

## **Silk Road: a Networking from East Asia to Europe**

### **A Synthesis Paper**

**Mohammed TAVAKOL\***

**Abstract:** The Silk Roads, no matter how and what they were called have been known to humankind not for a few centuries but for several millennia. Most of these routes are the remnants of natural roads. These historical roads, terrestrial and maritime running from the East to the West and from the North to the South, introduced sedentary and nomadic populations and opened up the space of dialogue to different cultures and the channel of communication to different socio-economic systems (civilizations). Ever since the Neolithic period between Mesopotamia, the Indian, and Chinese, Between Pamirs and Arabia and Africa, Central Asia and Europe, it was not only the commercial artifacts, jade, bronze, iron, and silk that was traded but there are ample testimonies that travelers, navigators, missionaries, pilgrims, merchants, scholars and explorers, exchanged also their ideas, customs, festivities, and other forms of material and nonmaterial culture. These “describe all there was to be seen, temples or palaces; all that was to be heard, songs and instrumental music; all that could be collected, stones and plants; and all that provided solace. Whether inns or stopping-places, markets or caravanserai, monasteries or sanctuaries.” The article will refer to historical, socio-economic, and political implications of this Silk Road.

### **Introduction**

The Silk Road was a collection of routes that stretched some 8,046 km from East Asia to the Mediterranean. It was originally composed of a number of caravan routes dating from around 300 BCE, along which jade was imported into China from the region around the Central Asian town of Hotan. Around 200 BCE, these routes were extended to meet the Middle Eastern road system. By 100 BCE, this link became an active trade route between the Mediterranean world and China.

The Silk Road was in use for over 2,000 years, and wheeled and caravan traffic was quite dense along certain stretches. The Silk Road reached the peak of its use during the fourteenth century; then decline set in. This was due to various factors, such as the disruption of traffic caused by the militant expansion of local rules, the fall of the Mongol Empire, and the drying up of many important oases along its routes. With the establishment of an alternate sea route between West and East (the "Spice Route") in 1497 by Vasco da Gama, the decline became irrevocable.

The Silk Road played a unique and central role in the processes of cross-cultural contact and exchange in the Old World. Goods, technology, ideas, and culture moved back and forth along its length. It was a principal conduit for the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and China. Islam likewise arrived from the west along the Silk Road. Ideas about mathematics, astronomy, and medicine travelled east and west, along with different forms of music, dance, painting, and other artistic media. From China to the West passed silk, jade, spices, ginger, tea, peach and pear trees, porcelain, papermaking, printing, and gunpowder. From the West into China came glass, grapes,

---

\*Dr., Tehran University & National Commission for UNESCO

cotton, wool, gems, ivory, and larger breeds of horses. Because of the vast distances to be covered and the expense of transport, long-distance trade along the Silk Road was usually limited to items of high value and low bulk. Ideas, on the other hand, moved back and forth with much greater freedom. The Paper goes in more detail to expand the above mentioned points.

In the history of international relations and of trade, few words are more evocative of mystery and opulence than Silk Roads (Seidenstrassen), the name coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 for the ancient routes that linked Asia and the West. Irresistibly romantic though the name may be, however, it is less than descriptive of the reality. Silk, China's famed and for centuries exclusive export, was not the only cargo carried by the caravans of camels that steadily made their way over treacherously shifting desert sands and ice-bound mountain passes. Through the centuries the caravans transported a host of natural and man-made products, both from East to West and from West to East.

The **Silk Road** (Traditional Chinese: pinyin, Simplified Chinese: sīchóu zhī lù, pinyin: sīchóu zhī lù; Persian: راه ابریشم; *Râh-e Abrisham*; Turkish: *İpekyolu*; Kyrgyz: *Жубек жолу* (*Ĝibek ğolu*); Hungarian: *Selyemút*) or **Silk Route** is an interconnected series of routes through Southern Asia traversed by caravan and ocean vessel, and connecting Chang'an (today's Xi'an), China, with Antioch, Asia Minor, as well as other points. It extends over 8,000 km (5,000 miles). Its influence carried over into Japan and Korea.



The Silk Road in the 1st century.

