



The Silk Road: Linking Europe and Asia Through Trade. The Silk Road is a historically important international trade route between China and the Mediterranean. Because silk comprised a large proportion of trade along this road, in 1877, it was named 'the Silk Road' by Ferdinand von Richthofen, an eminent German geographer.

The Silk Road is the most well-known trading route of ancient Chinese civilization. Trade in silk grew under the Han Dynasty (202 BC - AD 220) in the first and second centuries AD

Origins

Originally, the Chinese trade silk internally, within the empire. Caravans from the empire's interior would carry silk to the western edges of the region. Often small Central Asian tribes would attack these caravans hoping to capture the traders' valuable commodities. As a result, the Han Dynasty extended its military defenses further into Central Asia from 135 to 90 BC in order to protect these caravans.

Chan Ch'ien, the first known Chinese traveler to make contact with the Central Asian tribes, later came up with the idea to expand the silk trade to include these lesser tribes and therefore forge alliances with these Central Asian nomads. Because of this idea, the Silk Road was born. The route grew with the rise of the Roman Empire because the Chinese initially gave silk to the Roman-Asian governments as gifts.

Spanning Two Continents

The 7000 mile route spanned China, Central Asia, Northern India, and the Parthian and Roman Empires. It connected the Yellow River Valley to the Mediterranean Sea and passed through places such as Chinese cities Kansu and Sinkiang and present-day countries Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Northwestern Indians who lived near the Ganges River played prominent roles as middlemen in the China-Mediterranean silk trade because as early as the third century AD, they understood that silk was a lucrative product of the Chinese Empire. The trading relationship between the Chinese and the Indians grew stronger with increased Han expansion into Central Asia. The Chinese would trade their silk with the Indians for precious stones and metals such as jade, gold, and silver, and the Indians would trade the silk with the Roman Empire. Silk proved to be an expensive import for the Roman Empire since its trade across Indian and Central Asia was heavily controlled by the Parthian Empire.

Social Consequences of the Silk Road

While the Chinese silk trade played a minor role in the Chinese economy, it did increase the number of foreign merchants present in China under the Han Dynasty, exposing both the Chinese and visitors to their country to different cultures and religions. In fact, Buddhism spread from India to China because of trade along the Silk Route, similar to the way Islam spread along trans-Saharan routes in medieval West Africa. .

The Silk Road's Decline

By 760 AD, during the T'ang Dynasty, trade along the Silk Road had declined. It revived tremendously under the Sung Dynasty in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when China became largely dependent on its silk trade. In addition, trade to Central and Western Asia as well as Europe recovered for a period of time from 1276-1368 under the Yuan Dynasty when the Mongols controlled China. The Chinese traded silk for medicines, perfumes, and slaves in addition to precious stones. As overland trade became increasingly dangerous, and overseas trade became more popular, trade along the Silk Road declined. While the Chinese did maintain a silk-fur trade with the Russians north of the original Silk Route, by the end of the fourteenth century, trade and travel along the road had decreased.

Route of the Silk Road

The Han-dynasty Silk Road began at the magnificent capital city of Chang'an (today's Xian). The route took traders westwards into Gansu Province through Lanzhou, Tianshui, Zhangye, jiuquan along the Hexi Corridor reached Jiayuguan - the giant barrier of the Great Wall and the first key point of the route- Dunhuang. Dunhuang is in the west end of the Hexi Corridor of Gansu Province. It is one of the well-known Chinese historical and cultural cities, and the bright pearl on the ancient Silk Road.

When the ancient Silk Road came out of the Hexi Corridor into Xinjiang, it broke into three main routes. The southern route ran west along the northern foot of Kunlun Mountains, via Charkhilk (Ruoqiang), Cherchen (Qemo), Minfeng (Niya), and Hetian (Hotan), then reached Kashgar - another key point on the Silk Road, afterwards went over the Pamirs, and reached India or passed through Afghanistan and Russian Central Asia to reach the coast of the Mediterranean or Arabia. The central route meandered west along the southern foot of the Tianshan Mountains dotted by Loulan, Korla, Chucha, and Aksu, then crossed the Pamirs and led to Mari in Russia. The northern route rambled along the northern foot of the Tianshan Mountains, starting at Hami wound through Turpan, Urumqi, westward reached the Ili River Valley, and led to area as near the Black Sea.

The three routes of the Silk Road ran between mountain ranges and long edges of deserts,

Kashgar Silk Road □□□□

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going through oases inhabited by ancient tribes. These tribes also opened some branch roads across mountain passes to join the three routes together.

The ancient Silk Road in Xinjiang traversed desolate desert areas and wound over snow-capped peaks. It was full of difficulties and obstacles and more dangerous and fascinating than other sections of the road. It was the only way for China to get in touch with the West between the second century B.C. and the 10th century A.D. Various ancient cultures of the West and East, including some lost cultures, have left traces of themselves in Xinjiang. Although sections of the Silk Road have been buried by sand in deserts, the local dry climate has miraculously preserved sites and relics several thousand years old. Some relics are as good as they were centuries ago.