

The Silk Road

The Silk Road was a set of ancient trade routes that led from China's ancient capital of Chang'an, all the way to Rome. All kinds of things were carried along these routes; not just goods, but also religion, technology and ideas. Learn how the Silk Road developed and helped to change the world.

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For Review Only

Before You Read

This story is about the Silk Road. The story starts in Nara, in western Japan, and then moves to the Taklamakan Desert and the Pamir Mountains, in China’s far west; before moving back to China’s ancient capital Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an), which is in central China. As the Silk Road involved trade between Chang’an and Rome, many places play a part in the story. Some places less familiar today include the Fergana Valley, which is in Central Asia; the Parthian **Empire**,¹ which at its height reached from Central Asia to the Mediterranean; and Byzantium, which was in modern-day Turkey.

A. An Ancient Journey. Read the paragraph. Then complete each definition with the correct word.

It is the year 100, and you are a merchant on the Silk Road. In your bags are valuable products from as far away as south India, Rome, and every place in between. You have just gone through Khunjerab Pass in the Pamir Mountains, and have arrived at Kashgar, China, on the western end of the Taklamakan Desert. After some rest, you ride your camel east to Hotan, the next place with fresh water, about ten days away. There you rest up for a couple of days, join other travelers to form a **caravan**² so that you’ll be safe from robbers, and then find guides for the hardest part of your journey—a ride northeast through the desert, one that could take more than 30 days to complete. There are places to find water along the way, but these can be easy to miss, and, if you do, you will die. This is why Taklamakan means “You go in, and never come out.” Yet, go into the desert you must, because you have goods to sell in Chang’an and this is the route. For days, you travel through an ocean of sand that goes as far as the eye can see, stopping at the few **oases**³ along the way. Finally, you see a brown wall made of packed dirt in the distance (the western end of the Great Wall of China), and then the Yumen Pass, and you are happy with the knowledge that soon you will be in Dunhuang, and have a hot meal to eat and a soft bed to sleep in. The hardest part of your journey is now over.

- 1. A m_____ is a person who buys and sells things to make money.
- 2. Something that is v_____ is useful, important, or worth a lot of money.
- 3. A j_____ is a long trip.
- 4. G_____ are things that can be bought and sold.
- 5. Something in the d_____ is something that is far away.
- 6. K_____ is information about something.

¹**empire**: a group of areas ruled by one leading authority
²**caravan**: a group of people making a trip together
³**oasis (pl. oases)**: a place with trees and water in the desert



Danxia landform in Zhangye, Gansu, China

B. Silk Road Facts. Look at the table and the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

Silk Road Facts	
What was it?	A network of trade routes that connected East Asia and Southeast Asia with South Asia, Persia, the Middle East, East and North Africa and Southern Europe from the 2nd century BCE to the 18th century.
How did it get the name?	A German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, came up with the term in 1877 in his book <i>China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon</i> .
How did it start?	The rise of the Parthian Empire, the Roman Empire, and the Han Dynasty ⁴ made trade between the East and West possible. Zhang Qian’s two journeys to the Western Regions in the 2nd century BCE helped open up the doors to this trade.
What goods were transported?	Goods like silk, china, metals, plants, recipes for foods, medicines, minerals, spices, fur, and animals. Music and dance, as well as religions like Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam were also brought along the Silk Road.

- 1. What have you learned about the Silk Road?
- 2. Does anything surprise you about the Silk Road?
- 3. What else would you like to learn about the Silk Road?

⁴**dynasty**: a period of time when members of the same family rule a country



Lop Nur, Xinjiang, China

The first time I really heard about the Silk Road was many, many years ago, in Nara, Japan. My wife and I were walking through Nara Park when we saw an exhibition hall packed with people. We didn't have a clear idea of what the exhibition was about, but we decided to go in. We discovered a large hall filled with sand from China's Taklamakan Desert, folk dancers and musicians from Central Asia, beautiful silks, wonderful things from all over the world, and strange spices. Among these riches were valuable items from China and elsewhere in Asia which were more than 1,200 years old—a reminder that when Nara was the capital of Japan, it was the eastern end of a trade route that went through China and Central Asia all the way to Rome.