These exchanges were significant not only for the development and flowering of the great civilizations of China, ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India and Rome but also helped to lay the foundations of the modern world.

The continental Silk Road diverges into northern and southern routes as it extends from the commercial centers of North China, the northern route passing through the Bulgar-Kypchak zone to Eastern Europe and the Crimean peninsula, and from there across the Black Sea, Marmara Sea and the Balkans to Venice; the southern route passing through Turkestan-Khorasan into Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and then through

Antioch in Southern Anatolia into the Mediterranean Sea or through the Levant into Egypt and North Africa.

The last missing railroad link on the Silk Road was completed in 1992, when the international railway communication Almaty–Urumqi opened.

The Silk Road on the Sea extends from South China, to present-day Philippines, Brunei, Siam, Malacca, Ceylon, India, Persia, Egypt, Italy, Portugal and Sweden. On August 7, 2005 it was reported that the Antiquity and Monument Office of Hong Kong was planning to propose the Silk Road on the Sea as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### **Chinese and Central Asian contacts**

From the 2nd millennium BC nephrite jade was being traded from mines in the region of Yarkand and Khotan to China. Significantly, these mines were not very far from the lapis lazuli and spinel ("Balas Ruby") mines in Badakhshan and, although separated by the formidable Pamir Mountains, routes across them were, apparently, in use from very early times.

Following contacts of metropolitan China with nomadic western and northwestern border territories in the 8th century BC, gold was introduced from Central Asia, and Chinese jade carvers began to make imitation designs of the steppes, adopting the Scythian-style animal art of the steppes (descriptions of animals locked in combat). This style is particularly reflected in the rectangular belt plaques made of gold and bronze with alternate versions in jade and steatite.

### **Persian Royal Road**

By the time of Herodotus (c. 475 BC) the Persian Royal Road ran some 2,857 km from the city of Susa on the lower Tigris to the port of Smyrna (modern Izmir in Turkey) on the Aegean Sea. It was maintained and protected by the Achaemenid empire (c.700-330 BC) and had postal stations and relays at regular intervals. By having fresh horses and riders ready at each relay, royal couriers could carry messages the entire distance in 9 days, though normal travellers took about three months. This Royal Road linked into many other routes. Some of these, such as the routes to India and Central Asia, were also protected by the Achaemenids, encouraging regular contact between India, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. There are accounts in Esther of dispatches being sent from Susa to provinces as far out as India and Cush during the reign of Xerxes (485-465 BC).

The first major step in opening the Silk Road between the East and the West came with the expansion of Alexander the Great deep into Central Asia, as far as Ferghana at the borders of the modern-day Xinjiang region of China, where he founded in 329 BC a Greek settlement in the city of Alexandria Eschate "Alexandria The Furthest", Khujand (also called Khozdent or Khojent — formerly Leninabad), in the state of Tajikistan.

When Alexander the Great's successors, the Ptolemies, took control of Egypt in 323 BC, they began to actively promote trade with Mesopotamia, India, and East Africa through their ports on the Red Sea coast, as well as overland. This was assisted by the active participation of a number of intermediaries, especially the Nabataeans and other Arabs. The Greeks were to remain in Central Asia for the next three centuries, first through the administration of the Seleucid Empire, and then with the establishment of

the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom in Bactria. They kept expanding eastward, especially during the reign of Euthydemus (230–200 BC), who extended his control to Sogdiana, reaching and going beyond the city of Alexandria Eschate. There are indications that he may have led expeditions as far as Kashgar in Chinese Turkestan, leading to the first known contacts between China and the West around 200 BC.

### *Chinese exploration of Central Asia*

The next step came around 130 BC, with the embassies of the Han Dynasty to Central Asia, following the reports of the ambassador Zhang Qian (who was originally sent to obtain an alliance with the Yuezhi against the Xiongnu, in vain). The Chinese emperor Wudi became interested in developing commercial relationship with the sophisticated urban civilizations of Ferghana, Bactria and Parthia: "The Son of Heaven on hearing all this reasoned thus: Ferghana (Dayuan) and the possessions of Bactria (Ta-Hia) and Parthia (Anxi) are large countries, full of rare things, with a population living in fixed abodes and given to occupations somewhat identical with those of the Chinese people, but with weak armies, and placing great value on the rich produce of China" (Hou Hanshu, Later Han History).

