

THE SILK ROAD: AFRO-EURASIAN INTERCHANGE ACROSS THE AGES

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Key Terms

Silk Road, Taklamakan Desert, Bactrian camel, Mogao Caves, Greater Afro-Eurasian Silk Road, Age of the Four Empires, Sogdians, Second Chinese Empire, Religions along the Silk Road, Dar al-Islam, Song Era, *Pax Mongolica*, Great Eurasian Pandemic, Timurids, New World Silver, Qing dynasty, Indian Diaspora, Orenburg Line, The Cotton Road, Aral Sea Disaster

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Summary

The Silk Road, a complex network of caravan routes across the heart of Central Asia that connected and cross-fertilized the peoples and cultures of the Afro-Eurasian World, flourished from about 100 BCE to circa 1350 CE, with five periods of particular vitality. Long before the advent of a global “world system,” the Silk Road served as a major medium for economic and cultural exchange, and constituted a true Afro-Eurasian System. Regardless of global shifts that witnessed the rise of new systems of transoceanic exchange after about 1450, the old roads of the Silk Road continued to bear traffic. Despite political and environmental shifts over the past 500 years, some of which have been quite disastrous, even today these ancient roads are important arteries for the lands and peoples that they connect.

1. An Introduction to the Silk Road

The opening up of China over the past several decades, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of various republics in western Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, and the growing business of eco- and adventure-tourism have all contributed to a new around the globe, but especially in the West, to the historic Silk Road.

Commonly defined, the Silk Road was a trans-Eurasian network of land routes, largely across Central Asia, that connected China to the trading emporia of India and the eastern Mediterranean, and it enjoyed its greatest period of efflorescence from about 100 BCE to around 1350 CE. Although largely correct, this definition is imprecise. In fact, the Silk Road did not stop in China or the Levant and not even at water's edge. Beyond China lay Korea and Japan in the Far East; beyond the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean lay North Africa and Europe in the Far West; beyond India and Arabia lay the east coast of Africa to the west and the coastal regions of Southeast Asia to the east. Thanks to ships and shipping lanes, Japan, the far-western regions of North Africa and Europe, and the many lands touched by the waters of the Indian Ocean shared in and contributed to the goods, ideas, and other items transmitted across the Silk Road and may legitimately be thought of as part of a Greater Afro-Eurasian Silk Road. Moreover, long-distance travel and exchange across the Afro-Eurasian World flourished for thousands of years before the beginning of the classic era of the Silk Road, and even today many of the traditional routes of the Silk Road continue to bear commercial traffic. This essay, however, focuses on the Silk Road's land routes across Eurasia, particularly between ca. 100 BCE and 1350 CE.

1.1. Caravan Routes

The peoples and merchandise that moved across the Silk Road's inland trade routes followed an irregular pattern. Especially convenient geographic locations endowed some cities with a heightened commercial importance for the trans-Eurasian caravan trade, but preferred caravan

routes connecting these cities fluctuated, sometimes erratically, due to shifting political and environmental factors. Wherever they met, caravan merchants feverishly exchanged intelligence and rumors of insecurity, highwaymen, raids on recent caravans, and the vicissitudes of local and regional political developments; weighing risks and options carefully, merchants changed their routes accordingly. A tediously predictable route was as good as gold, and even an excruciating desert crossing was preferable to death at the hands of brigands.

Within this web of trade routes one can discern several primary arteries of latitudinal caravan traffic across Asia. Moving from east to west, the southern route out of central China passed below the Tarim Basin and its dreaded Taklamakan Desert. To the north of the Tarim Basin, travelers had a choice of two major routes: one skirted the Taklamakan Desert, passing through a variety of oasis towns; the other swung farther north across the pastoral-nomadic steppe. The two routes that passed along the periphery of the Tarim Basin eventually converged at Kashgar (today Kashi in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) and then crossed the Tian Shan and Pamir ranges, en route to Samarqand and Balkh (respectively in present-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan), where caravans loaded with merchandise from China met with others from northwestern India. The routes then continued in several different directions: south to the markets of India and westward to Iran and the Near East. In the latter case they ultimately led to the port cities of the Levant, North and East Africa, or on to Europe overland through Constantinople. A variety of side routes in Central and Southwest Asia, and the Balkans took travelers northward to Mongolia, Siberia, Russia, and Scandinavia. In addition to the routes that carried commerce into northwestern India and to the far western lands washed by the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas, a southwestern route led from Chengdu in China's Sichuan region into eastern India and the lands of Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding all of these side roads and tributaries, the main traffic was east to west and west to east across Eurasia during the classic era of the Silk Road.

At its height in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, the main overland portions of the Silk Road stretched for more than 6,500 kilometers from east to west, from Chang'an (modern Xi'an), capital of the Tang dynasty (618–907) in north central China, to Antioch, Tyre, Constantinople, and similar commercial centers of the Eastern Mediterranean. Along the way, it passed through such fabled cities as Kabul in Afghanistan, Susa in Iran, Baghdad in Iraq, and Palmyra in Syria. It traversed deserts, steppe, rivers, and mountain ranges, all filled with mortal dangers for those who braved its routes.

Additionally, bandits preyed on travelers, and strange food, drink, and microorganisms always threatened a traveler's internal organs. Then there were the psychic dangers. Several famous Silk Road travelers, notably Xuanzang (see below) and Marco Polo, recorded first-hand accounts of the frightening nocturnal sounds and voices of the Tarim Basin's Salt Desert of Lop Nor that disoriented to the point of death the unwary.

The dangers of Silk Road travel were ameliorated and the journey was made possible by oasis towns and cities, defensible camping spots, and caravanserais, that allowed travelers to progress from refuge point to refuge point at the pace of about 35 to 40 kilometers a day with a variety of

pack animals: Bactrian camels, oxen, yaks, horses, Arabian camels (dromedaries), donkeys, and even elephants. Of these, the slow but strong Bactrian, or double-humped, camel, which could carry average loads of about 180 kilos, did the bulk of transport across the pathways of Central Asia. To further ensure the safety of travelers, shrines and pilgrimage sites sprang up where travelers could find physical refuge and religious solace. One of the most famous and oft-visited was the complex of caves and shrines known as the *Mogaoku* (Peerless Caves) about 35 kilometers outside of the town of Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert. At this bustling oasis of monastic life and pilgrimage worship, more than 1000 caves were carved out of a gravel cliff face between the late 4th and mid-14th centuries CE. Of these, 492 were decorated shrines containing some of the most exquisitely beautiful Chinese Buddhist paintings and statuary ever crafted—artwork that displayed influences from as far away as Iran, India, and the Mediterranean.

Along the Silk Road's routes merchants moved goods, pilgrims visited holy sites, missionaries sought out converts, armies marched on expeditions of conquest and missions of pacification, prisoners of war were transported to uncertain futures in distant lands and among alien peoples, colonists set out for far-away frontier regions, ambassadors and promised brides journeyed to foreign lands to cement alliances, and imperial administrators traveled to far-flung outposts.

In addition to manufactured goods, livestock, fruits, and vegetables were transported to new homes, where they became integral parts of the agrarian landscapes and tables of host cultures. Artistic motifs and styles in painting and sculpture traveled along these routes, as well as other forms of expression. Music, dance, and a wide variety of musical instruments made their way east from Persia, India, Central Asia, and elsewhere and had profound impact on the cultures of China, Korea, and Japan. Even new sports and games, such as polo and chess, passed along the Silk Road. Far more important than the commodities carried on the backs of beasts of burden, ideas flowed every which way, especially religious concepts. Not all of the exchange was healthy, however. Diseases also traveled along these pathways, as microorganisms were carried by human and animal traveler alike.

1.2. The Term “The Silk Road”

Travelers along the Silk Road during its classic era referred to its routes by many different terms, but there is no evidence that any of them called either all or part of it “the Silk Road.” The term is modern. In 1877 a German geologist, geographer, and pioneer-explorer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), coined the term “*die Seidenstrassen*”—the Silk Roads—in his study of the historical geography of China’s Tarim Basin, as a way of indicating that Chinese silk was the commodity that fueled premodern commerce along the routes that passed through the oasis towns that ringed the Tarim Basin’s Taklamakan Desert. *Die Seidenstrassen* was later translated into English as the singular, rather romantic “the Silk Road.” Today many specialists in world history are turning back to the plural; additionally, many of them prefer the term “the Silk Routes,” which allows them to include the sea routes that washed against the shores of Eurasia and Africa and extended trade for many thousands of kilometers. They are correct to do so, but the more evocative “Silk Road” remains part of the popular historical vocabulary among Anglophones. What is history without some romance?

2. Silk and Other Merchandise along the Silk Road

Chinese Silk as a commodity of exchange and diplomacy was undoubtedly a major item transported along these caravan routes. It has been estimated that by the late first century BCE, China's Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) expended upward of ten percent of state revenues on the tens of thousands bolts of silk and thousands of kilos of silken thread that it sent annually as “gifts” to “tributary” neighboring states and tribes of nomads as a way of keeping them non-aggressive. Silk was avidly sought and expensive, and its secret of production was jealously but not successfully guarded by the Chinese. More important than the dual secrets of the silkworm, *Bombyx mori*, and the mulberry tree leaves on which it feeds, was knowledge of the complex process of silk production, and it was probably the difficulty of mastering that art, more than anything else, that slowed the spread of sericulture beyond China. The Chinese had domesticated the silkworm probably as early as 5000 BCE, but it was only around the 5th century CE that the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan (today Hotan or Hetian), then located on China's far western periphery, witnessed the raising of silkworms for their thread. According to a legend recorded in the early 7th century, the secret of sericulture was brought to Khotan by a Chinese princess-bride, who carried from home mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs hidden in her headdress, as dowry for her Khotanese husband-to-be. Later she founded a Buddhist convent for women, which became Khotan's first center of silk production. Whatever the truth of this charming story, the fact remains that Khotan became a major producer of quality silk, and remains so today. By the mid-6th century, the secret of silk had reached Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. Once the Byzantines mastered the art of producing silk, the silk industry became an imperial monopoly and a major component of the empire's economy. In like fashion, silk production became an important industry throughout the Islamic World, thanks largely to Islamic conquest of the Persian Sassanian Empire in the mid-7th century. From both Byzantine and Islamic sources, the technique of producing high quality silk later traveled to Western Europe, where the Italians and the French became masters of the craft.

