The Silk Road:
A Series of Cultural Explorations, Encounters, and Exchanges

Rachael Williams
Senior Division
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The Silk Road was a network of trade routes spanning across Eurasia, from China to places further west.\(^1\) While the trade of physical goods was important, the Silk Road’s significance lies in cultural explorations, encounters, and exchanges between East and West.\(^2\)

**Birth of the Silk Road**

A series of encounters resulted in the Silk Road. Before it, nomadic tribes known as the Xiongnu, today referred to as the Huns, were attacking the Chinese.\(^3\) In 138 BC, the Chinese Emperor sent one-hundred men, leading them the explorer Chang Ch’ien, to Bactria to find and make an alliance.\(^4\) While making an alliance with the Yueh-chih failed, the mission beared fruits of its own.\(^5\)

From Central Asia, Chang Ch’ien brought back knowledge of the land which had been unexplored to the Chinese prior to.\(^6\) He also brought back alfalfa.\(^7\) Alfalfa was especially significant due to it becoming a staple to the horses later used in the military campaign to defeat the Huns.\(^8\) The military posts arranged after encountering and conquering the Huns and all of Turkestan actualized what was to become the Silk Road.\(^9\)

Chang Ch’ien’s exploration of the lands further west, possibly as far as Rome, inspired further explorations to transpire.\(^10\) With the military posts established, such explorations could be

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\(^2\) “About the Silk Road.” UNESCO, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.


\(^5\) Watkins.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Bodde.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Watkins.
better facilitated. Often, to explore new countries and their cultures, China would exchange embassies with other countries. Detailed accounts of Ta-ts’in were produced from such cultural encounters. In these accounts, everything from politics, to the economy, to the way of life, are explained. Things of notable value are especially documented. Ta-ts’in’s use of coral, opaque glass, and crystal in architecture, as well as available gold, silver, and precious gemstones were noted since the Chinese were looking for potential trade. The emperor Yang-ti of the Sui Dynasty had even wanted trade between China and Ta-ts’in, however couldn’t achieve this in his life.

Other countries’ cultural exchanges were also explained in this manner. Parthia and China would exchange embassies, and their lands were described in great detail. Embassies were also sent to T’iao-chih. Other instances include Shan sending an embassy and presenting jugglers, an aspect of culture, and large birds’ eggs unlike the Chinese had seen, to the Chinese Emperor. It was at this, that the Chinese Emperor was highly pleased, allowing for a positive encounter. Yet another country China looked into increasing relations with was T’ien-chu, or India. There, many valuable items, such as coral, amber, chin-pi, or jade-stone, chu-chi, a type of pearls, and storax were available for trade. All these explorations, encounters, and exchanges, were a large part of what put the Silk Road in history.

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17 Qian, Sima. “Translation A.” Ibid. 35.
Now the Silk Road itself was not an actual road. It was a series of trade routes both land and maritime, with the ability to fluctuate with geopolitical relations. While many geographers attempt to draw specific routes for the Silk Road throughout all of history, (see Appendix I,) the Silk Road had always maintained the ability to change. One instance of geopolitical relations affecting exchanges was the Roman Empire avoiding encounters by not traveling through areas controlled by Parthia, their enemies. This aspect of the Silk Road was of great significance, since it had caused certain cultures to exchange more with others, sowing the seeds of culture in different locations.

Because of its ability to be flexible, the Silk Road was enabled to be used throughout history. Use of it has been recorded throughout history. Some sources even suggest that the Silk Road continues to be in use through China’s One Belt, One Road initiative. The Silk Road, however, was at its height before the year 1000.

Originally, the Silk Road had gotten its name in the mid-nineteenth century from Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geographer, who called it Die Seidenstrasse, which means “the Silk Road.” He called it this because of the importance of the silk trade along the trade routes, which is just the beginning of the exchanges that had taken place on the Silk Road.

The Exchanges

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21 “About the Silk Road.” UNESCO.
22 “About the Silk Road.” UNESCO.
23 Hansen. “The Legacy of the Silk Road.”
25 Ibid.
26 “About the Silk Road.” UNESCO.
27 Ibid.
Silk was the textile in which the Silk Road was named. It was so important to the nobility of Rome, it alone was estimated to cost the Roman Empire half a billion USD today, all payed for with precious stones, wool textiles, asbestos, and glass. “One writer, indeed, has even gone so far as to suggest that this unfavorable trade balance was one important cause for the downfall of the Roman Empire.”