The civilizations that developed in China and Mesopotamia are perfect examples of how people dealt with other cultures. There was a time when the two lived in complete ignorance of each other, separated by a vast and hostile wasteland known as Central Asia. Eventually, the civilizations of Western Asia and China would come in contact by way of an overland trade route known as The Silk Road. The inevitable encounter between East and West some 2000 years ago provides us with a guide for dealing with twentieth century effects of globalized economy, culture, race, and nationality. The vast amount of ideas and information that we encounter over the world wide web is not unlike the vast amount of ideas and information encountered on the Silk Road somewhere between China and the west.

Within Central Asia lies one of the most inhospitable deserts in the world. Here, there are little or no natural resources. In a land with little water, there is equally little vegetation or wildlife. Sand storms whip the sandy surface of this region burying anything in its path. This is the Taklimakan dessert, but local people call it "the Land of Death", or "the Land of Irrevocable Death". Such people rarely intruded into the interiors of the Taklimakan dessert. Instead they stuck to the path of the Silk Road and other routes which skirted the edges of the dessert. The Taklimakan has for centuries acted as a natural barrier between the East and West, however, it was not the only thing preventing contact.

The land surrounding the Taklimakan is equally hostile. To the northeast lies the Gobi Dessert, which is less dry and desolate than the Taklimakan, but nonetheless a formidable boundary. To the south lie the largest mountain ranges in the world - the Himalayas, Karakourum, and Kunkun. These giants separate Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent. Still another barrier separating east from west is the Pamir "Knot", a conglomeration of several mountain ranges including the Tianshan and Pamir ranges. Approaching the area from the east, the least difficult entry is along the 'Gansu Corridor', a relatively fertile strip separating the Mongolian plateau and the Gobi from the Tibetan High Plateau. Coming from the west, or south, travelers were forced to make their way through icy passes along the Pamir "Knot" and the Himalayas.

Chinese and Western civilizations developed on opposite ends of the continent in areas that were able to support life. The western end of the trade route developed first along the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia, while the eastern end developed more slowly due to the difficult terrain. The Chinese civilization advanced during the Qin Dynasty, when individual states unified under a central government located at Changan (present day Xian). Exploration of the west by the Chinese did not begin until the Han Dynasty when the emperor sent Zhang Qian on a mission to form an alliance with the Yuezhi tribe in the west. He began his journey in 138 BC and returned to his emperor's court 13 years later after being captured twice by an enemy tribe. Although Qian failed to secure an ally in the west, he brought back important information about a new breed of horse and hitherto unknown tribes in the west. More expeditions were sent west to retrieve horses and objects of beauty for the emperor. By this process, the route to the west was opened up. Many scholars regard Zhang Qian as the father of the Silk Road, but even before his expedition, small amounts of Chinese goods were reaching the west.

When considering the nature of the Silk Road, one must remember that there was no one silk route, but many routes, roads, and paths that head in an east-west direction. Some routes were well developed and relatively free from bandits, while others were less protected and had fewer oasis towns which offered shelter from the elements. A particular route along the southern edge of the Taklimakan was quite risky, but it took less time to cross. One thing that many of the routes had in common was a meeting point in Kashgar (Kashi). This city, located at the foot of the Pamirs, became one of the most important trade centers in Central Asia. This was the halfway point along the Silk Road where most traders sold their loads to middle men who would make the final transaction further down the line. So in reality, few traders actually made the transcontinental journey along the route; it was the goods that eventually made it from one side of Asia to the other.

The Silk Road did not exist for the sole purpose of trading silk. Although silk was most remarkable for westerners, it was only one of many items that were traded throughout the history of the Silk Road. Gold, precious metals, ivory, precious stones, and glass went towards China, while furs, ceramics, gun powder, jade, bronze objects, lacquer, and iron went west. All of these items went overland by way of caravan which consisted of anywhere to 100 to 1000 camels, each loaded with roughly 500 pounds of goods. Such caravans were extremely valuable and vulnerable to bandits; as such they needed escorts and a secure place to camp each night.