Silk was an important commodity and was even used as currency, especially when it came to China's purchasing peace along and within its frontiers through massive “gifts” of it to various border peoples. Yet, it was *possibly* not the primary item transported, bartered, and bought along the Silk Road, especially in the centuries after the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. From China came ironware, lacquer ware, ceramics and fine porcelains, and many other manufactured commodities. In return, China received from South Asia exotic woods, dyes, and spices, as well as Buddhist relics and texts, and from Central Asia it received horses, furs, and jade. During Roman times, the West sent eastward colored glassware, Baltic amber, bronze statuettes, and especially gold and silver. Trade in humans was equally important, with every society touched by the Silk Road participating in slave traffic.

The Roman West's main form of payment for silk and other Eastern luxury goods was hard bullion, which meant that the Roman World suffered from a trade imbalance with the East. Late in the 1st century CE the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (23–79) grumbled about all of the wealth wasted so that “a Roman woman might exhibit her charms in transparent gauze.” He estimated that the annual cost to Rome for direct trade with India alone was minimally 50 million

sesterces. Although this was very much a seat-of-the-toga estimate, he was probably not too far off the mark. We can also assume that Rome's trade with Central Asia for silk and other luxury items was probably equally costly. By the 3rd century, this trade imbalance contributed to the empire's overall social and economic miseries, especially in its western regions.

3. An Historical Overview

As already noted, the Silk Road's classic era stretched from about 100 BCE to approximately 1350 CE. Within that millennium and a half it enjoyed five periods of particular efflorescence. Following that classic era, it continued to have periods of regeneration and even transformation, well into modern times. For much of the classic period, it was the lure of Chinese manufactured goods that drove Silk Road commerce. After 1350, the Timurids of Central Asia, the Manchu, or Qing, dynasty of China, Indian diaspora communities in Inner Asia, and imperial Russia successively drove and transformed the Silk Road.

4. The First Golden Age: The Era of Four Empires (100 BCE–200 CE)

The first golden age, which saw the true opening up of the Silk Road, stretched from about 100 BCE to about 200 CE in a period known as the Era of Four Empires. Two massive empires, Han China and Rome, anchored the eastern and western ends of the Silk Road. Two other states, the Kushan (or Kushana) Empire, which united northern India and with various regions of Central Asia, and the Parthian Empire, which was centered on Iran and Iraq, completed the linkage of powerful (and sometimes competing) polities that provided security for the transit of merchandise and people across the heart of Eurasia. The Roman Empire's period of efflorescence was roughly 31 BCE to about 450 CE, with a period of massive crisis and breakdown occurring from about 180 to about 284 or 313 (take your pick); the Han Empire lasted for about 400 years, from 202 BCE to 220 CE. The Kushan Empire flourished from the late 1st century BCE to the late 2nd century CE, whereas the Parthian Empire lasted from 248 BCE to 226/227 CE, to be followed by the militantly Zoroastrian Sassanian, or Sassanid, Empire (226-651).

Clearly silk and other commodities had traveled long distances across Eurasia well before the classic era of the Silk Road. The prehistoric Chinese imported jade from the region of Khotan well before 2000 BCE., and Chinese silk dating from around 1500 BCE has been found in northeastern Afghanistan, while silk scraps have been found in Egyptian tombs dating from around 1000 BCE. Notwithstanding this early trade, it was only in this age of four great regional empires, which together created a chain of fairly secure routes and citadels stretching across Eurasia, that the volume of travel and trade along the Silk Road became significant.

Yet, despite this rise in the level of commodity-exchange, we must keep in mind that these were largely high-profit luxury goods that passed along the Silk Road. Inasmuch as the lands to and from which they traveled were agriculturally based economies, overall these manufactured items had relatively little impact on the economies of these lands or the lives of the vast majority of the peoples who resided along the Silk Road's almost innumerable routes. In the end, it was the ideas and the flora and fauna that traveled along these caravan routes that had the most significant impact on history.

4.1. Han China

One can confidently say that China was the engine that drove the commerce of the Silk Road for much of its first golden age, and the Silk Road would not have opened and flourished were it not for China's gaining control of the Gansu (or Hexi) Corridor, a narrow defile that lies northwest of the city of Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and is flanked by the Qilian Mountains to the south and the Gobi Desert to the north.

A multi-ethnic confederation of pastoral peoples whom the Chinese called the Xiongnu (common slaves) controlled this narrow defile at the start of the Han Era, but during the reign of Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE), the Chinese successfully wrested control of it away from their steppe enemies in a series of campaigns that began in 133 BCE. Driving beyond the Gansu Corridor, in 101 BCE, Han armies reached as far west as the fertile Ferghana Valley (in today's eastern Uzbekistan). There the empire obtained access to a steady supply of Ferghana's large and fast horses, whose superior qualities led the Chinese to refer to them as "Heavenly Horses." These steeds from far-away western pasturelands helped the Chinese cavalry fight the nomads on a roughly equal basis and were a factor in Han China's establishing and maintaining, at least for a while, hegemony over the trade routes of Central Asia that skirted the Great Tarim Basin.

Han China set up fortifications, beacon towers, and earthen berms (known as "long walls") along and within this newly established western frontier beyond the Gansu Corridor, which enabled it to control the Xiongnu nomads (whose confederation was conveniently fragmenting by 55 BCE) and to protect and tax mercantile traffic. Within the Gansu Corridor, the Chinese established four citadel towns—Lanzhou, Wuwei, Zhangye, and Anxi. Originally intended to provide a heightened measure of security against incursions from the steppe nomads, they became significant centers of commerce as the Xiongnu threat decreased.

4.2. Parthia

During this first golden age hardly anyone traveled all the way from East Asia to the Mediterranean or vice versa (although we do know of a late second-century CE Roman legation that traveled across the Indian Ocean and up through the land and water routes of Southeast Asia to the Chinese imperial court). Rather, goods, ideas, and the like were largely passed along from hand to hand, from mind to mind, along a series of connected caravan routes. Indeed, the Parthians were so eager to profit from the riches of the Silk Road that in exchange for patrolled roads and marketplaces with fair exchange rates and standardized weights, they generally forbade merchants to pass through their land from one end to the other. Rather, they compelled them to stop, exchange their goods at major towns and cities in Iraq, pay the market tolls, and return home. For this reason, the Parthian lands of Iran and Iraq became major sites for the transmission of not only merchandise but also ideas and styles.

4.3. Art along the Silk Road

Statuary that was fashioned during the first five centuries CE along the Silk Road, from Persia through Central Asia to China, shows the adoption and adaptation of certain Greco-Roman

sculptural techniques and artistic styles: idealized realism in the portrayal of bodies; the use of drapery to define the body; the technique of contrapposto (the turning of the hip and leg away from the shoulders and the head to impart a sense of dynamism to an otherwise static statue); and an emphasis on facial expression. Thanks to Greco-Roman influences, especially as interpreted by artists of the Kushan Empire in Pakistan and Afghanistan (an area known as Gandhara), Buddhist sculptural art was brought to a new level.

Buddhist cave paintings along the Silk Road drew upon many different traditions—Indian, Persian, and Mediterranean. In 1907 mural fragments were excavated at the ruins of the Silk Road city of Miran, which lay west of Dunhuang in Han-dominated lands. Until Miran disappeared beneath the desert sands in the 11th century, the city was a major stopping-off point along the southern Tarim Basin route. Little remains of Miran today, but its recovered murals are testimony of the ways in which Eastern and Western cultures mixed along the Silk Road. Its paintings of the Buddha and his disciples, all of which all appear to be the work of a single artist and his students, show a definite Mediterranean influence. One fragment gives us the artist's name, Tita, which might be a Central Asian variant of the Latin name Titus. He was probably a Romanized Levantine.

4.4. Rome and India

In addition to its contacts with Central Asia and beyond, the Roman Empire also enjoyed direct commerce with India by way of the Red Sea. In large part, Rome's commercial contact with India was driven by a desire to circumvent its Parthian enemy's control over the westward flow of luxury goods from the farther reaches of Asia. By the mid-1st century CE, Mediterranean merchants had established a regular pattern of routes to the markets of India. Sailing in midsummer up the Nile to Coptos, 12-days journey from Alexandria, they then journeyed over 400 kilometers across the mountains and desert of Upper Egypt for another 12 days before reaching the Red Sea. From there they took advantage of favorable westerly winds to sail to India, returning with the easterly winds of December or January. This long and dangerous journey was made attractive, Pliny the Elder informs us, because merchandise brought back from India sold at 100 times its original price. Even following the collapse of Roman unity in the Mediterranean after about 500 CE, Egyptian, Syrian, Arab, and Jewish, merchants from the Mediterranean continued to maintain this slender but important link between India and the West.

