

# Chapter 24

## The Silk Road

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

### 1. Introduction



Under Han rule, new trade routes allowed the Chinese to trade with other ancient cultures. In this chapter, you will explore the great trade route known as the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was actually a network of smaller trade routes. It stretched for more than four thousand miles across Asia—from Luoyang (l-waw-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 with this trade.



The Silk Road **linked** the peoples of the East and the West for more than a thousand years. In this chapter, you will learn more about the exchanges between Asian and western cultures.

### 2. 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 west with 100 men. His mission was 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 taken prisoner by the Huns. Both times, he was able to escape.

Zhang Qian never achieved an alliance. But his trip was a success in other ways, as it helped the Chinese learn about a number of 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.

**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. During the Han dynasty, 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 may have been 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. It was rare and expensive. Even 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.



### 3. The Eastern Silk Road

The Silk Road was not one continuous route. It was 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 the distances between oases like Loulan and Kucha were shorter.

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 double eyelids 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. Then it was taken by boat to Rome and other Mediterranean cities.



Besides silk, the Chinese also traded fine dishware (which became known as china), ornaments, jewelry, cast-iron products, and decorative boxes. In return, the Chinese received a variety of goods from other traders. The Chinese particularly valued horses from Central Asia. Other items from Central Asia included jade, furs, and gold. 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.



#### 4. 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 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 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 tigers, lions, and scorpions, and also tormented by flies.

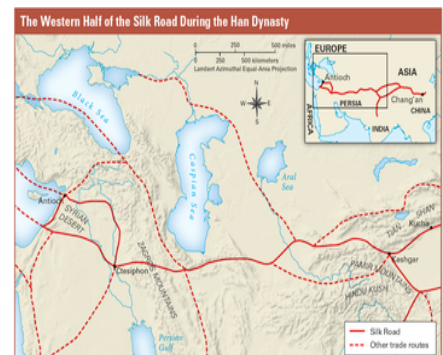
The varied goods finally reached Antioch and other Mediterranean ports. From there, ships carried them throughout the Mediterranean world.



**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 asbestos, which the Chinese used for making fireproof cloth as well as coral. Chinese doctors used coral to help them treat illness. It was said 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.



## 5. 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.