The development of Central Asian trade routes caused some problems for Han rulers in China. Bandits took advantage of the terrain to plunder trade caravans along the Gansu Corridor. As a result, trade began to suffer great losses at the expense of merchants at either end of the route. Han rulers answered this threat by constructing forts and defensive walls along part of the route. These sections were later combined to form the 'Great Wall' which still stands today as a testament to human achievement and suffering at the hands of determined emperors. Unfortunately, the wall along the northern side of the Gansu Corridor was not as effective as intended, as the Chinese periodically lost control of sections of the route. It became apparent to later Han rulers that in order to control the route, especially the Taklimakan region, a permanent local government had to be established. Once a local government in the Taklimakan region was secure, the growth of settlement along the routes really began to take off. Under the protection of the Han Empire, the settlements were able to reap the benefits of secure

and reliable trade. They also absorbed a lot of the local culture, and the cultures that passed them by along the route.

### **The Roman Empire and silk**

Soon after the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BC, regular communications and trade between India, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, China, the Middle East, Africa and Europe blossomed on an unprecedented scale. Land and maritime routes were closely linked, and novel products, technologies and ideas began to spread across the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. Intercontinental trade and communication became regular, organised, and protected by the 'Great Powers.'

### ***Central Asian commercial & cultural exchanges***

The heyday of the Silk Road corresponds to that of the Byzantine Empire in its west end, Sassanid Empire Period to Il Khanate Period in the Nile-Oxus section and Three Kingdoms to Yuan Dynasty in the Sinitic zone in its east end. Trade between East and West also developed on the sea, between Alexandria in Egypt and Guangzhou in China, fostering the expansion of Roman trading posts in India. Historians also talk of a "Porcelain Route" or "Silk Route" across the Indian Ocean. The Silk Road represents an early phenomenon of political and cultural integration due to inter-regional trade. In its heyday, the Silk Road sustained an international culture that strung together groups as diverse as the Magyars, Armenians, and Chinese.

Under its strong integrating dynamics on the one hand and the impacts of change it transmitted on the other, tribal societies previously living in isolation along the Silk Road or pastoralists who were of barbarian cultural development were drawn to the riches and opportunities of the civilizations connected by the Silk Road, taking on the trades of marauders or mercenaries. Many barbarian tribes became skilled warriors able to conquer rich cities and fertile lands, and forge strong military empires.

The Silk Road gave rise to the clusters of military states of nomadic origins in North China, invited the Nestorian, Manichaean, Buddhist, and later Islamic religions into Central Asia and China, created the influential Khazar Federation, and at the end of its glory, brought about the largest continental empire ever: the Mongol Empire, with its political centers strung along the Silk Road (Beijing in North China, Karakorum in central Mongolia, Sarmakhand in Transoxiana, Tabriz in Northern Iran, Astrakhan in lower Volga, Solkhat in Crimea, Kazan in Central Russia, Erzurum in eastern Anatolia), realizing the political unification of zones previously loosely and intermittently connected by material and cultural goods.

The main traders during Antiquity were the Indian and Bactrian Traders, then from the fifth to the eighth c. the Sogdian traders, then the Persian traders.

The Roman empire, and its demand for sophisticated Asian products, crumbled in the West around the 5th century. In Central Asia, Islam expanded from the century onward, bringing a stop to Chinese westward expansion at the Battle of Talas in 751. Further expansion of the Islamic Turks in Central Asia from the 10th century finished disrupting trade in that part of the world, and Buddhism almost disappeared.

In the domain of Arts; many artistic influences transited along the Silk Road, especially through the Central Asia, where Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese influence were able to intermix.

Religion was the most important commodity to be carried along the route. The religions of Central Asia owe much of their existence to the trade routes that carried them to Tibet, the Taklimakan region, and eventually China's ancient capital Changan. Buddhism came into China from India as early as the first century AD, and changed the face of Silk Road towns with monasteries and pagodas. Buddhism's influence was also seen in the art of the era, as more artists began using the image of the Buddha in their work. Later, Islam made it into the heart of China much the same way as Buddhism did before, but as we shall see, its ultimate effects contributed to the Silk Road's eventual decline. Christianity too was carried by European missionaries and took root in Tang China in 638 AD.