4.5. The Collapse of the Roman and Chinese Empires

In the late 3rd century, the unity of the Roman World began to disintegrate, and one of the factors that precipitated that crisis came out of the Silk Road. From the mid-2nd through the 6th centuries, a series of new diseases traveled along the Silk Road from the east and devastated the Mediterranean. Each new disease—measles, small pox, and bubonic plague—appearing as it did among unprotected populations, resulted in massive die offs. The impact of the sudden deaths of tens of millions of Mediterraneans during these four and a half centuries significantly contributed to the eventual transformation of the Roman World.

A bit earlier, during the 2nd and early 3rd centuries CE, the Han Chinese Empire also underwent a series of natural disasters, civil wars, and invasions from its pastoral nomadic neighbors. The

story of Lady Wenji, which became one of China's most celebrated stories, is emblematic of this collapse of Chinese imperial power. Around 194 CE, the widow Cai Yan (more popularly known by her courtesy name, Lady Wenji) was abducted from her late father's home by marauding Xiongnu mercenaries, whom the Chinese Empire had employed but could not control. Her captors transported her to Mongolia, where she was wedded to a high-ranking lord of the Southern Xiongnu. During her captivity, she bore two sons. Finally, around 206, a Chinese ransom mission bought her release and brought her back home, but the city to which she returned lay in ruins. Fourteen years later the Han dynasty, which had already lost any semblance of power, was toppled.

5. Continued Interchange

Regardless of the collapse of imperial authority in the western half of the Roman World and throughout China, trade along the entire length of the overland Silk Road continued, at times somewhat tenuously, after the empires of Rome and Han China had passed away. During the 4th, 5th, and early 6th centuries CE, trade between the Far East and the Far West slowed, but it never totally disappeared. The riches that were available to the merchants willing to brave the hazards of this caravan network that linked eastern and western Eurasia were far too attractive to ignore.

Religion, as well as trade goods and artistic styles, traveled along these routes. Originating in India, Buddhism made inroads into western China as early as the mid-1st century CE, although initially it did not receive much of a welcome because its metaphysics and world views were so alien to China's traditional values and beliefs.

Resistance to the salvific message of Buddhism began to change with the collapse of the Han Empire in 220 and China's entering into a time of troubles that persisted for three and a half centuries, down to the year 589. During this time of political disunity, a number of Central Asian peoples infiltrated China's western and northern regions, set up kingdoms that followed Chinese models, and patronized a variety of Buddhist beliefs and practices, especially of the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, branch, which offered release from the pains of existence to all believers.

Therefore, whereas long-distance exchange between the Mediterranean and China diminished appreciably after the collapse of the Han Empire, there was no appreciable falling off of contacts between China and India. If anything, they only intensified, as the influx of Buddhism into China went from a trickle to a flood during these centuries of political fragmentation. As important as was India, the birthplace of Buddhism, to China's converts to the Middle Path, India was not, however, the immediate source for most of the Buddhist traditions that entered the Middle Kingdom in the 3rd through 6th centuries. Rather, China received its Buddhism largely from Central Asians. Of these, the most important were an Eastern Iranian people known as the Sogdians, and it was the Sogdians who were the major driving force during the Silk Road's second era of efflorescence.

6. The Second Golden Age: The Sogdian/Buddhist Era (200–600)

The period from roughly 200 CE to about 600 witnessed the trade routes of Central Asia dominated by the Sogdians, an Iranian people who were ancestors of present-day Tajiks.

Sogdiana was the Greek name for the steppe region just east of the Oxus, or Amu Darya, River. This region, also known as Transoxiana, encompassed an area that today lies within Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kazakhstan, and Kyrgystan. The Sogdians were politically divided into small city-states, such as Bukhara and Samarqand, but were culturally united. More than any other people, they served as the great overland merchants who connected the lands of western Eurasia with those of the East and were vectors of a fair number of ideas and goods. Indeed, Sogdian was the common language of the trade routes, and the name “Sogdian” became a synonym for “merchant.” Sculptures of Sogdian merchants, with their conical hats (Phrygian caps), full beards (often colored red), bug eyes, and large noses, were a standard item for Chinese ceramic sculptors for centuries.

The Sogdians were largely Zoroastrians, but they were also translators of major Buddhist, Manichaean, and Christian texts into Chinese and a variety of Central Asian languages. Residing in diaspora communities along the major routes of the Silk Road all the way across Eurasia from China to the Mediterranean and into India, Sogdians served as intermediaries through which a number of outside religions, primarily Buddhism, made their way across Inner Asia and into China.

Buddhist monasteries and shrines, such as the famous *Mogaoku* (Mogao Caves) outside the garrison city of Dunhuang in the Gansu Corridor, served as major sites of both religious and physical refuge for weary travelers along the major and minor pathways of the Silk Road. They also served as important centers of learning and cultural transmission.

Although the Sogdians introduced some of the earliest Buddhist sutras, or sacred books, to enter China, soon native-born Chinese Buddhists were desirous of gaining even more of the canonical literature of the Middle Path, and some of them were not about to wait for additional sutras to be brought to them. The Silk Road was a two-way street.

6.1 Faxian

It is in this context that the Chinese Buddhist monk, pilgrim, and Silk Road traveler Faxian set out from northern China in 399 for India, in search of sacred sutras and holy sites. On his way to India, he stopped at the Mogao Caves outside Dunhuang, where he rested and prayed for a month. Upon reaching India, he proceeded to devote well over ten years to visiting sites sacred to Buddhism, studying Sanskrit, and collecting Buddhist texts. Finally, Faxian chose to sail home from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) by way of the islands of Southeast Asia. It almost cost him his life. After a storm-tossed sea voyage, he arrived back in China in 414, hundreds of miles north of his intended port. Sea travel was not fast, sure, or safe in the 5th century, and that was one reason for the primacy of the Silk Road. Shaken but safely at home, Faxian spent the rest of his life translating into Chinese the scriptures that he had acquired.

6.2. The Sogdians after 600

Clearly Sogdians were not the only travelers along the myriad paths of the Silk Road. Syrians, Khorezmians (who lived to the north of Sogdiana), Indians, Chinese, and especially Persians (other than Sogdians) also used these routes for many different purposes. But the Sogdians

played the primary role during these centuries when China was politically fragmented. Even after 589, when China was again united into a single empire, the Sogdians continued to be major players in commerce and the transmission of culture along the pathways of Central Asia. They became early converts to Islam and proved to be a major factor in Islam's becoming a universal faith and culture—a faith and culture that ultimately displaced Buddhism in much of Central Asia. But Islamic dominance of Central Asia still lay in the future. The next, that is the 3rd, heroic age of the Silk Road was driven by the Second Chinese Empire.

7. The Third Golden Age: The Era of China's Second Empire (600–750)

The Silk Road's third golden age lasted from about 600 to about 750, a period that stretched from the reunification of China under the Sui dynasty (589–618) to about the mid-point of the Tang Era (618–907). Under the early Tang emperors, China again extended its frontier borders deeply into Central Asia and was open to the world even more than had been the case in the Han Era. It remained open to alien peoples and influences until the empire's unity and prosperity began to disintegrate in the mid-8th century.

The goods that were carried to new homes in China during the era of the Second Chinese Empire were many and varied, but none were more important than the seeds and plants introduced from afar. Grapevines had already made their way to China from the Iranian West as early as the 2nd century BCE and the art of grape-wine-making soon followed, but it was in the age of Tang, and probably due to Sogdian influence, that grape-wine-making became a significant Chinese industry. Likewise, raisins became part of the Chinese diet in early Tang. Other foods that were now an integral part of the Chinese kitchen, having reached the Middle Kingdom either in this period or earlier, included spinach, golden peaches, kohlrabi, leeks, pistachios, walnuts, pomegranates, and various melons. In July 2011, while visiting the Shaanxi Historical Museum in Xi'an, (ancient Chang'an), Andrea viewed a Tang-era *sancai* (3-color-glaze) ceramic of a watermelon, a fruit that by the 8th century was already a much-loved item in the Chinese diet. Cash-crop plants introduced from the west included date palms, the sugar beet, and saffron crocuses.

Tang China's reception of new plants, foodstuffs, and food-production processes, such as refining sugar from sugar cane, depended on human vectors, but travelers from abroad brought more than just new tastes for the tongue. Arab, Indian, and Persian physicians and scholars, Brahmin priests, and musicians and dancers from Central Asia and beyond thronged the 9-square-block Western Market of Chang'an, where upwards of about 5,000 foreigners congregated at any one time. Not only did their learning and art fertilize Chinese culture, but China served as a mediator in the transmission of these alien influences to much of the rest of East Asia, especially Japan.

During the latter half of the 8th century, the Japanese imperial court, which had been an avid recipient of cultural influences from Tang China up to that point, began to retreat from its policy of liberally borrowing from China. The decision was probably motivated in part because of conflicts, both internal and along its overextended borders, that were tearing apart the Second Chinese Empire.

The first half of the 8th century was dominated by the seesaw reign of Emperor Tang Xuanzong (r. 713–756), known more popularly as Tang Ming Huan (Brilliant Emperor of Tang). In these 43 years China's empire went from the heights of grandeur to debasement and disaster. A gifted artist and generous patron of the arts, he created a court known for refined elegance. Continuing the expansionistic policies of his predecessors, he drove his armies to overextension along China's far western and southwestern frontiers. His passionate love for a young concubine, Yang Guifei, finally led him to neglect imperial duties. One result was the rebellion in 755 of General An Lushan, a soldier of Sogdian and Turkish descent, and the seizure and sacking of the capital cities of Luoyang and Chang'an. Although An Lushan was killed in 757, the rebellion continued to rage across China. Tang rule was nominally restored in 763, but for the next 144 years Tang power remained weak and hegemony along major stretches of the Silk Road passed to other powers, which included the short-lived but powerful Uyghur Empire in Mongolia (744–840), Tibetans, and various Islamic peoples.