The Silk Road had not been limited to silk, however. In addition, spices were exchanged, primarily along the maritime routes, or Spice Routes. Other traded goods commonly included items with high value and low weight. While this physical exchange of goods was important, there was something with a far greater significance that we are indebted to, even today.

This exchange includes the exchange of innovations between East and West. Many of these innovations shaped countless events in history and still influence the way we live today. One of the greatest of these is paper.

Paper, formally invented by Ts’ai Lun in 105 AD in China, was suspected in use even earlier. Paper spread through the Silk Road through a series of exchanges, however the knowledge of its making came through encounters. The Arabic world learned of papermaking through captured Chinese artisans during a battle in Turkestan. It spread through the Arabic world, from Samarkand to Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and eventually into Spain in 1150 AD. Today, paper is a key part to our everyday lives and both history and our way of life would not be the same without it.

\[^{28}\text{Bodde.}\]
\[^{29}\text{Bodde.}\]
\[^{30}\text{“About the Silk Road.” UNESCO.}\]
\[^{31}\text{Bodde.}\]
\[^{32}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{33}\text{“The Spread of Papermaking.” China Culture.}\]
\[^{34}\text{Bodde.}\]
An innovation closely related to paper that had also spread from China was block printing. With paper and block printing, between years 932 and 953 AD, under the direction of Feng Tao, more books were printed in China at that time than the rest of the world put together, up to the year 1800. With this enthusiasm for printing, it underwent an evolution. Phi Sheng invented separate, movable type in the years 1041 and 1049 AD. It was this invention that spread along the Silk Road and was exchanged with other cultural innovations. If it were not for this invention as well as the Silk Road being the means for it to be exchanged, Gutenberg’s printing press would never have been possible. While separate, Phi Seng’s means of printing was what inspired Johannes Gutenberg. Countless instances in history were influenced due to the use of printing which can ultimately be traced back to the Silk Road.

In addition, tea was popularized because of the Silk Road. Disciples of Buddhism from India had brought tea into China, however there it was mainly used as a herbal medicine. Through the Silk Road, tea had spread to Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and it eventually made its way to Europe. In Europe, it caught on as a popular drink, quickly becoming a significant item in world trade. If it were not for tea popularized by the Silk Road, history would not be the same. One of the pivotal events of the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party could not have taken place without tea, and thus the Silk Road.

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Bodde.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
In addition to paper, block printing, and tea, many other innovations were spread because of the Silk Road. Some of these include porcelain, gunpowder, the compass, lacquer, medicines, plants, such as soybeans, kites, playing cards, and more.\footnote{Ibid.} Aside from innovations, ideas were also exchanged along the Silk Road.

One such idea we have modern chemistry to thank for. In China, a mineral called kaolin was commonly used in porcelain.\footnote{Bodde.} Because it was commonly used by the Chinese, it became closely associated with alchemy and their search for the immortality elixir as well.\footnote{Ibid.} Countless other instances of alchemy also developed in China. “… A huge book in fifty-two parts was compiled in China. It describes 1,871 plant, animal, and mineral substances, from which it suggests no less than 8,160 medical prescriptions.”\footnote{Ibid.} From there, Chinese alchemy had spread and inspired Arab alchemy.\footnote{Ibid.} After undergoing further explorations by that culture, Arab alchemy had then inspired medieval European alchemy, the predecessor of our modern day chemistry.\footnote{Ibid.} Without the Silk Road, such knowledge and ideas would not have spread, and we would not know as much as we do about science today.

In addition to ideas such as chemistry, another concept was exchanged because of the Silk Road. This is the concept of language. To take part in the physical exchange of goods, many traders had to speak a variety of languages.\footnote{Ibid.} The exchange of different languages was an important element of the Silk Road because not only was it used on a practical level, but it was
also a part of creating tolerance between cultural encounters.\textsuperscript{50} With languages being known and the ability to communicate, encounters became positive, allowing the trade of goods and knowledge to flourish.