The Tang Dynasty was the height of the Silk Road's importance. Individual states assimilated thus decreasing the outside threats. Buddhist manuscripts and artwork continued to pour into China changing the look of the civilization as a whole. By 742 AD, the Changan had become an exotic metropolis, boasting a population of nearly two million, five thousand of which were foreigners from along the Road, as well as Japanese, Koreans, and Malays. Starting in 1206, the Mongols led by Genghis Khan conquered a huge portion of Asia. In China they established the Yuan Dynasty which lasted only about 160 years, but nonetheless was the center of the largest empire that the world has seen. The Mongol Empire enveloped the whole of Central Asia from China to Persia, and stretched as far west as the Mediterranean. Under the Mongols, the Silk Road became an important path for communication between different parts of the empire, as well as a protected trade route. The Mongols remained relatively sympathetic to different religions, nationalities, and creeds. It was at this time that the first Europeans began arriving in Mongol cities. Marco Polo is probably the most famous westerner to have witnessed the court of Kubilai Khan. He traveled extensively throughout China and brought back to Europe some of the first factual information about East Asia.

### **Mongol era**

The Mongol expansion throughout the Asian continent from around 1215 to 1360 helped bring political stability and re-establish the Silk Road (vis-à-vis Karakorum). In the late 13th century, a Venetian explorer named Marco Polo became one of the first Europeans to travel the Silk Road to China. Westerners became more aware of the Far East when Polo documented his travels in *Il Milione*. He was followed by others.

Many technological innovations from the East seem to have filtered into Europe around that time. The period of the High Middle Ages in Europe saw major technological advances, including the adoption through the Silk Road of printing, gunpowder, the astrolabe, and the compass. Also maps, larger ships,...

### **Disintegration**

However, with the disintegration of the Mongol Empire also came discontinuation of the Silk Road's political, cultural and economic unity. Turkmen marching lords seized the western end of the Silk Road — the decaying Byzantine Empire. After the Mongol Empire, the great political powers along the Silk Road became economically and culturally separated. Accompanying the crystallization of regional states was the decline of nomad power, partly due to the devastation of the

Black Death and partly due to the encroachment of sedentary civilizations equipped with gunpowder.

Many factors are attributed to the decline of the Silk Road. The Mongol Empire began to crumble as early as 1262, due to quarreling among regional Khans. In 1368, the Ming Dynasty regained control of China and immediately emphasized nationalism and isolationism in an effort to prevent future invasion. With the revival of Islam in the west and Chinese nationalism in the east, the controls on the land route once again rose. Trade by sea became less dangerous and more profitable than the long and arduous land route. Also, the demand for silk began to slump as European production was perfected and passed on. Perhaps the greatest factor contributing to the decline of trade along the Silk Road was geography. Maintaining existing settlements along the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts became increasingly difficult during that era of political unease. A lack of natural resources proved too stressful for many desert cities along the southern end of the Taklimakan region. Maintenance of wells, streets, and buildings was neglected in light of invasion from bandits, lack of trade, and a sometimes imposing religion from the West. Soon the old towns and religious sites were buried deeper beneath the sands.

The wish to trade directly with China was also the main drive behind the expansion of the Portuguese beyond Africa after 1480, followed by the powers of the Netherlands and Great Britain from the 17th century. As late as the 18th century, China was usually still considered the most prosperous and sophisticated of any civilization on earth, however its per capita income was low relative to western Europe at that time. Leibniz, echoing the prevailing perception in Europe until the Industrial Revolution, wrote in the 17th century: "Everything exquisite and admirable comes from the East Indies... Learned people have remarked that in the whole world there is no commerce comparable to that of China" (Leibniz).

In the 18th century, Adam Smith, declared that China had been one of the most prosperous nations in the world, but that it had remained stagnant for a long time, its wages always were low, and the lower classes were particularly poor.