7.1. Xuanzang

But before the collapse of Tang, the Second Chinese Empire presided over an era characterized by great long distance travel and cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Not only did travelers from far away visit China, but the Middle Kingdom exported its own travelers, the most famous being the Buddhist monk Xuanzang. Between 629 and 645, Xuanzang traveled some 16 000 kilometers from Chang'an to India and back along various routes of the Silk Road, in search of sacred Buddhist texts.

On his outward journey, this 27-year-old scholar-monk traveled to present-day Afghanistan, where he viewed with awe and reverence the two colossal Buddha statues of Bamiyan, which the Taliban destroyed in 2001. After escaping bandits and facing numerous other perils, including being lost in the Gobi Desert, where he nearly perished, Xuanzang entered India in the fall of 630, after a journey that had already lasted a full year.

Once in India, he made pilgrimages, studied, taught, wrote, and collected scriptures and Buddhist images. On three separate occasions, Xuanzang spent extended periods of time at Nalanda, the most celebrated Buddhist monastery in the world and a center for Buddhist, Hindu, and secular studies. To this monastery, which was already some seven centuries old, monks and other scholars came from such widely separated regions as Sumatra, Tibet, Ceylon, China, Mongolia, and Japan. Here they studied the Buddhist scriptures, Hindu holy books, Sanskrit literature, logic, mathematics, astronomy, and a variety of other subjects.

In April 643, Xuanzang began his return trip to China. Following an equally harrowing return trek, in which he lost 50 books of scripture while crossing the Indus River, escaped a number of bandit bands, lost an elephant while traversing a pass in the lofty Pamir Mountains, and again suffered the rigors of crossing a desert, he reached the Mogao Caves in 644, where he rested and worshiped. Today one can still see a painted depiction in Cave 103 of Xuanzang's epic trek out of India and over the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountain passes. In early 645, Xuanzong returned in triumph to Chang'an with relics, seven important Buddha statues that had a profound impact

on subsequent Chinese and Japanese Buddhist iconography, and 657 sacred books. Under imperial patronage, Xuanzang and a team of other monks proceeded to translate these scriptures into Chinese, which were then housed in Chang'an at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, an Indian-inspired, stone structure that Emperor Gaozong ordered built at Xuanzang's request.

7.2. Chinese Exports

In addition to travelers, a number of ideas and technical devices made their way out of China and into the West from the era of Tang and beyond. For many of these, the processes of transmission and dates of arrival in the West are unclear, but we can state a few facts with some certitude. Before the year 730, the Far West, where a Western European civilization was slowly emerging, had received the stirrup (the first-known stirrups date to 4th-century China). By 900, and probably well before then, it received the wheelbarrow and the hard horse collar. At some unknown time, it received the cross bow, which the Chinese had developed as early as the 3rd century BCE. In the early 14th century the West received gunpowder. Gunpowder was created in China possibly in the 9th century, and by the 12th century the Chinese were using it for bombs and grenades. It was first mentioned in Europe in 1326/1327, and significantly, the earliest European “bombards” look strikingly like a Chinese weapon of 1128.

Lines of transmission and diffusion are usually difficult, if not impossible, to trace, and this is certainly the case of two items clearly invented by the Chinese—the printing press and the magnetic compass. It is not at all clear if either of these, which appeared in Western Europe centuries after their initial appearance in China, traveled westward across land and sea trade routes or if they were independently invented in the West.

7.3. Religions along the Silk Road

The caravan routes of Central Asia provided missionaries with convenient routes into Early Tang China, especially as Chinese armies drove deeply into Central Asia and extended Chinese hegemony as far west as the Pamir Mountains. The most important of these missionaries were still Buddhists, who now appeared in ever increasing numbers, especially those who belonged to that branch of the Middle Path known as Mahayana Buddhism, a universal faith of salvation. The period from roughly 600 to about 850 is rightly called China's Age of Buddhism. Other salvation faiths claiming a universal mission also established themselves in China, but in far less significant ways.

Manichaeism, a dualistic faith out of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) that combined elements from Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism and claimed a world mission, traveled into the far western reaches of China through the agency of Sogdian merchants. The Sogdians introduced Manichaeism to various Turkic tribes inhabiting the oasis towns of the Silk Road. One such tribe, the Uyghurs, established a partially Manichaean state, and in the 8th and 9th centuries, some Manichaean missionaries made their way to the Tang capital at Chang'an, where they took up residence within the foreign community but attracted few converts.

Other salvation religions also traveled into Central and East Asia out of the Middle East, specifically the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism (again, thanks to Sogdians) and a

brand of Christianity known to its Christian detractors in the West as Nestorianism. More correctly, it is known as the Church of the East or as the Assyrian Christian Church. “Nestorian” teachings had been declared heretical by the churches of Constantinople and Rome in 451, but this branch of Christian belief found a home in the Sassanian Empire, which then ruled over Iraq and Iran. From Sassanian Mesopotamia and Iran, Assyrian Christian missionaries made their way east. The earliest known Assyrian Christian missionary to arrive in Chang'an appeared in 635 out of Persia. For several centuries, these Christians built their churches in China and enjoyed on-and-off imperial patronage of a minor sort until the mid-9th century, when China closed down large numbers of Buddhist monasteries and other foreign religious establishments. But just about the time that the Tang emperors were turning their backs on a number of foreign religious influences in China, the Chinese found themselves having to take increasing notice of a new religion from the West—Islam—and the various merchants, missionaries, and armies that professed that faith.

As China began to retreat into itself after 750 because of internal problems, a new imperial power arose in the West—Islam's Abbasid Empire (750–1258), with its capital at Baghdad on the Tigris. In 751, Islamic troops threw back a Chinese army at the Talas River (in modern Kyrgystan), and with that victory Islam established itself as the dominant force along the western half of the Silk Road. What is more, the religion of Islam began to make inroads among the peoples of Inner Asia.

7.4 The Grand Canal

The glamor of the Silk Road should not blind us to the fact that these long-distance, overland caravan routes across the heart of Eurasia—from China to the Mediterranean--carried a small percentage of the supercontinent's traded commodities. Most goods, especially high-bulk, low-profit items, traveled along inland and coastal waterways and, usually for shorter distances, on the backs of animals. So far as China was concerned, the Grand Canal, which ultimately ran south to north for over 1,000 miles and linked the Yangzi to Yellow River regions, was the engineering marvel without peer that allowed China to become an industrial and commercial superpower. With origins that stretched back to the early 5th century BCE, major portions of the Grand Canal were constructed under the Sui Dynasty (589-618), and over the centuries that followed, it experienced periods of disrepair, destruction, repair, upgrading, and extension. Under the Yuan, or Mongol emperors (1271-1368), it linked the southern port city of Hangzhou with the northern imperial capital of Dadu (present-day Beijing). Even today, it is a major avenue for moving heavy, low-profit items by barge.

Likewise in the West, as early as the reign of Charles the Great (r. 768-814), canals were being built and the great rivers of Europe, such as the Rhine, were becoming major thoroughfares for goods and people. Of course, a very small percentage of those goods, such as silken tapestries on their way to churches and monasteries, had their origins somewhere along the Silk Road, even as far away as China.

8. The Fourth Golden Age: Dar al Islam (750–1000)

In 634, Islam exploded out of the Arabian Peninsula, and for the next century plus its armies drove into and captured lands that were part of the western and central portions of the Silk Road.

In 651 Sassanian Persia fell to the Arab armies of Islam, and by 750 Muslims had overrun Sogdiana and the Indus Valley of northwest India. Conversion to the faith of Islam by the peoples whose lands were conquered was a much slower and less complete process, but by the time the Abbasid dynasty established its capital at Baghdad in 762, Islam was well on its way toward becoming a major world religion encompassing many peoples and lands. From around 1000 CE, the peoples of western Central Asia, especially the Turkic peoples, gradually abandoned Buddhism for Islam. Muslim merchants—Arabs, Sogdians, Persians, and Turks—became increasingly common and important figures along the entire Silk Road, and resident Islamic communities of Arab and Iranian merchants sprang up in western and northern China, as well as in the oasis towns of what the Chinese called “the Western Lands”—lands beyond the Gansu Corridor. Even Christian Constantinople had a mosque for its resident Muslims.

Despite their ethnic differences, all educated Muslims, and that included most merchants, whether Arab, Iranian, Kurd, Turk, Berber, or whatever, shared a single sacred tongue—Arabic. What is more, by virtue of their conquest of the Sassanian Empire, the Arabs had inherited a rich Iranian tradition, and Persian became Islam's second great language of high culture, especially in poetry and literary prose. In many respects, Arabic and Persian became two major languages of commerce and interchange across the vast western stretches of the Silk Road.

Because *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam) extended from Central Asia to Spain and western North Africa by the early 8th century, the reach of a Greater Silk Road rivaled and perhaps exceeded that of the era of Han China and the Roman Empire. In succeeding centuries, the frontiers of Islam expanded even farther, reaching India and the lands of Southeast Asia. Additionally, significant and growing numbers of Muslims resided in the port and major market cities of China as the centuries rolled along. The 14th century traveler Ibn Battuta criss-crossed Afro-Eurasia, journeying from his native western North Africa to possibly as far east as southern China and certainly as far south as the kingdom of Mali in sub-Saharan West Africa, and during almost all of his 29 years of travel he found welcoming and usually powerful Muslim hosts wherever he went.

