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History of the Silk Route

The Silk Route remained a historic trade route from 2nd Century B.C.E. to 14th Century C.E. and covered Asia to the Mediterranean, passing through China, India, Persia, Arabia, Greece and Italy, thereby providing a strong connection between the East and the West. The name of Silk Route was assigned to it mainly due to the heavy Silk Trade in the region. The expansion of Buddhism and extensive trade of silk and ceramics created a strong connection between the two regions.

The fame of ancient China was mainly owed to the trade of Silk from East to West whereby most of the European countries imported Silk from China. The name of the route is misleading to a great extent and is attributed to a German Scholar Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, who used this name during the last century. Yet, the Silk Route remained a trade corridor for many other goods like gold and other valuable metals, woolen-linen textiles, ivory precious stones (jade), ceramics etc.¹ The Chinese emperor, Wu-Ti, sent his diplomat Chiang Kien to Europe in 138 BC with a Caravan of 100 men, who returned to China after thirteen years. This expedition played a pivotal role in discovering the Silk Route. He brought the intelligence about the political, economic, geographical and military strength of the Europeans, which highly impressed the Han's Court. He was conferred the title of "The Great Traveler" by the Emperor. Thus, he provided a

1 Haripada Chakraborti, *Trade and Commerce of Ancient India*, 1966, p. 39.

link between the East and West and can be rightly called the “Father of the Silk Route”²

The Silk Routes were comprised of a large network of markets, thoroughfares and strategically located trading posts, which served for transportation and distribution of goods. Routes extended from the Greco-Roman metropolis of Antioch across the Syrian Desert via Palmyra to Ctesiphon (the Parthian capital) and Seleucia on the Tigris River, a Mesopotamian city in modern-day Iraq. From Seleucia, routes passed eastward over the Zagros Mountains to the cities of Ecbatana (Iran) and Merv (Turkmenistan), from which additional routes traversed to modern-day Afghanistan and eastward into Mongolia and China. Silk Road routes also led to ports on the Persian Gulf, where goods were then transported up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Routes from these cities also connected to ports along the Mediterranean Sea, from which goods were shipped to cities throughout the Roman Empire and into Europe.³ The ancient route is shown in Fig 1.1.

For more than two thousand years, they not only enhanced the silk, ceramics and spices trades, but also cultivated the exchange of knowledge, culture, technology, and religion between the Orient and Occident thus propelling human civilization forward. The second route was the Maritime Silk Route, which began from the ports of Guangzhou and Quanzhou in South China, passed by countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia and then entered the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, before finally arriving at the east coast of Africa. As main routes of communication which survived as such for more than two thousand years, they not only enhanced the silk, ceramics and spices trades, but also cultivated the exchange of knowledge, culture, technology, and religion between the Orient and Occident

2 J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*

3 “History.com Editors. Silk Road”, *HISTORY*, November 3, 2017, available at <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road>.

thus propelling human civilization forward⁴. These Silk Routes are also depicted in Fig 1.1.a & b

Historically, the Han Dynasty of China is credited with the establishment of the original Silk Routes around (114 BCE), however, the route itself was originally established as the Persian Royal road during the Achaemenid Empire (500-330 BCE), by Darius the Great. The two empires came into contact with each other around 200 BCE leading to the establishment of trade relations. The northern part of the road was a major artery and it continued from Susa (modern day Iran) to the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor, which is the modern day Turkey. Postal stations were also established along the road for communication, for which horses were used by the Empire. The major road was further extended by the Persians, through smaller roads. The Silk route further extended to Mesopotamia and Egypt. The city of Alexandria was established in 339 BC by Alexander the Great. It further extended to the modern day Tajikistan in the Fergana valley of Neb⁵.

4 Louis C.W. NG /China (Hong Kong), Conservation and Management of Ceramic Archeological Sites along the maritime Silk Route

5 Shoaib Khan, Power games on the Silk route: a journey from historical to modern era. Eurasian Journal 3(2), July 2021

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Fig. 1.1 a. Silk Routes: An old depiction

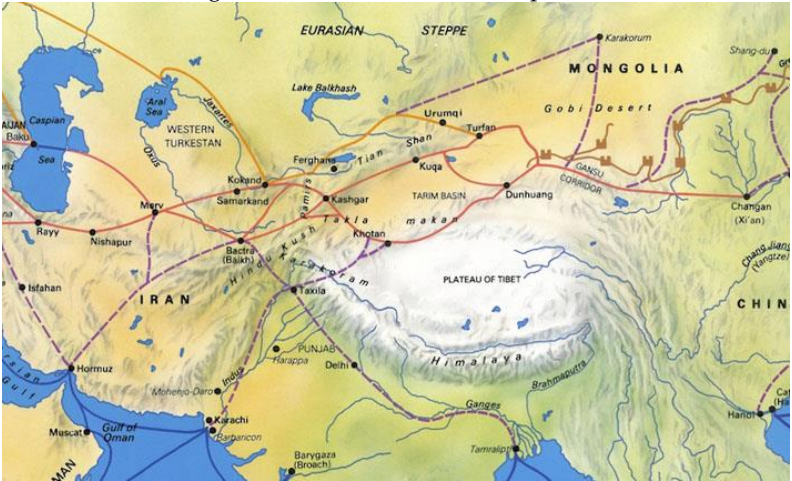


Fig. 1.1 b. Old trade routes

“History.com Editors, Silk Road”, HISTORY, November 3, 2017, available at <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road>