Language was exchanged in another way as well. This includes other languages being enhanced due to the concepts presented through other words in the exchanged languages. From India, Chinese gained around 35,000 new words.\textsuperscript{51} In addition, certain words, such as the one for steamed bread, or dumpling, holds similarities across numerous countries and cultures in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{52} Another word spread because of the Silk Road includes China being used as a common term for porcelain. If it were not for China’s invention of porcelain, and the Silk Road to spread it as far west as Europe, porcelain would not have become known as China. In addition to language and words, other ideas have been exchanged because of the Silk Road.

These other ideas, and yet another aspect of culture, include religions. Manicheism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity were all exchanged by the Silk Road.\textsuperscript{53} Hinduism and Islam were also exchanged.\textsuperscript{54} These religions would never have spread so far and touched as many lives if it were not for the Silk Road. Leaders would even grant permission to refugees to practice their religions along the Silk Road.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, religion was another part of the important exchanges on the Silk Road. In fact, almost all of the exchanges happening on the Silk Road was related to the exchange of a certain set of beliefs known as Buddhism.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Millard, James. “James Millard: The Silk Road in History and Today.” National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 16 May 2013.
\textsuperscript{53} Hansen. “The Legacy of the Silk Road.”
\textsuperscript{54} “About the Silk Road.” UNESCO.
\textsuperscript{55} Hansen. “The Legacy of the Silk Road.”
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
India, referred to as T’ien-chu, was specifically traded with for many items of value, the doctrines regarding the Buddha being one of these.\textsuperscript{57} Around 646 AD, the Chinese monk Xuanzang had gone on a pilgrimage to India for 25 years and his journal reflects the exploration that had taken place.\textsuperscript{58} Another example of Buddhism being a significant instance of exchange on the Silk Road includes the Mogao Caves. The Mogao Caves were created at 366 AD and were built at a strategic point on the Silk Road, Dunhuang, one of the most important crossroads.\textsuperscript{59} It was built there so that the art of Buddhism could be encountered and traded with the other exchanges of the Silk Road.\textsuperscript{60} The Mogao Caves holds the greatest art of Buddhism from the 4th century to the 14th century, having 45,000 square meters of murals and over 2,000 painted sculptures.\textsuperscript{61} Many of these pieces of art, presently arranged in 492 preserved caves, show the very culture of the time.

\textit{Detail of a Legend}, one of the fresco paintings located in the Mogao Caves pictures an encounter. (See Appendix II.) Horses are being used in this military campaign, much like how the Huns had been defeated. Such knowledge is able to spread through art such as this and further the cultural explorations. In addition to \textit{Detail of a Legend}, there are two other paintings that represent the Mogao Caves’ and Silk Road’s cultural significance.

These are two fresco paintings, both titled \textit{A Dancer}. (See Appendix III.) While created during the same time period, 386-634 AD, and holding many similarities, they still present a juxtaposition and together, present an abundance of culture. They show the significance of dance and music that has been presented at one of the most critical locations of the Silk Road.

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\item[57] Füeh, Shen.
\item[58] Xuanzang. “Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions.” Trans. Samuel Beal. Vol. 1. 646 AD.
\item[59] “Mogao Caves.” UNESCO, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.
\item[60] “Mogao Caves.” UNESCO.
\item[61] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
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wonderous art of the Mogao Caves has stretched far beyond the exchange of Buddhism and into something far greater; the very exchange of culture.

Overall, the cultural explorations, encounters, and exchanges of the Silk Road has led Central Asia to being referred to as the melting pot of cultures, much like the US is to the west.\(^{62}\) All the aspects of culture from the physical goods available, to innovations, ideas, languages, and religions, have situated us in a much better world today, one that would not be as enriched without it. Even though the Silk Road was at its height at 1000 AD, the Silk Road lives on, even today.

**One Belt, One Road Initiative**

During March of 2015, the official document from the Chinese government regarding the One Belt, One Road project was released.\(^{63}\) Chinese President Xi Jinping had announced it in 2013 and it first begins to take effect in 2015.\(^{64}\) The goal of One Belt, One Road is to increase the trade and exchanges happening between China and other countries across Eurasia, including countries like India and Bangladesh.\(^{65}\) Other parts across Central Asia and Southeast Asia are also included in this plan.\(^{66}\) The project is aimed at encouraging economic and trade coordination as well as balanced economical benefits throughout these regions.\(^{67}\) The benefits to increased trade from places inland are many and significant.\(^{68}\)

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\(^{62}\) Hansen.“The Legacy of the Silk Road.”