In addition to a world religion that embraced all ethnicities and two common tongues, Islam provided another service to overland (and maritime) trade—a major upswing in the number of *caravanseries* from Spain to Central Asia that provided places of physical and spiritual refuge along caravan routes and within towns and cities. Although construction of them was seen as a pious act, they also made it easier for local lords to collect market taxes and to monitor the many strangers who passed through their lands. When located in urban settings, these places were often known as *khans*, *hans*, and *funduqs*. Inns and the like had been available to travelers since the rise of civilization, if not earlier, and during the 5th century BCE, the Persians had constructed rest houses at regular intervals along the Royal Road that ran for about 2500 km. (about 1550 miles) from Susa in Iran to Sardis in western Anatolia (present-day Asian Turkey). But given the primacy of commerce to the economy of Muslim states (after all, the Prophet had been a merchant), caravansaries, largely constructed on a single model of a square or rectangular walled compound, proliferated. Many of the urban *funduqs* became centers for resident diaspora communities (hence Italian maritime merchants established *fondaci* in such Muslim port cities as

Alexandria), where merchants could find persons who shared their language, culture, and religion.

During this first age of Muslim ascendancy, the Scandinavian World of the Vikings and the Frankish World of Catholic Christianity joined the Byzantine World centered on Constantinople as recipients of and contributors to the revitalized traffic and interchange of the Silk Road...

8. 1. Dar al-Islam and the Transmission of Ideas

The Islamic World was a major conduit for the transmission of Eastern ideas to the West. According to tradition, victorious Arab armies at Talas captured Chinese who knew the process of paper production, and from them adopted paper-making as an industry. There is no good reason to accept this legend as fact. China had discovered the process for making paper sometime before the late 2nd century BCE, but like the art of silk production, paper-making did not remain a Chinese monopoly. The craft had already spread to the oasis cities of Central Asia by the early 7th century, before the spread of Islam, and it was from these centers, such as Samarqand, that the Muslim World learned to make paper. Paper factories were established in Baghdad before 800, in Egypt by the early 10th century, and in Islamic Spain around 950. During the 10th century the technique reached Christian Europe, but it took several centuries before paper replaced parchment as the material of choice for European scribes. Whether immediately embraced or not, paper ultimately proved to be a medium of profound change in the ways host societies kept their records and transmitted their knowledge.

Just as important for recording keeping was the decimal system of numeration, which the Arabs borrowed from India and eventually transmitted to the West, where it mistakenly became known as Arabic numbers.

8.2. A Shift Away from the Land Routes

Islamic states rose and fell over the centuries and new peoples, such as the Turks, were added to the multiethnic mixture of Dar al-Islam. The picture is a complex one, but overall we can say that between roughly 750 and about 1200, Muslim merchants and states were the driving forces of the overland Silk Road. Seljuk Turkish rulers in 12th- and 13th-century Anatolia (today Asian Turkey) were famous for constructing massive caravanserais along remote trade routes, replete with guards and mosques, where daily hundreds, even thousands, of merchants and their retainers could find shelter for themselves and their animals and also worship. Likewise, caravanserais were attached to urban mosques as essential charitable institutions.

Around about the year 1000, however, maritime transportation through the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea was fast becoming the preferred means of moving goods, due to its relative speed, the ability of ships to transport large cargos, and improvements in naval technology. Arab, Persian, East African, Indian, Malay, and Chinese sailors plying the waters of the Indian Ocean increasingly were supplanting the caravan traders of land-locked Central Asia as the primary carriers of the goods and ideas of the Afro-Eurasian Ecumene.

9. The Song Interlude: Song China Takes to the Ocean (1127–1279)

Well after the Second Empire passed away, China continued to be an economic superpower and to no small extent the engine that drove the economy of the Afro-Eurasian World. But activity along the land routes of the Silk Road became less important for much of the next period of Chinese history known as the Song Era (960–1279), so called because of the Song dynasty that ruled China. Paradoxically, this dwindling of activity along the Silk Road happened at a time in which China's industrial output, commercial activity, and export trade were at an all-time high. Sea transport had become increasingly secure and, hence, popular, beginning in the Tang Era, but it was only in the period known as Southern Song (1127–1279) that merchant mariners became the primary transporters of long-distance trade goods from East Asia to the West. The fact that the so-called temporary capital of the Southern Song dynasty was the bustling port city of Hangzhou (when the northern “permanent” capital of Kaifeng in China’s interior was overrun and occupied by a steppe-people from Manchuria known as the Ruzhen or Jurchen in 1126) suggests the importance of maritime trade to China. During this era Chinese naval technology led the world.

The importance of sea lanes for the transportation of goods from Korea and China all the way to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and beyond continued during the next period of Chinese dynastic history, the Yuan Era (1279–1368), when Mongol emperors ruled the Middle Kingdom. (Actually, the Chinese *Zhong Guo* is best translated as “Central Country.”) Ibn Battuta (1304–68?), a traveler from Morocco, visited the port city of Calicut on India’s southwestern littoral, or Malabar Coast, in 1341. There he viewed 13 Chinese ships and recorded in his travelogue that only Chinese vessels carried goods through the China Sea (today’s South China Sea). He further noted that Chinese ships carried anywhere from three to twelve sails (of plaited bamboo), and the largest had crews of upward of 600 sailors and 400 men-at-arms, which speaks volumes regarding the ever-present danger of pirates in the waters of Southeast Asia. The largest ships had four decks, with private cabins outfitted with salons and lavatories for the comfort of merchants traveling with their retinues of wives, children, and slaves. Traveling aboard ship had its comforts, despite the inherent perils. Sailors even grew vegetables on the ship. Other sources confirm Ibn Battuta’s description of the size and sophistication of these vessels and also inform us that these massive ships had water-tight compartments to reduce the danger of sinking. Despite this continued high level of maritime commerce, the overland Silk Road underwent a major revival during China’s Age of Mongol Dominance.

10. The Fifth Golden Age: The Era of the Pax Mongolica (ca. 1260–ca. 1350)

To a merchant living in 1200, it might have seemed, if he thought about it at all, that the golden heyday of the overland trade routes across the heart of Asia was over. People and goods still moved along these routes, but not in the relative volume of earlier days. Yet, nobody could have imagined that in 1206 a Mongol chieftain would unite the tribes of Mongolia and assume the title Chinggis Khan (also transliterated as Genghis Khan). Beyond that, who could have imagined that this khan would launch a series of conquests that would result in the creation of the greatest land empire in history? The Mongols under Chinggis Khan (1167?–1227) and his immediate successors had a deserved reputation as merciless warriors and devastators of cities, in particular cities important to Silk Road trade. When Baghdad was sacked in 1258, the city was almost

utterly destroyed and a reputed 100,000 of its inhabitants were massacred. Whatever the numbers of slain, it took several centuries for the city to recover. Golden Samarqand was likewise razed and its inhabitants massacred or enslaved. By the mid-13th century, however, the Mongols began to settle down and tried to rule the vast empire that they had carved out. From about 1260 to around 1350, Eurasia experienced a phenomenon that historians call the *Pax Mongolica*—the Mongol Peace—which was the fifth golden age of the Silk Road, especially as far as Western Europe was concerned.

Much of this so-called peace was due to the Mongols' policing of Inner Asia's major caravan routes (when they were not fighting among themselves or with others) and even a system of regularly spaced horse post stations for persons traveling on official business. Although they were barred by law from using the post stations, it is clear that many merchants illegitimately took advantage of the rest areas. Persons traveling on especially important missions also wore a metallic *paiza*, which guaranteed them safe passage and, relative to the wording of the paiza and the worth of the metal on which the text was inscribed, the right to requisition a certain level of supplies and to command the assistance of local authorities. If we can believe Marco Polo, his father, uncle, and he had a golden paiza as they traveled eastward in 1271. Whether on official business or not, travelers along the land routes of Inner Asia certainly had more security after about 1260 than they had enjoyed for many decades, although travel was never easy and the number of deaths due to disease, accident, and assault must have still been quite high.

One other consequence of this Mongol Peace was that the major routes of the Silk Road now shifted in a more northerly direction, making Mongolia a new center of the Silk Road. The traffic in goods and peoples between China and Mongolia certainly rose in significant volume during this era. Moreover, because the Yuan emperors of China, such as Kubilai, depended so heavily on non-Chinese as governmental advisors and ministers, the human traffic in well-educated individuals traveling east to China from lands in the "West," (largely Islamic lands in western Central Asia) rose appreciably. Go east young man, go east. One such adventurer-civil servant to the khan was Marco Polo, although it is uncertain what exact offices he held and the nature and extent of most of his duties. There was also a significant rise in an odious form of human traffic that took place well before this era of Mongol Peace, as unknown numbers (but certainly at least in the tens of thousands) of enslaved artisans of every sort were shipped to Mongol capital of Karakorum by victorious Mongol armies. Well, at least their lives had been spared when their cities were sacked.

10.1 Western Merchants in China

As just pointed out, this roughly century-long period was an age when a great, but not unified Mongol Empire provided a trans-Eurasian infrastructure stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea that allowed travelers, such as Marco Polo, access to far-distant cultures and lands. In addition to Polo, whose travels lasted from 1271 to 1295, numerous other Western merchants, especially Italians, traveled to and took up residence in China in search of the riches that the luxury trade offered them. Indeed, travel to far-away Cathay became sufficiently important that around 1340, Francesco Pegolotti, a Florentine banker, composed a handbook for merchants traveling to China. Known as *The Practice of Commerce*, it took the merchant who wanted to

travel to China step by step through the process, explaining which routes were safest, the supplies he should bring and what he could purchase along the way, what he could expect to encounter and where, and what kinds of servants and helpers he should employ. Pegolotti also provided tables of monetary exchange and weights—all computed according to Genoese standards. The amazing thing is that Pegolotti, as far as we know, never traveled beyond the eastern Mediterranean. His detailed knowledge of the Silk Road was based on the accounts of European merchant adventurers who had been to China and back.