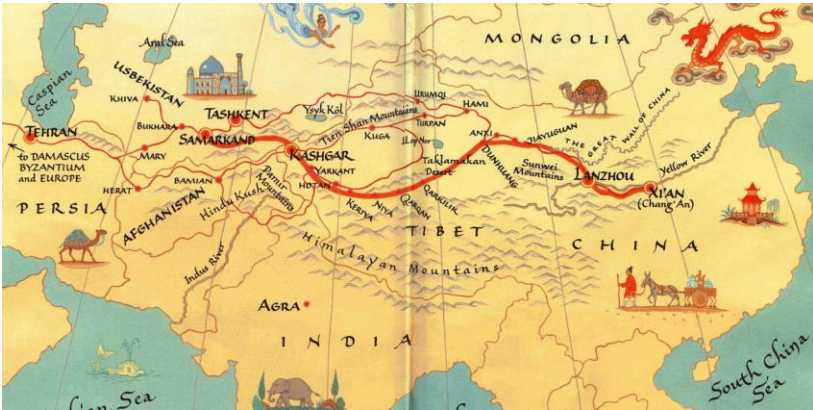


Fig. 1.2 Old Silk Route depiction

“Silk Road, the Ancient Communication Route in the World”, Ghoghnos, September 24, 2019, available at <https://www.ghoghnos.net/blog/city-guide/silk-road-the-ancient-communication-route-in-the-world/>

Due to significance of the Maritime Silk Route, the Pilgrim's Route to Santiago de Compostela was added to the World Heritage List as *Cultural Route* in 1993, which provides a rich variety of cultural heritage. A cultural route offers a dynamic context, within which the study of human history, migration, encounters, conflicts, dialogue, trade and interaction amongst different civilizations. For more than two thousand years, the route provided an interplay and relationship of mutual benefit and mutual trust and as a result, peoples from different regions, races, and cultures peacefully and amicably participated in trading activities.

The Silk Route also provided a corridor for the expansion of religious beliefs. Missionaries from different faiths including Buddhism, Christianity and Islam accompanied the traders for conversion of the people of various regions along the route. The traders from Arabia and Persia, transmitted Islam to China through land and maritime Silk Route. Hence the diversity of Islamic culture including philosophy, science, law, art, music, dance and literature, flourished in China thereafter. Conversely,

the Muslim traders brought the knowledge, skills and advanced technologies from China to Muslim and Western world.

The trade development along the Silk Route can be divided into three periods, 3rd, century BC to 7th century AD, 7th century AD to 13th century AD and 13th century AD to 19th century AD. China mainly exported ceramics, tea, ironware Chinese Silk and imported mainly spices. Over the years, however ceramics of China got more popularity in the Western world and specialized kilns and tools were developed in were established in Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Jiangxi in China. These areas of modern China are still famous for ceramics and textile. The trade of ceramics thus remained the most dominant aspect of maritime Silk Route, as the transportation of fragile ceramics products was more feasible along the marine routes.

According to World Tourism Organization, Silk Route serves as longest tourism route of the world. WTO has developed an interactive map to reflect the tourism sites along the Silk route. Before the emergence of China, three main cultural movements existed, that enriched the region, i.e. Greek, Indian, Iran (Bianca 2005, p21). These cultural streams intersected in the Northern part of Pakistan. The local people absorbed various current of cultural diversity particularly in the areas of Peshawar, Taxila, Swat and Gilgit. The old Silk route also exists today along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) and can be traversed in the areas of Taxila, Hazara, Kohistan, Besham, Chilas, Gilgit, Hunza and enters China via Khunjerab Pass.

The petroglyphs and inscriptions found in various parts along the Silk Route provides a rich knowledge about the history and cultural diversity along the ancient route. A greater concentration of such art and crafts can be found in the Chilas areas, where the Nomadic tribes, temporarily settled when the river was in high flood and it was difficult to cross it. These petroglyphs describe that the wild animals such ibex and markhor. The human beings are found hunting these animals with arrows, bows and stone. These images were also used for teaching of hunting to the younger people. This was followed by postural community, when

the humans tried to raise animals for their survival and hence their settlements became more nomadic⁶ The upper Indus region along the Silk route has been providing opportunities for enriching the cultural diversity of the region as witnessed along the Nile River.

