The Silk Road

EAST MEETS WEST

How untold wonders, knowledge, and even death traveled the ancient world

by Bryan Brown

The only signs of a road are the skeletons of the dead. Wherever they lie, there lies the road to India."

So wrote the 4th-century Buddhist monk Fa Xian (shee-ahn). But the words could have been echoed by any number of travelers who braved the dangers of the great ancient route known as the Silk Road.

For about 1,500 years, the Silk Road was the key link between Asia and Europe. This 4,000-mile-long network of trade routes spread goods, cultures, and religions throughout the vast Eurasian landmass.

Untold wonders suddenly appeared in local marketplaces. They might have been cinnamon and pearls from India, wine and olives from the Mediterranean—or that great mystery, silk from China. Long before globalization, the Silk Road bound the known world together.

In Search of Warriors

The Silk Road developed in the second century B.C., starting from Imperial China. At the time, Emperor Wu-ti (woo-DEE) was fighting with the Xiongnu (hong-NOH), a nomadic tribe to the north. The Emperor needed allies. He also needed bigger horses, strong enough to carry men in armor into battle.

In 138 B.C., Wu-ti sent one of his most trusted men, Zhang Qian (chen), on a crucial mission. Zhang’s goal was to make an alliance with some enemies of the Xiongnu, in valleys far to the west. Zhang’s 13-year trip over the Pamir Mountains into Central Asia was one of the greatest journeys of exploration in history.

The explorer did not return with an alliance. What Zhang did bring back was priceless information about people and trade routes to the west. In
places such as Bactria, part of modern-day Afghanistan (see map, p. 15). Zhang was surprised to find Chinese goods for sale. Those items had come long distances, through India.

Wu-ti smelled opportunity. He, too, could establish a more direct trade with distant peoples. This trade, the Emperor reasoned, would make his empire mighty indeed.

**Dangerous Roads**

It was not long before traders were traveling west from Changan, capital of the Chinese Empire. Passing the westernmost end of the Great Wall, the Silk Road made its way by various paths through Central Asia. Over time, it came to include already-established trade routes to India. Eventually, it reached Mediterranean seaports such as Tyre and Antioch. There, boats took wares to Rome and other Italian cities.

Very few traders went the entire distance. Instead, they traded what items they had for others, then returned home. Goods that made the journey from east to west, or vice versa, changed hands many times—each time becoming more expensive.

Each stage of the journey had its own dangers. Blinding sandstorms in the Taklimakan Desert could strike at a moment’s notice. In places in the Tien Shan Mountains, caravans passed over narrow rock ledges. Some traders fell to their deaths. Others

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**Fun Facts**

- **UNTIL THE 6TH CENTURY, THE Chinese kept silk production a secret. That changed when two Persian workers smuggled silk worms out of China in the folds of their bamboo canes.**

- **APPLES originated in Kazakhstan and were carried east by Silk Road traders.**

- **FOUR OF CHINA’S GREATEST INVENTIONS—paper, printing, gunpowder, and the compass—reached the West through the Silk Road.**

- **MANY PEOPLE THINK THAT THE SWIMMING POOL game Marco Polo came from an imagined incident in the adventurer’s life. Kept on his camel in the desert, Polo is said to have dreamed that someone was calling his name.**

- **IN THE 19TH CENTURY, the name Silk Road was given to the trails by a German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen.**
were buried by avalanches.

Threats from bandits were just as likely. Traders also often had to pay taxes or bribes to local officials to pass through a region. The Parthians, who controlled Persia (modern-day Iran) from about 247 B.C. to 224 A.D., demanded especially high taxes. Rome fought numerous wars with Parthia, partly over control of the Silk Road.

The Romans were crazy for silk. At first, all they knew was that it came from a faraway eastern land they called Serica—"the land of silk." For centuries, the Chinese guarded the secret that silk was made by silkworms. The Romans thought it grew on trees.

**Marco Polo**

Goods were not the only things traveling the Silk Road. From India, Buddhism spread to China, and became the official religion there in the 6th century A.D. Christianity and Islam also moved along the routes.

The most famous Silk Road traveler was a merchant (trader) named Marco Polo. Leaving the Italian city of Venice in 1271 A.D., when he was 17 years old, Polo traveled for years through the Asian empire of the Mongols. When he finally returned, Venetians found his descriptions of the East and its riches awe-inspiring, or simply unbelievable.

Diseases also traveled along the Silk Road. Like the avian flu today, they sometimes started in the farming areas of China and were carried west. Millions of Romans died from an epidemic of smallpox that began in Asia in 165 A.D. The Black Plague, which killed millions of Europeans in the 1300s, also spread in part through travelers on the Silk Road.

September, China and India agreed to open a section of the road between their countries that had been closed since 1962. Now, trucks carry watches, shoes, canned food, and tea over that road. Elsewhere in Central Asia, oil and gas move over terrain where camels once bore cinnamon and ginger. Many of the products for sale have changed. But the legacy of the Silk Road lives on.

**Your Turn**

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<th>WORD MATCH</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. merchant</td>
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<td>2. nomadic</td>
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<td>3. caravan</td>
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<td>4. epidemic</td>
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<td>5. imperial</td>
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**THINK ABOUT IT**

1. How was the Silk Road a form of globalization?
2. Name some popular dishes that originated in other countries. Why are so many different types of food available in the U.S. today?
Follow the Silk Road

Reading a Historic Map

Suppose you wanted to get a silk shirt. You could buy it in a store or order it on the Internet. But if you had lived centuries ago, it would have taken a long time to get it—and a lot of patience.

Before the 500s, China was the only place where silk was made. People in search of the precious fabric had to rely on camel caravans. The caravans carried silk, spices, and other goods from the Orient to Europe.

There were no direct roads, so delivery took a long time. The caravans of traders and goods plodded slowly onward, braving scorching deserts, snow-covered mountains, bandits, and other dangers.

Merchants did not travel the Silk Road from beginning to end. They would carry their goods only so far, then trade or barter them with other merchants, who carried the merchandise on the next leg of the journey.

With each trade, the prices of the goods went up.

The Silk Road was not a single road, but a network of many roads. None were paved. Our historic map shows only the main routes and the names of major present-day countries. It does not show political borders because these changed constantly.

Can you follow the Silk Road? Study the map, then answer the questions below.

1. The easternmost section of the Silk Road was in which present-day country?
2. At which eastern city did the Silk Road begin?
3. The Silk Road stretched as far west as which three cities in Europe?
4. Today, those cities are part of which country?
5. Which desert separates China and Mongolia?
6. In Central Asia, the Silk Road split into three main westward routes. The central and southern routes looped around which geographical barrier before meeting at Kashgar?
7. The northernmost route ran north of which mountains?
8. Which city on the Tigris River was a stop on the Silk Road?
9. What is the present-day name of Constantinople?
10. How do you think merchandise was transported from Tyre to Italy?