10.2 Missionaries and Diplomats along the Silk Road

Additionally, between 1245 and the late 14th century, Roman Catholic friars (Franciscans and Dominicans), serving as diplomats to the Mongol khans (in the hope of enlisting their aid in a crusade against Islam) and as missionaries to all non-Catholic peoples whom they encountered, traveled to Persia, India, Mongolia, and China along the routes of the Silk Road. Whereas the Dominicans concentrated on Persia (roughly present-day Iran and Iraq), western Central Asia (such lands as what is today Uzbekistan), and India (which was not in Mongol hands), the Franciscans focused on lands farther east, Eastern Central Asia, Mongolia, and China. The Franciscan friar John of Monte Corvino, for example, established a mission church in China around 1294, and he managed to keep in tenuous contact with his superiors in Europe through letters carried back and forth by Italian merchants. In 1307, Pope Clement V appointed Friar John archbishop of China, with his archiepiscopal seat centered in the Mongol capital of Dadu (the heart of present-day Beijing). Additional missionaries joined John and established mission churches in southern China. Most of their converts to Roman Catholic Christianity, however, came from the ranks of “Nestorian” Christian Ongut Turks rather than from the Chinese and Mongol populations.

We know of at least one such Ongut Christian, a resident of the Mongol capital of Dadu, who traveled all the way to the West, a monk known as Rabban (Master) Sauma (Faster).

Around 1275 or shortly thereafter, Bar Sauma (“Son of the Faster,” as he was then known) set out for Jerusalem with a younger colleague, Markos. According to two contemporaneous Middle Eastern sources, the Great Khan, Khubilai, who was now emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China (although his final victory over the Song dynasty was still about four years in the future---1279), also entrusted the two monks with the mission of visiting Christian holy sites in his name, thereby presenting himself as a friend of Christianity. And why not? His mother, the remarkable Sorghaghtani Beki was a life-long Eastern (Nestorian) Christian, who also patronized Buddhist, Daoist, and Muslim religious persons and, institutions, and customs. Religious tolerance was a governing policy of most Mongol leaders.

Whatever their mission from Khubilai might have been, because of troubles farther west, the two monks had to abandon their pilgrimage in the Mongol Il-khanate of Persia. Probably because they traveled under the authority of Khubilai Khan and spoke Mongol, the language of the il-khan, the youthful Markos was subsequently installed as Catholicus, taking the name Yaballaha III and becoming the spiritual head of all “Nestorians” from Syria to China.

In 1286 Il-Khan Arghun, a nephew of Khubilai, decided to send a diplomat to the pope, the kings of France and England, and the emperor of Constantinople, offering an alliance against the Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria and further offering to become a Christian in the bargain by being baptized in Jerusalem, once that city had been recovered from the Mamluks. He chose Sauma, who was now in his early 60s. Despite his age, Rabban Sauma set out early in 1287, accompanied by two Italian merchants as his interpreters. Both merchants were probably traveling home from China by way of Persia. His first ambassadorial stop was the court of Andronicus II in Constantinople, whose half-sister Maria had been married to the previous il-khan, Abakha. (The widow was now back home in Constantinople, living as a nun.) The tangled diplomatic web of Byzantium did not favor an alliance against the Mamluks at that time, but desirous of keeping good relations with the Mongols, Andronicus received Rabban Sauma with great courtesy and supported the monk's visits to Constantinople's holy sites. From Constantinople, Rabban Sauma traveled to Italy, only to discover that there was a papal interregnum. He was, however, more than warmly welcomed by the cardinals who were in conclave to elect a new pope. After touring the holy sites of Rome, the monk then set off for France by way of Genoa. He met with King Philip IV in Paris and King Edward I of England in Bordeaux, which was in land held by Edward as a fief. Both monarchs expressed exuberance for the proposed crusade and pledged to join it, but in reality they had more pressing concerns, largely struggles and intrigues against one another. Hearing that finally a new pope, Nicholas IV, had been elected in February 1288, Sauma then returned to Rome to get papal approval of this crusade. Nicholas received Sauma graciously, even concelebrating mass with him, but he refused to commit to a crusade. At that moment the vestiges of the crusader states in Syria-Palestine were under siege by the Mamluks, and the last significant bastion, Acre, would fall in 1291. A crusade was just too risky and the chances for disaster were high. This undoubtedly distressed Sauma, who was entrusted with three letters from the pope—two to church leaders and one to the il-khan. In the letter to Arghun, the pope urged his immediate conversion and implicitly supported his campaign against the Mamluks but without offering any Western support. A disappointed Sauma returned to the il-khanate court at Tabriz in the autumn of 1288.

On his part, Arghun continued to hope for Western assistance, which never came, and despite his intentions, he never launched a campaign against the Mamluks. He died in March 1291, and in 1295 his successor, Ghazan, converted to Islam. This did not prevent Ghazan's attacking the Mamluks 1300, but the il-khanate was never able to conquer Syria.

As already noted, before, during, and after the period of Sauma's mission to the West, Christian priests, traveled, as envoys and missionaries throughout lands held by the Mongols, including far-away China. Of course, these missionary friars also served the spiritual needs of the Western European merchants who had taken up residence in China. One person to whom they ministered was Katerina Vilioni, a member of a prominent Venetian family, who died at Yangzhou in 1342 and whose tombstone was discovered in 1951.

Notwithstanding the missionary-friars' fervor, their small numbers and native resistance to their message meant that these Roman Catholic missionaries to China had no significant impact on either Chinese or Mongol culture. The mission limped along until the late 14th or early 15th

century, when it disappeared. Baptized Chinese Catholics persisted in small numbers, however, well after 1400.

10.3 Artistic Interchange between Europe and China

One apparent cultural memory of Franciscan missionary activity that persisted down to the present was the Italian-Franciscan representation of the Virgin of Humility, which in the hands of Chinese artists became the Child-Giving Guanyin, the Buddhist bodhisattva of mercy and fertility.

10.4 The Memory of Direct Access to Cathay

Of far greater significance was the fact that the Catholic West never forgot this century of direct overland contact with the Great Khan of Cathay. Long after the land routes to the Far East were effectively shut off for Europeans and long after the Mongols had been expelled from China, Westerners sought new avenues through which to reach the fabled riches and the many millions of non-Christian souls that awaited them in China and the other lands of the “Indies.”

11. The Great Eurasian Pandemic

After the mid-14th century, political and environmental factors combined to prevent ready travel from the Far West to the Far East, and Europeans no longer had direct contact with China in the numbers that they had enjoyed during the era of the Mongol Peace. One of the factors contributing to that rupture was a phenomenon that later generations of Europeans would remember as the Black Death (1347–50), an outbreak of plague, the highly infectious bacterium *yersinia pestis* in its bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic forms, that became a Eurasian-wide pandemic. The open roads of the Pax Mongolica provided ready avenues for its transmission.

The epidemic probably flared up initially in Central Asia in 1331–32, and from there it spread outward in all directions, to China, India, and westward into the Middle East and North Africa. It reached southern Russia and Ukraine by 1345–46. According to a European tradition that some historians accept and others question, in 1347, an invading Mongol army transmitted the disease to the defenders of a Genoese trading post in the port city of Caffa on the Black Sea, an important commercial link along the Silk Road. The infected Italians evacuated, sailing through the Bosphorus Strait and bringing the disease to Constantinople. They then they sailed into the Mediterranean Sea, ultimately introducing the bacillus to Europe by way of Sicily and Italy. By May 1348, it reached Scandinavia. Whatever its point of entry, clearly Western Europe received the infection through trade routes from the east, and its effect was devastating. Our best estimate is that by 1350, close to 50 percent of the total population of Western Europe had died from the epidemic, and the mortality rate for the rest of Eurasia and North Africa was probably about the same. The plague continued to return periodically to Western Europe, but with ever diminishing mortality rates, until the latter half of the 17th century.

The initial pandemic, as deadly as it was, did not close down totally the routes along which it had moved. It was also not the sole factor in largely shutting off Western European merchants from direct access to the markets of East Asia. But, alongside other factors discussed below, it was a major blow to Europe’s full participation in Silk Road traffic. If Europe wished to return to the

rich markets of the “Indies,” as indeed it did, it would have to do so by sea.

12. The Timurids and the Indian Summer of the Silk Road (1400–1500)

Before Europeans managed to reach the lands of the Indian Ocean and beyond by water, the Silk Road experienced a final age of increased interchange, at least for Chinese, Muslim, Indian, and Central Asian merchants, due to the efforts of another would-be world conqueror and his family, known collectively as the Timurids (1370–1507).