The silk route was initially used for trading of Silk, yet it was a route for trading a variety of other commodities as well. From West to East, the traded goods included Horses, saddles and Riding Tack, The grapevine and grapes, Dogs and other animals, Animal furs and skins, Honey, Fruits, Glassware, Woolen blankets, rugs, carpets, Textiles (such as curtains), Gold and Silver, Camels, Slaves, Weapons and armor. The commodities traded from East to West included Silk, Tea, Dyes, Precious Stones, China (plates, bowls, cups, vases), Porcelain, Spices (such as cinnamon and ginger), Bronze and gold artifact, Medicine, Perfumes, Ivory, Rice, Paper and Gunpowder. The trade of various commodities along various roads of Silk Routes have been shown in Fig 1.3. There were Caravanserais at every 30-40 km for the stay of travelers and traders. The number of old roadside inns increased to provide protection to the travelers and merchants. Some of these Caravansaries still exist in Iran and other countries and Iran (see Fig 1.4 for Caravanserai of Zeniddin Mehraiz Iran).

6 Dr. Naela Aamir and Dr. Aqsa Malik "The Pre-Historic Petroglyphs of Silk Route: Shatial to Khunjerab Pass" Majallah-e-Tahqiq Vol.39, Sr.No.111, April – June, 2018.

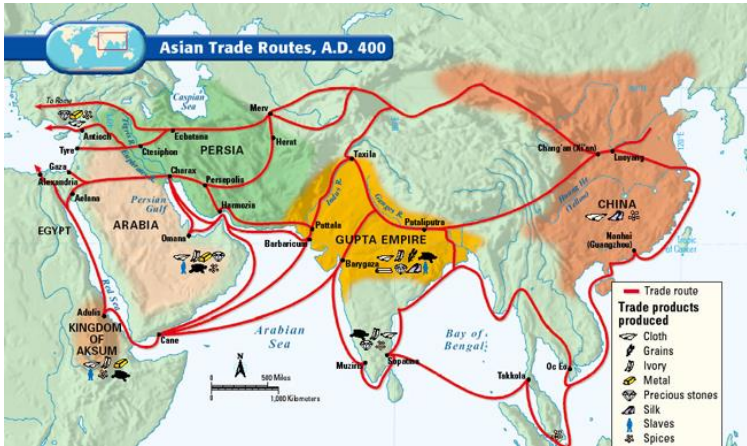


Fig. 1.3 Trading of various commodities along Silk Routes⁶



Fig. 1.4 Caravanserai Zeino-Din Iran⁷

For landlocked countries of Central Asia, Silk Routes provided the only option to connect with the rest of the world. In the olden days, Uzbekistan played an important role and bridge to connect

7 "Silk Road, the Ancient Communication Route in the World", Ghoghnos, September 24, 2019, available at <https://www.ghoghnos.net/blog/city-guide/silk-road-the-ancient-communication-route-in-the-world/>.

for transport from East to West and South to North. At the same time, due to its high population, Uzbekistan offers a larger internal market for the region. Kazakhstan was the first country of central Asia to propose, New Silk Route in 2007, under the umbrella of Western Europe and Western China (WE-WC) project. This corridor was expected to bring more economic benefits to the region with the construction of modern infrastructure. This project WE-WC was initiated before the start of BRI and to a greater extent, it provided a stimulus to initiate Eurasian Economic Union and BRI. The China newly built Eastbound network, is connecting with the Kazakh oil, Turkmen natural gas, Mongolian iron ore, Siberian timber, and Afghan copper, as well.

Besides a poetic metaphor, the Silk road provides a model for connecting the East and West of the world for trade and creating Merchant Capitalism for China. This is comprised of three layers of movement along the route, exchange of goods, exchange of services and movement of knowledge. These three levels of movements and exchanges are the spirit and rational for the modern BRI as well. In the prehistoric days, goods like silk and paper products, precious stones, jewellery, clothing, gunpowder, animals and animal skins, paper and paper products, and all the necessities that are required for long-distance travel including food, guides, and so on. The modern BRI has to be dominated by the transfer of goods from the East to West for expansion of the Chinese trade and commerce. For movement of services like knowledge about military and defence, ceramic making, postal services as well transfer of technology, the old Silk Route played a pivotal role. The modern BRI is also expected to provide a network of corridors to transfer the development and modern technologies from China to the rest of the world. Silk route also served an active connection for transfer of knowledge relating to language skills, intercultural exchange rituals shared when people eat together or communication, calculations, religious practices, art, sculpture and design, meditation techniques, and knowledge. This will continue with the modern BRI in different forms of globalized culture and traditions.

The first chapter established the foundation for the book in the background of historical relations of China with the rest of the world, through the Silk Routes. These routes served as strategic corridors for transfer of goods, services and knowledge from East to West, thereby creating the military and intellectual dominance of China over the rest of the world. The diversity of cultures and beliefs along the routes created peace and tranquility as preachers of various religions used these roads to extend their beliefs to other parts. Most of the Silk Route has been vanished and it is more like a metaphor now, yet the modern concept of Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) of China has its roots from the success of the old Silk Routes and its historical supremacy through trade and merchant capitalism. Chinese being a nation with long history and culture spreading over thousands of years, has been using the grandeur of Silk Routes in the modern day philosophy of Global Trades.

In next chapter, we will learn about the historical perspective of China Pak diplomatic relations spanning over seven decades.