In effect, the spirit of the Silk Road and the will to foster exchange between the East and West, and the lure of the huge profits attached to it, has affected much of the history of the world during these last three millennia.

### **The Present Day**

The Silk Road, after a long period of hibernation, has been increasing in importance again recently.

The fight of man against the desert, one of the biggest problems for the early travellers, is finally gaining ground. There has been some progress in controlling the progress of the shifting sands, which had previously meant having to resite settlements. The construction of roads around the edges of the Taklimakan has eased access, and the discovery of large oil reserves under the desert has encouraged this development. The area is rapidly being industrialised, and Urumchi, the present capital of Xinjiang, has become a particularly unprepossessing Han Chinese industrial city.

The trade route itself is also being reopened. The sluggish trade between the peoples of Xinjiang and those of the Soviet Union has developed quickly; trade with the C.I.S. (author's note: C.I.S. is the "Commonwealth of Independent States" which (used



to be) the official title of the new countries formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Probably "new republics of the former Soviet Union" would now be more appropriate.) is picking up rapidly, with a flourishing trade in consumer items as well as heavy industry. The new Central Asian republics had previously contributed much of the heavy industry of the former Soviet Union, with a reliance for consumer goods on Russia. Trade with China is therefore starting to fulfill this demand. This trading has been encouraged by the recent trend towards a 'socialist market economy' in China, and the increasing freedom of movement being allowed, particularly for the minorities such as those in Xinjiang. Many of these nationalities are now participating in cross-border trade, regularly making the journey to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The railway connecting Lanzhou to Urumchi has been extended to the border with Kazakhstan, where, on 12th September 1990, it was finally joined to the former Soviet railway system, providing an important route to the new republics and beyond. This Eurasian Continental Bridge, built to rival the Trans-Siberian Railway, has been constructed from Lianyungang city in Jiangsu province (on the east China coast) to Rotterdam; the first phase of this development has already been completed, and the official opening of the railway was held on 1st December 1992. It is already promised to be at least 20% cheaper than the route by sea, and, at 11,000 kilometres, is significantly shorter. From China, the route passes through Kazakhstan, Russia, Byelorussia, and Poland, before reaching Germany and the Netherlands. The double-tracking of the railway from Lanzhou to the border of the C.I.S. has now been put high on the Chinese development priority list.

### **Conclusions**

From its birth before Christ, through the heights of the Tang dynasty, until its slow demise six to seven hundred years ago, the Silk Road has had a unique role in foreign trade and political relations, stretching far beyond the bounds of Asia itself. It has left its mark on the development of civilisations on both sides of the continent. However, the route has merely fallen into disuse; its story is far from over. With the latest developments, and the changes in political and economic systems, the edges of the Taklimakan may yet see international trade once again, on a scale considerably greater than that of old, the iron horse replacing the camels and horses of the past.

The specific role of the Silk Roads is in the destiny of so many people and so many communities is involved. A dialogue between cultures means exchanges not only of goods but also of ideas. The very term commerce suggests the exchange of objects as much as that of ideas. In this instance, as else-where, the term comprises two meanings: trading, admittedly, but also points of view, discussions, or even deliberations. In these circumstances, "the silk trade serves as a reactive agent and provides topical illustrations in the light of which history can be viewed not merely in economic but also in political, cultural and religious terms".

## References

1. Boulnois, Luce. 2004. *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants on the Silk Road*. Translated by Helen Loveday.
2. Elisseeff, Vadime. Editor. 1998. *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*. UNESCO Publishing. Paris. Reprint: 2000.
3. Foltz, Richard C. 1999. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
4. Gonzales, Ray, ny, *The Geography of the Silk Road*, Humboldt University.
5. Litvinsky, B. A., ed., 1996. *History of civilizations of Central Asia, Volume III. The crossroads of civilizations: 250 to 750*. Paris, UNESCO Publishing.
6. Vollmer, John E., E. J. Keall, and E. Nagai-Berthro , 2006, "Silk Roads: An Introduction to Trade".
7. Whitfield, Susan, 1999. *Life Along the Silk Road*. London: John Murray.
8. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
9. Wood, Frances, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Hardcover), The Silk Road.