Silk Road routes.

Most travelers on the Silk Road rode slow-moving camels in caravans at a pace of two to three miles per hour. They traveled eight to fourteen hours each day with all their food, water, and goods for trading strapped to the sides of the camels.

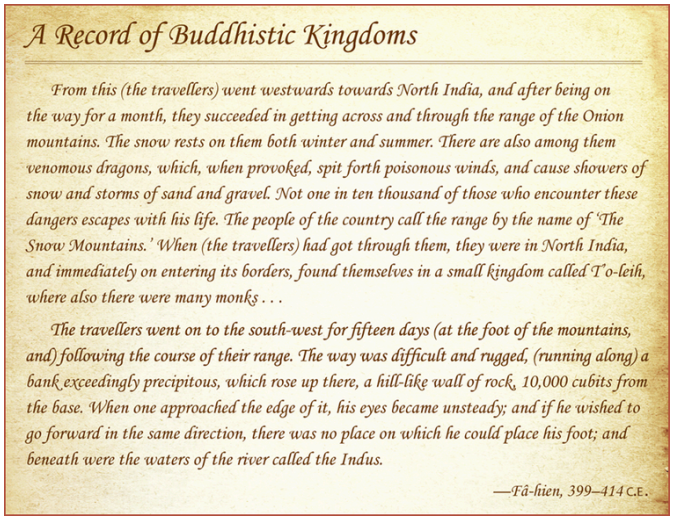
This primary source is a map of the western half of the Silk Road, through the Arabian Desert, which is now in present-day Iraq.The map was made for King Louis XIV of France in 1683 by Vincenzo Coronelli, a Franciscan monk and cartographer. Back in that time period, the king may have used this map to see which routes his merchants should travel. Study the map and look closely for symbols of different land and water features. Then identify the ones that you recognize on this map. How does this map compare to a modern map of this area? Does this map have advantages or disadvantages over a modern map? What do the details on this map tell you about traveling along the Silk Road?

Notes from an Ancient Traveler

According to ancient sources, a Chinese monk named Fâ-hien traveled on the Silk Road between 399 and 413 C.E. He set out from China to India to find books on Buddhist teaching and learn about Buddhist practices in India. Along the way, he visited the places where Buddha was born and lived, and he learned about sacred texts from Buddhist monks he met.

Fâ-hien wrote about his journey in *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*. As you read the following passage about the land that Fâ-hien crossed, consider how the geography affected his travels.The locations mentioned in the text still exist today, but with different names. The Onion Mountains are today's Pamir Mountains. The Snow Mountains are today's Himalaya Mountains.

What geographical features are described in this passage? How did these features affect travelers? Why do you think mythological creatures, such as the dragon, are included?



A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms

From this (the travellers) went westwards towards North India, and after being on the way for a month, they succeeded in getting across and through the range of the Onion mountains. The snow rests on them both winter and summer. There are also among them venomous dragons, which, when provoked, spit forth poisonous winds, and cause showers of snow and storms of sand and gravel. Not one in ten thousand of those who encounter these dangers escapes with his life. The people of the country call the range by the name of 'The Snow Mountains.' When (the travellers) had got through them, they were in North India, and immediately on entering its borders, found themselves in a small kingdom called T'o-leih, where also there were many monks . . .

The travellers went on to the south-west for fifteen days (at the foot of the mountains, and) following the course of their range. The way was difficult and rugged, (running along) a bank exceedingly precipitous, which rose up there, a hill-like wall of rock, 10,000 cubits from the base. When one approached the edge of it, his eyes became unsteady; and if he wished to go forward in the same direction, there was no place on which he could place his foot; and beneath were the waters of the river called the Indus.

—Fâ-hien, 399–414 C.E.

The Silk Road on the Sea

After listening to reports of the harsh conditions of the Silk Road, some traders took to the seas. Surely traveling on water would be faster and easier, they thought. Over time, this alternative water route became known as the Silk Road on the Sea.

Here is a map of the Silk Road region. The red line shows the land route from China to the ports of the Mediterranean Sea. The dark blue line shows the Silk Road on the Sea.

Traders who decided to travel by boat could often carry more supplies for themselves or for trading. However, as they packed for their journeys, they had to be careful not to weigh down their boats.They tried to bring enough food, supplies, and clothing to get them to their destinations. Otherwise they wasted valuable time stopping at intermediate ports to resupply.

In addition to carrying their own supplies, traders carried products to exchange in faraway places. They brought and returned with silk, spices, and glassware. Since they would receive more money or goods if their products were undamaged, they had to transport them carefully.

Do you think the Silk Road on the Sea is a shorter distance than the land route? Which route do you think was more dangerous?Why do you think the sea route stays so close to the shore?



Challenges on the Sea

Some travelers expected the Silk Road on the Sea to be safer than the land route. However, these travelers still faced their own unique sets of challenges. The following primary source is a journal written in Greek by an unidentified traveler. He wrote of traveling the Silk Road on the Sea during the first century. The *Erythraean Sea*mentioned in the excerpt refers to what we now call the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea

Directly below this place is the adjoining country of Arabia, in its length bordering a great distance on the Erythraean Sea. Different tribes inhabit the country, differing in their speech, some partially, and some altogether. The land next the sea is similarly dotted here and there with caves of the Fish-Eaters, but the country inland is peopled by rascally men speaking two languages, who live in villages and nomadic camps, by whom those sailing off the middle course are plundered, and those surviving shipwrecks are taken for slaves. And so they too are continually taken prisoners by the chiefs and kings of Arabia; and they are called Carnaites. Navigation is dangerous along this whole coast of Arabia, which is without harbors, with bad anchorages, foul, inaccessible because of breakers and rocks, and terrible in every way. Therefore we hold our course down the middle of the gulf and pass on as fast as possible by the country of Arabia until we come to the Burnt Island; directly below which there are regions of peaceful people, nomadic, pasturers of cattle, sheep and camels.

—Author unknown, first century

In this excerpt, what dangers does the author describe? Do you think this sea route is safer than the original Silk Road? What challenges did the sea travelers face that are similar to those of the land travelers? What challenges are unique to each way of travel?