We had never thought about the Silk Road before, but after seeing the exhibition we became interested in it and Central Asia. This interest led us to China, where we visited the Taklamakan Desert, lived quite near it for two years as we explored old Silk Road sites in the far west, going as far as Karakul Lake high up in the Pamir Mountains, very near China's border with Pakistan, a place Marco Polo described. During our time in the far west of China, we rode camels through the desert and visited ancient markets, which sold goods not so different from those sold one thousand years ago. The memories we made there would last the rest of our lives. It was our interest in the Silk Road that drove us there and kept us wanting to learn more.

 Track 1



It may not seem obvious at first, but trade between China and Europe was not always possible. China's ancient capital, Chang'an, and Rome were separated by eight thousand kilometers (almost five thousand miles) of deserts, mountains, seas, and warring countries. While both sides knew that the other existed, very few people ever traveled between the two places.

One of the big difficulties to any kind of trade or relations were the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu's home was Mongolia, but they often warred against the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Since the Han Dynasty was not strong enough at first to defeat the Xiongnu, for many years it used **diplomacy**⁵ to keep them at bay. However, it became obvious that something had to be done because the Xiongnu continued attacking the Han cities and towns. It was not just the Han who were being troubled by the Xiongnu. For example, the Xiongnu had pushed the Yuezhi, a group who came from what is now Gansu **Province**,⁶ west all the way to the Ili River on the border of modern-day China and Kazakhstan.

When the Han Dynasty's young **Emperor**⁷ Wu (156–87 BCE) heard reports of this, he decided to send one of his court **officials**,⁸ Zhang Qian (died 114 BCE) along with about 100 people and a Xiongnu guide named Ganfu to the far west in the hope of joining forces with the Yuezhi in 138 BCE.



Statue of Zhang Qian in Kashgar, China

Main Idea

1. What is the main idea of the first paragraph on page 5?
2. Why was trade and travel between China and Rome so difficult 2,200 years ago?

⁵**diplomacy**: skill in handling government relations

⁶**province**: an area into which many countries are divided

⁷**emperor**: the ruler of an empire

⁸**official**: a person who works for the government



Mural of Mogao Grottoes showing Zhang Qian taking leave of Emperor Wu going to the Western Regions

Zhang's first trip out west did not go well: He and his men were caught by the Xiongnu when they entered the Hexi Corridor. This long route between mountains and deserts in Gansu Province, with plenty of water and oases, links central China to the Western Regions. Zhang was held prisoner for ten years before he and Ganfu escaped and continued their journey. Zhang was able to reach the Yuezhi, only to discover that they were no longer interested in fighting against the Xiongnu. Zhang and Ganfu then spent about a year traveling around Central Asia before deciding to return to Chang'an. On their way back, they were once again caught by the Xiongnu. It took them a year to find a way to escape and this time Zhang was able to reach Chang'an, where he made his report to Emperor Wu. This was the first time that the Chinese had received in-depth information about the Western Regions.

While Zhang was on his way to the Western Regions, Emperor Wu went to war against the Xiongnu. In 121 BCE, five years after Zhang's return, an army led by Huo Qubing drove the Xiongnu out of the Hexi Corridor. This provided a land bridge between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions and Central Asia.

In 119 BCE, Zhang once again headed up a large group of **emissaries**⁹ to develop relations with another country in the west, Wusun. While Zhang was in Wusun, the other emissaries continued traveling, some going as far as what is modern-day Iran and India. These efforts helped to open up trade relations with the countries out west.