\(^{64}\) Hansen. “What the Silk Road means today.”

\(^{65}\) Summers, Tim. “What exactly is ‘one belt, one road’?” *Chatham House.*

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”

\(^{68}\) Ibid.
One aspect that makes exchanges and trade successful is the materials coming from a variety of places so that trade refrains from being dependent on a single source. This is the issue China has. Out of all its trade, 82% of it comes from sea routes. Part of the One Belt, One Road initiative, is to greater diversify their means of trade. With a greater amount of exchange happening through Central Asia, China would obtain the economic diversity they need.

The One Belt, One Road initiative also holds true to the strategies of many institutions, the Asia Development Bank being one of these. While so far the One Belt, One Road project has only increased travel in the target areas, it holds great potential to increase the exchange of trade in the near future. Even Russia is on board with the effort. Part of the One Belt, One Road initiative calls for the cooperation of other countries. Russia originally had a separate plan, but after the exchange of communication between the nation’s leaders, Russia and China are coordinating their respective efforts. Overall, the One Belt, One Road initiative is a continuation of the Silk Road into the modern age.

Whether it was back in the BC era, at its height in the 1000s, or continuing today with the One Belt, One Road initiative, the Silk Road has played an influential role in the shaping of history, both directly and indirectly. Through explorations, encounters, and exchanges, the Silk

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69 Hansen. “What the Silk Road means today.”
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”
73 Summers.
74 Summers.
75 Ibid.
76 “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”
77 Summers.
Road brought about cultural tolerance, as well as innovation and ideological exchange, allowing us to live in a better world today.
Appendix I

The Silk Road, in addition to the maritime routes known as the Spice Routes, stretched across Eurasia. Here, the means of exchange can be traced through places such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Japan, and countless other modern-day countries, as shown by the map. While the Silk Road has always had the ability to evolve with geopolitical relations, these are some of the most prevalent routes.

This fresco painting, *Detail of a Legend*, created in 535 to 557 AD during the Western Wei Dynasty, pictures one of the many encounters in the Silk Road’s history.

These fresco paintings are both titled *A Dancer*. They were created during the same time period of 386 to 634 AD of the Northern Wei Dynasty. Seeing the stylistic similarities, one could imagine that they were created by the same artist. Both of these paintings are located in Dunhuang and are a part of the Mogao Caves’ collection.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


_A Dancer_ is a fresco picturing a person, assumably a dancer. The painting uses shades of grey, white, and black, and appears to be female. She seems to hold something, bending her head down to it. Since she is a dancer, I came to the inference that this is a woodwind type of musical instrument. The outline of the body, at the arms and around the head, is very interesting, considering it is outlined darker than the rest.


This _A Dancer_ should not be confused with the other. They are two separate works of art. This one is quite similar in sense of style and is also coming from the Northern Wei Dynasty period of 386-634 AD, leading me to the inference that they were created by the same artist. This dancer displays the same technique of shades of black, grey, and white. Nonetheless, this second dancer has its own distinct features. This one appears to be more masculine. The eyes are white, as if they were open, unlike the other feminine dancer. In his hands, he holds a harp, yet another similarity considering they both hold musical instruments. A difference is that the masculine dancer has some sort of circular image behind his head. I am not quite sure what it is or what it means, however it is interesting.


This painting pictures what is going to be a battle, horses in green and white with their riders riding toward what must be the enemy, men on the ground with swords and shields. More research is needed to learn what encounter this painting illustrates.

This translation came from a section of the Chin-shu. It embraces the period of 265-419 AD. Closely describing Ta-ts’in, also called Li-chien or Li-kin, it is clear what information the Chinese are looking to spread about this land. There is much reference to its power and riches, especially in the sense of encounters and exchanges. Li-kin trades countless valuables with Parthia and India, ending up on the more profitable end than its trade partners. This source allowed me an insight on the way the Silk Road influenced people at the time.