Known to his devoted followers as Amir Tēmūr, to Europeans as Tamerlane, and to his detractors as Tēmūr (or Timur) the Lame (Tēmūr-i Leng), because of crippling battle injuries, the Central Asian Turkic conqueror Amir Tēmūr (1336–1405) rose from obscurity to cast off his Mongol suzerains and forge one of the greatest military powers in the world. From 1370 until his death, Tēmūr consolidated his control over much of western Central Asia and neighboring lands, and his nomadic armies terrorized vast regions of Eurasia. In the 1380s and 1390s, Tēmūr’s armies demolished the commercial centers of the Mongol Golden Horde on the Black Sea, razed the trade outposts of the north Caucasus, torched Astrakhan (a great commercial city at the mouth of the Volga River), utterly destroyed Saray, the capital of the Golden Horde on the lower Volga, and sacked Delhi in northern India amidst terrible slaughter. Tēmūr’s armies proved to be an incredibly destructive force that disrupted traditional trade routes. But, as had been the case under the Mongols, trade flourished where there was peace. Thus, his campaigns against the Golden Horde dealt a crushing blow to the trans-Eurasian trade routes of the north, but they added immeasurable value to Tēmūr’s own commercial centers in the south, especially his capital of Samarqand, which he beautified with the labor of thousands of enslaved artisans, many of whom had been transported from afar.

Shortly after Tēmūr’s victory over the Ottoman army at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the Spanish King Henry III of Castile-León appointed Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo his ambassador to Samarqand. Clavijo left a detailed account of his journey to the court of Tēmūr, in which he described Samarqand as a magnificent city and vibrant commercial center, overflowing with people and merchandise from across Asia. At the beginning of the 15th century, Samarqand was the hub of a flourishing Silk Road trade, and nobody in Europe or Asia doubted the “centrality” of Timurid-dominated Central Asia. For a century after his death, Tēmūr’s dynasty dominated the lands around Samarqand and maintained the city as a nexus of the arts, science, scholarship, and Sufi piety, as well as a commercial hub.

13. A New World

World historical developments of the 15th and 16th centuries had a profoundly negative effect on Silk Road trade. It took several decades for the Ottoman sultans to recover after Timur withdrew, but recover they did, and in 1453, Sultan Mehmet II (the Conqueror) took Constantinople and extinguished the Byzantine Empire. In subsequent decades the Ottomans expanded their territory considerably, both into Europe and the Middle East. To the Ottomans’ immediate west lay another Islamic power, the Mamluk Empire, which, until its conquest by the Ottomans in 1517, controlled the rich trade routes of the Red Sea. Thereafter, the Ottoman Turks also benefited from this rich commercial route. Thus, as European demand for silk,

spices, dyes, and other luxuries of the “Orient” increased, access to these commodities was almost entirely dependent upon trade routes that passed directly through Islamic territories. This, along with a quest for distant Christian allies who might help to stem Ottoman expansion that seemingly threatened all of Christian Europe, provided European powers, especially those of the Iberian Peninsula, with a profound motivation to invest heavily in maritime technology. Thus, European explorations were spurred by efforts to bypass the Mamluks and Ottomans and achieve a direct line of trade with the suppliers of their much-desired commodities, and also link up with Prester John, who ruled, according to legend, a fabulously rich Christian country somewhere in “the Indies.”

13.1. The European Impact on the Global Economy

During the 15th century the Portuguese established a network of trading posts progressively farther down the west coast of Africa. In 1498, the Portuguese captain-major Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and ushered in a new age of European commercial activity in the Indian Ocean. In the 16th century, the Portuguese *Estado da India* (State of India) was the dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean, a position it enjoyed until the Dutch and English East India Companies rose to challenge it at the beginning of the 17th century. In just a few decades these Northwest Europeans surpassed their Iberian competitors, and their joint-stock companies grew to become the greatest commercial enterprises in the early modern world.

From the initial voyage of Vasco da Gama, European maritime interests controlled an increasingly larger share of the movement of textiles, spices, and other Asian commodities sold in European markets. Thus, with some justification, generations of scholars have argued that the European Companies’ considerable success in the Indian Ocean’s commercial arena dealt a crushing blow to Silk Road trade. To be sure, the European commercial venture in Asia increased markedly as time passed. However, that European expansion did not occur in a vacuum; throughout this era there was a corresponding increase in global trade as a whole. This was largely built upon the steady injection of enormous amounts of precious metals into the global economy, especially silver from the mines of Mexico and Peru, with much of it ultimately going to markets in China and the Indian Ocean to pay for goods desired by Europeans.

Despite all of this maritime movement of silver and trade goods by European mariners, one should be careful to avoid the assumption that the Western European East Indies Companies usurped all Eurasian trade.

13. 2. Qing China and the Revival of Central Asian Commerce

Central Asian sources illustrate that the westward trade of China along the historic Silk Road caravan routes continued under the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644), albeit at a less impressive magnitude than it had under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. The importance of this trade appears to have increased markedly, however, with the rise of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911). After some 50 years of struggles against the Mongol Junghars in northwest China, in 1758–59, the Qing armies emerged victorious and established Chinese control over

the region of eastern Turkistan that was later designated “Xinjiang” (New Province), a region three times the size of France. This conquest extended Chinese authority farther to the west than had been achieved for a millennium. Kashgar, Yarkand, and other Silk Road cities prospered again as vibrant commercial centers, attracting regular caravans from western Turkistan loaded with goods from Russia, Europe, and the Mediterranean, and caravans from India loaded primarily with bolts of cotton textiles. In the mid-18th century, many Central Asian powers, nomadic and sedentary alike, willingly subordinated themselves to the Qing in an effort to improve their trade with China. In reality, such submissions did not represent a tangible extension of Chinese authority across the mountain range known as Tian Shan (Heavenly Mountains); they were merely symbolic gestures, strategic maneuvers designed to appease the Qing and secure stable commercial access to markets in Xinjiang. Still, Central Asian powers maintained close relations with the Qing, rulers worked to maintain security along the roads, wealthy merchants invested in building caravanserais, and commerce flourished along Central Asia’s dusty caravan routes.

13.3. The Indian Diaspora

In the 18th and 19th centuries, as trans-Eurasian trade continued at a significant pace along the east-west axis, there was a considerable increase in trade along the north-south axis. Central Asian relations with India remained highly active even into the 20th century. Travelers from both sides of the Hindu Kush regularly traversed the caravan routes across the Afghan frontier, but the greatest participants in this exchange were the tens of thousands of Indians who operated a merchant diaspora that stretched across much of Eurasia, including Afghanistan, Iran, the Caucasus, and the Volga Basin, reaching even as far as Moscow and St. Petersburg. These predominantly Hindu Indians were nearly always welcomed and protected by their hosts, even in the more staunchly conservative Central Asian Muslim states. This was partly because of the value placed on the Indians’ commercial connections, especially as suppliers of Indian cotton textiles. Even more important, however, were the services they provided as moneylenders in urban and rural markets. Naturally, the Indians amassed considerable wealth in the diaspora, and much of that was repatriated to India in the form of Central Asian horses, a commodity that enjoyed a steady demand in Indian markets well into the 19th century, with annual import estimates reaching as high as 100,000.

14. Russian Expansion into Central Asia’s Trade Routes: From Silk Road to Cotton Road

Russia’s emergence as a great military and economic power also offered valuable opportunities to its Central Asian neighbors. Already in 1715, during the reign of Tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725), there was talk in the Khivan Khanate of establishing an alliance with Russia against the neighboring Turkmen tribes. Peter embraced the idea, partly to expand Russian political interests in the area but also in the hope of improving his trade with the Indian Ocean by discovering a river-route to India. The Russian mission was doomed to fail, however, as the political situation in Khiva had changed by the time of its arrival, and the new ruler, Sher Ghazi Khan (r. 1715–28), ordered the massacre of the Russian troops. Another mission was sent eastward into Mongol Junghar territory the next year, only to suffer a similar fate. It was clear that further Russian expansion in Central Asia would require more calculated steps. This involved the establishment of a network of frontier fortresses. By 1743, this “Orenburg Line”

of militarized commercial outposts stretched across the steppe, protecting Russian political and commercial interests from the nomadic tribes of the steppe, and significantly advancing Russia's trade by drawing merchants from as far away as India and the Ottoman Empire. Caravans arrived loaded with spices, tea, cotton and silk textiles, Kashmiri shawls and other commodities in great demand in the markets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere in Europe.

Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century, the Central Asian caravan routes were heavily trafficked, but in ways other than those that had characterized the "traditional" Silk Road trade of earlier eras. The commodities involved in the 19th-century trans-Eurasian trade also differed from those of earlier periods, as developments related to the Industrial Revolution led to a dramatic and sustained increase in the demand for merchandise considerably more mundane and bulky than the expensive luxury goods of the past. It could even be said that, in the 19th century, the flow of commodities along the east-west "Silk Road" was gradually surpassed by the rise in traffic along the north-south "Cotton Road."

From the early decades of the 19th century, as Russian industrialists began to establish their own textile mills, they developed an unquenchable demand for cotton and dyes but were unable to produce these commodities due to climatic factors. In the 19th century, camels loaded with Indian cotton and indigo became increasingly common at the trading fortresses in the steppe, and Central Asian farmers began to turn over agricultural land to grow cotton as a cash crop for export to Russian markets. However, this overland trade in cotton, while clearly significant, was dwarfed by the shiploads of raw materials transported to Russia through Western Europe, having originated in such places as India, Egypt and, increasingly, the cotton plantations of the southern United States.

Along with fantastic economic growth for the European powers, the Industrial Age also brought the Age of Imperialism and the Russian and British contest for supremacy in Central Asia. The victor of this "Great Game" stood to secure access to Central Asia's resources and markets and, ultimately, as the British expanded their imperial authority across India, the Russians similarly expanded theirs in Central Asia. By 1848, the Russian empire extended across modern Kazakhstan to the borders of the agricultural states to the south.