While on the map China looks far from Europe, it is worth keeping in mind that Alexander the Great's empire reached nearly as far east as China's modern western border. After Alexander died, his empire was divided up, with a resulting Seleucid Empire going all the way from the Mediterranean to what is modern-day Afghanistan. By the time of Zhang Qian, this empire had begun to fall apart and was then just a small country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. However, the regions west of China had already developed strong trade ties with countries in Europe. Once the route continued into China, these ties resulted in a flood of goods going east and west.

⁹**emissary**: a representative on a mission from one government to another

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing A, B, C, or D.

1. What does it mean to say someone or something has been kept at bay?
A. They have been kept near the ocean.
B. They have been successfully defeated at battle.
C. They have been kept from being a problem.
D. They have been invited to live in your cities.
2. From the context on pages 9 and 11, what is a go-between?
A. A person who stands in between others and lets nothing through.
B. A person who passes things along to others expecting nothing in return.
C. A person who buys a product, changes it in some way, and then sells it at a higher price.
D. A person who buys products and then sells them at a higher price.
3. Why might the Parthian sailors have wanted to tell Gan Ying that the journey to Rome was long and dangerous?
A. They did not want him to get to Rome.
B. They were afraid to sail across the Mediterranean.
C. He was not offering them enough money.
D. The journey was in fact long and dangerous.
4. What area of the world was not affected by the Silk Road according to the story?
A. Africa
B. the Americas
C. Pacific islands
D. western Europe
5. On page 19, the phrase at the speed of electricity refers to _____.
A. high-tech communication
B. large ships
C. the news
D. computers

B. Complete the Timeline. Complete the table below with information from the passage.

Year	Event
before 2nd century	Rome and Chang'an were separated by deserts, mountains, seas, and (1) _____.
Emperor Wu's time	• In the year 138 BCE, (2) _____ went to the Western Regions to seek alliance with Yuezhi against Xiongnu. • In 121 BCE, a Han army led by Huo Qubing drove the Xiongnu from (3) _____, making trade between the East and West possible. • In 119 BCE, (4) _____ went to the Western Regions again to develop relations with Wusun, together with other countries in this region.
5th century	Faxian, a Buddhist monk, made a 13-year trip to (5) _____ to look for Buddhist scriptures.
14th century	The following reasons made travel along the Silk Road not as common as before the (6) _____ Empire began to fall apart, as well as epidemics like the Black Death.
19th century	Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geographer, began to use the term "the Silk Road."

C. Answer the Questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Why did the author decide to come to China?
2. What can the history of the Silk Road tell us about life in China 1,500 years ago?
3. How does the age of globalization compare with the impact of the Silk Road?

The New Silk Road

Track 2

Inspired by the success of the Silk Road, formed during the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago, China introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The “Belt” refers to the land routes, and the “Road” refers to the sea routes. Like the old trading route, this new plan is a large network of trade routes that will also be used to share ideas. The aim is to bring countries together by improving connections and working together, which will in turn improve trade links. When governments work together, it can greatly benefit businesses in all countries involved, not to mention make cultural ties stronger.

The BRI is a 21st century form of the Silk Road, with its trade routes reaching even further around the world, including parts of Africa and South America. The trade routes cross both sea and land, allowing many more countries to take part. The BRI has five main goals: getting governments in different countries to work together; improving air, land, and sea connections; making business easier; sharing financial benefits; and connecting people.

The number of countries taking part in the BRI is continuing to increase. At the time of writing, there are over 100 countries involved. Through the BRI, new roads and railways are being built to allow people and goods to travel more easily. Further to this, ports, power plants, airports and communications networks are being developed too. With the BRI this complex and large, continuing discussions are required to help make sure that everything stays on track.

Many believe the project will benefit all countries involved, and others wait with high hopes. According to the World Bank, BRI transport projects could reduce trade-route travel times by up to 12%. Trade could also increase by as much as 9.7%. Through working together as equal partners, the relationships, cultural exchange, and sharing of knowledge between countries can grow and improve, just as they did in the time of the ancient Silk Road.

Word Count: 325
Time: _____