This translation from the Sung-shu was written around 500 AD and embraces the period of 420-478 AD. This describes some encounters and exchanges between China and tribal people, stated as being quite different from themselves. The exchange of important goods, such as rhinoceros horns and asbestos cloth, in addition to the exchange of writings and ideas regarding the Buddah, resulted in increased explorations and exchanges in those parts.


This translation was originally a part of the Ch’ien-han-su, written around 90 AD. It explains a positive encounter between the Chinese Empire and Parthia, and how the emperor was pleased.


This text was translated from a section of the Chiu-t’ang-shu. It spans the period 618-906 AD. The section the translation comes from is about Persia, referred to as Po-ssu, and surrounding countries. Examples of encounters through forced provision of goods and missed opportunities for exchange are all explained, in addition to the politics and culture of Persia.

This section from the *Shih-chi* was written around 91 BC. It describes an instance of exchange, encounter, and exploration between the Chinese Empire and Parthia, referred to as An-hsi in the text.


The *Wei-shu*, the book in which the text was translated from, embraces the period of 386-556 AD. At first, the politics of Ta-ts’in, primarily the capital city An-tu are explained. Their economy is later also described in great detail, explaining what Ta-ts’in produces. In addition, this translation states that the Ta-ts’in people greatly resemble the Chinese, and that is why it is called Ta-ts’in, an excellent instance of exchange.


This translation originally came from the *Liang-shu*. It’s about the period 502-556 AD. The exchanges between India, Ta-ts’in, and Parthia were expressed in this section. These exchanges include the trade of coral, amber, gold jadestone, types of pearls, and storax, a type of fragrance. The process of making storax is also described in great detail.


This is the official document of the One Belt, One Road initiative released by the Chinese government. This source provides many valuable insights on the initiative since it is not being analyzed or otherwise reviewed by a second party.


This translated text, originally written by Xuanzang, was written at the request of the Tang Emperor. Xuanzang was an important figure of Buddhism who traveled along the Silk Road and by reading through this, I gained valuable insight.


This translation from the *Hou-han-shu* illustrates an encounter between China and places further west, the country of Shan and Ta-ts’in specifically. Interpreters, embassies, valuables, and foreign forms of entertainment were exchanged between Shan, Ta-ts’in, and China.

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This is a translation from the *Hou-han-shu*. It includes a detailed description of the capital of T’iao-chih and the country itself. It is extremely detailed, in the sense that one can get a feel for what the environment and geography was like, and what was new knowledge to the Chinese. In this way, the exploration of T’iao-chih was able to be experienced by the Chinese as a whole. The ending note of this translation is that there are many valuable things in the land of T’iao-chih.

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This is a translation from the *Hou-han-shu*. It is primarily about the economy and politics of Ta-ts’in. The aspects unfamiliar to the Chinese are easily evident, such as a king being appointed by merit and the submitting of petitions to him. In addition, the valuables in their country are explained in great detail. Their trade partners are also touched on as well as ways of traveling. What is documented in this section presents the knowledge of the culture that is new to the Chinese.
Secondary Sources


This source gave me an excellent starting point about what the Silk Road was about and also helped me better understand which aspects of the Silk Road I should focus my project on.


This source has given me many insights on what innovations were exchanged between eastern and western civilizations through the Silk Road.


This page had given a broader scope on what was exchanged, seeing that the Silk Road’s trade was not limited to physical items. Cultures were also exchanged.


It seems that China is considering making the ancient Silk Road an actual road in the One Belt, One Road initiative. This article raised my awareness and has given me a good starting point on this.

I had learned some interesting facts in this video. Professor Millard had explained some linguistic similarities across Eurasia in certain words, like the word for steamed bread or dumpling. He also confirmed the art, religious, and technological exchange throughout Eurasia.


This webpage has given me insight on what the Mogao Caves are, allowing me to find more primary sources of the art in the caves. These caves are relevant because the Mogao Caves were strategically set up along the Silk Road and will show many of the cultural influences being traded at the time period.


This site gave more information on paper, as well as printing.


This source gave me a deeper insight into the One Belt, One Road initiative. In addition to going in-depth with the very meat of what it is, this source also included many facts regarding its position as compared to other organizations, and even other countries, such as Russia.


This source highlights on the beginnings of the Silk Road, the events going on with the Xiongnu prior to the military posts first being set up.