The second stage of Russian conquest in Central Asia unfolded from 1865 to 1884, and the far-off American Civil War (1861–65) played an important role in this process. By the mid-19th century, Russian industrialists had become dependent upon the cotton supplies of the American South. In the 1860s, while supply diminished significantly during the Civil War, global demand remained more-or-less constant and the price of cotton skyrocketed. Russian industry was starved for raw materials and, in an effort to establish a more permanent solution that would safeguard the young and fragile Russian industrial economy, the Russian military began to annex the semi-arid agricultural lands to the south. Within two decades virtually all of sedentary Central Asia west of the Tian Shan was either reduced to a "protectorate" or colonized outright. However, Eastern Turkistan, the stretches of Central Asia located east of the Tian Shan, remained then, as today, a Chinese possession.

14. 1. Cotton Monoculture

Central Asian farmers had begun to grow cotton as a cash crop for export to Russian markets already in the early decades of the 19th century, but following these Russian conquests, there was a sizeable and progressive increase in the amount of Central Asian agricultural land dedicated to cotton cultivation. While under the Russian Empire this was largely a product of market economics, there was an astounding increase under the “command economy” of the Soviet Union (1917–91). From the 1940s, Moscow effectively forced Central Asian farmers into a cotton monoculture, leaving them unable to produce enough food to satisfy the needs of their local populations. This rendered Central Asian peoples dependent upon outside sources for necessary food supplies and has several times resulted in food shortages and famine.

The ecological and economic effects of over-irrigation in Central Asia have been traumatic. In response to Moscow’s demands for more cotton, the Central Asian Soviet republics, especially Uzbekistan, hastily built hundreds of kilometers of poorly constructed irrigation canals to draw water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers in an effort to bring more land under the plow. Between 1940 and 1986, there was a 120 percent increase in land devoted to cotton production. By the late 1970s, however, the Syr Darya was depleted to such an extent that it no longer reached the Aral Sea. The amount of water flowing into the Aral Sea from the Amu Darya is similarly insufficient and rapidly decreasing.

The result is that the Aral Sea, once the world’s 4th largest inland body of water, has for decades been shrinking and increasing in toxicity from the chemicals that had been applied to the cotton crops only to leech into the ground water. In 1960, the Aral Sea supported a vibrant fishing industry yielding over 43,000 metric tons of fish. Within just 20 years this figure dropped to zero, as the polluted sea was no longer able to support marine life. Rusting ships stranded in the desert, 50 miles from the steadily retreating coastline, are grim reminders of a regional economy ruined. Still worse are the health effects on local peoples, as the desert wind sweeps across the dry ground that just a few years earlier had been the sea bed, filling the air with a poisonous dust. Regional populations suffer from a host of medical problems including widespread cancer, congenital birth defects, an infant mortality rate of 11 percent, and an average life expectancy 20 years shorter than that of someone who lives elsewhere in Central Asia.

15. The Silk Road Today

Environmental degradation, ethnic and religious clashes, and involvement in a global struggle that is all-too-often mislabeled as a “War on Terrorism,” are an integral part of the picture today of the lands of the traditional Silk Road. And yet traffic along its highways continues. Indeed, Silk Road tourism has become a growth industry, despite some inherent dangers in specific locations. Four-wheel-drive vehicles bring the curious and the scholarly into the Gobi and Taklamakan Deserts to marvel at the ruins of once-forgotten Silk Road oasis towns and the many Buddhist shrines that dot the landscape. At a now-less-remote site, the Buddhist Mogao Caves near Dunhuang, a modern airport makes it possible for tens of thousands of tourists annually to reach in a few comfortable hours what once took harrowing and wearying weeks of plodding

travel. On the less romantic end of the spectrum, caravans of brightly colored lorries carrying every sort of commodity travel over mountain passes that Faxian, Xuanzang, Marco Polo, and unknown hundreds of thousands of merchants, pilgrims, and adventurers have trekked by foot and animal for the past several thousand years.

One of those painted trucks graced the Mall in Washington D.C. in late June-early July 2002, as the center piece of the Smithsonian Museum's annual Folklife Festival, which was dedicated to the many lands, peoples, and cultures of the Silk Road, both ancient and modern. Its hundreds of thousands of visitors became aware, through the sights, sounds, aromas, and tastes that enveloped their senses, that the Silk Road is so much more than a phenomenon of the past. Underscoring that fact was one of the featured artists at the festival, the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who in 1998 founded the Silk Road Project. Based on the dual principles that traditional cultures must be preserved but also that such traditions have historically been and will ever continue to be enriched by circulation and cross-fertilization. Given that philosophy, the Silk Road Project is dedicated to exploring ways to celebrate, illuminate, and revitalize the living musical traditions of the Silk Road and, where appropriate, to marry those traditions with the music of the West.

Yes, the Silk Road has changed in modern times, but it has always been in a constant state of flux. Despite those changes, both ancient and modern, it has retained a certain unique quality and centrality of undeniable importance to the economic, intellectual, and cultural lives of the peoples connected by its many routes.

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E-Materials

Dan Waugh, emeritus at the University of Washington, has prepared "The Silk Road—Materials for an e-History" at <http://faculty.washington.edu/dwaugh/srehist.html>. It is an invaluable collection of lectures, essays, photos, and other data.

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The Silk Road is an important e-journal aimed especially at educators and published under the auspices of the Silkroad Foundation of Saratoga, CA. Six volumes have been published to date, the last appearing in early 2009. Access is through the Silkroad Foundation's web site www.silk-road.com/toc/newsletter.html

CD-Rom

McGraw-Hill has produced the interactive CD-Rom, *Tracing the Silk Road* (2003), as part of its After the Fact Series. It attempts to teach basic historical skills within the context of a general overview of the Silk Road. It reproduces some interesting documents and artifacts, but they are too few and diverse to allow for in-depth analysis.

Glossary

Afro-Eurasian Ecumene: The interconnected communities of Africa and Eurasia before 1500 CE.

Byzantine Empire: An Eastern Christian empire that claimed Roman imperial legitimacy, it was centered on Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and flourished from the mid-6th century to 1453.

Caravanserai: A built place of refuge for caravans.

Cathay: Northern China.

Cotton monoculture: Raising cotton as *the* sole cash crop to the exclusion of other agricultural products.

Dar al-Islam: The House (or Abode) of Islam—all lands subject to Muslim authority, as opposed to Dar al-Harb, the House of Confusion (or War)—all lands not subject to *Sharia* (Islamic sacred law).

Diaspora Communities: Resident communities of foreigners, largely merchants, who provided the necessary support and infrastructure for travelers of their own ethnicity or religion.

Indies: A medieval European term that encompassed all of the lands of the East, including East Africa, not just the subcontinent of India.

Jungars: A nomadic Mongol people of Xinjiang subjugated by the Qing in the 1750s.

Khivan Khanate: A Turco-Mongol khanate that existed from 1511 to 1920. Named for Khiva (today in Uzbekistan), which became its capital in 1592.

Khotan (Hotan, Hetian): Located on the southwest periphery of the Taklamakan Desert, it was the capital of an independent kingdom in the 5th century CE Today it is a small oasis town in Xinjiang.

Mahayana Buddhism: The "Great Vehicle," a branch of Buddhist belief and worship. It teaches that all humans ultimately will be led to salvation through the agency of selfless bodhisattvas—enlightened beings who have deferred Nirvana until all humanity is saved.

Manichaeism: A syncretic religion that arose in 3rd-century Iraq out of the teachings of Mani (216–76). Borrowing deeply from Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, this "Religion of Light" presented itself as a universal faith of salvation..

Nestorian Christianity: A misnamed branch of Eastern Christianity that was declared heretical by the imperial

churches of Constantinople and Rome because its adherents were falsely accused of overemphasizing the humanity of Jesus to the point of denigrating his divinity. To give it its full name, the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East established its base in the Sassanian Empire, from where it sent out missionaries into Central Asia and China. A number of Turkic tribes converted to this branch of Christianity.

Oasis town/city: Watered settlements along the desert periphery that provided refuge and trading opportunities for merchants and other travelers.

Prester John: John the Priest—a legendary Eastern Christian priest-king who ruled over a vast empire somewhere in the Indies. His existence was taken as fact by Western Europeans from at least the mid-12th century, and the search for him as a potential crusade ally continued for centuries and into early modern times. He was variously located in China, Central Asia, India, and Ethiopia.

Sericulture: Silk production. Derived from the Latin *Seres*, the term used by the Romans for the mysterious people of the east who produced *serica* (silks).

Steppe: The grasslands of Central, Asia inhabited by horse-breeding pastoral nomads.

Sesterces: A *sester* (pl. *sesterces*) was a bronze or silver coin—the basic unit of currency in the Roman Empire.

Taklamakan Desert: One of the world’s largest sand deserts, encompassing over 160,000 square kilometers of wilderness. The name, which is Turkic, loosely means, “those who enter never return.” See Tarim Basin.

Tarim Basin: A vast plain in today’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, within which the Taklamakan Desert lies surrounded by prosperous agricultural oases.

Tributary states and peoples: Lands and peoples, often pastoral nomads of Inner Asia, that theoretically were subservient to the emperor of China. In fact, China often purchased at exorbitant rates the “tribute,” such as horses, and it often paid off these peoples with large bribes in the form of “gifts.”

Turkistan/Turkestan: The Land of the Turks. A vast region of Central Asia extending west to east from roughly the Caspian Sea to the eastern regions of Xinjiang in China.

Turkmen: Turkic inhabitants of Turkmenistan and portions of Afghanistan and Iran who are linguistically related to the Turks of Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Zoroastrianism: An ancient Iranian religion with roots back to the 12th century BCE, it centered on the cosmic struggle between Ahura Mazda, the sole God of Goodness and Light, and Ahriman, a superhuman or even divine being of evil and darkness.