



Traders formed camel caravans to cross the desert sands along the Silk Road.

The Silk Road

24.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about the achievements of the Han dynasty. Under the Han, **trade routes** were opened that allowed the Chinese to trade with other ancient cultures. In this chapter, you'll explore the great trade route known as the **Silk Road**.

The Silk Road was actually a network of smaller trade routes that stretched more than 4,000 miles across Asia. It reached from Luoyang and the Han capital of Chang'an in China to Mediterranean ports such as Antioch in Syria. By the first century C.E., the Mediterranean region was dominated by the Roman Empire, whose capital city was Rome (in present-day Italy). The Silk Road connected the great empires of the Han and the Romans. (You will learn about the Roman Empire later in this book.)

Both goods and ideas traveled along the Silk Road. The Chinese traded such things as silk and jade. In return, they acquired new products such as spices from India and glassware from Rome. New ideas, including Buddhism, also entered China as a result of this trade.

The Silk Road linked the peoples of the East and the West for more than 1,000 years. In this chapter, you will learn about the opening of the Silk Road. You'll discover what traveling the Silk Road was like in the time of the Han. You'll also learn about the goods and ideas that were exchanged between the cultures of Asia and the West.



Use this image as a graphic organizer to learn about the goods and ideas traded between the East and the West along the Silk Road.

24.2 The Opening of the Silk Road

The Silk Road was made possible by the expansion of the Han empire. The military campaigns of the Han beat back nomadic peoples in northwestern China, allowing trade routes to the west to be opened.

The Father of the Silk Road

A Chinese explorer named Zhang Qian is often called the Father of the Silk Road. His travels opened the way for trade between China and its western neighbors.

In 138 B.C.E., a Han emperor sent Zhang Qian west with 100 men. His mission was to form an alliance with western peoples against China's northern enemy, the Huns. Zhang Qian traveled across central Asia to what is now the country of Iran. Twice he was taken prisoner by the Huns. Both times he managed to escape.

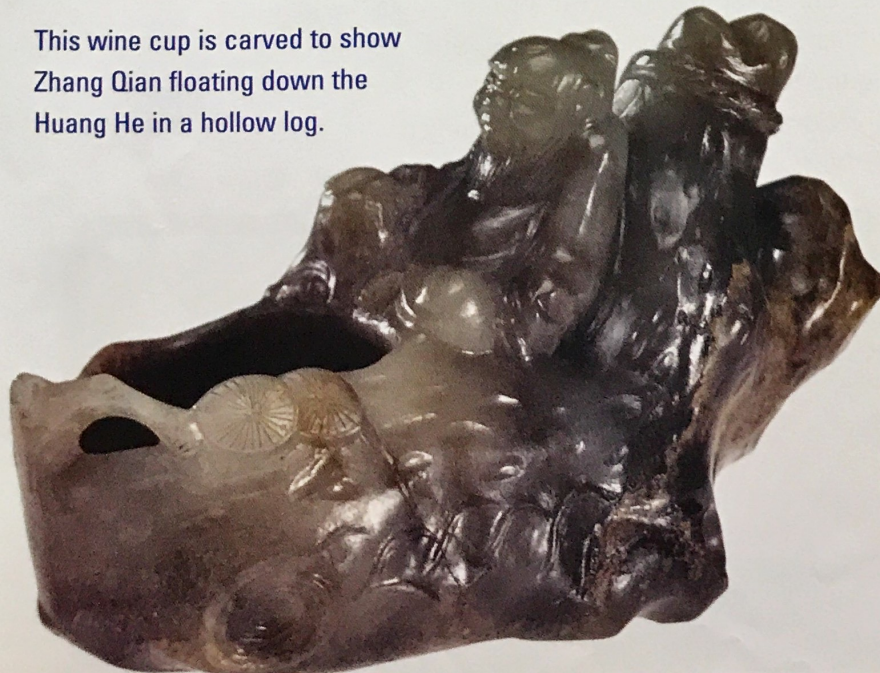
Zhang Qian was not able to form an alliance. But his trip was a success in other ways as it helped the Chinese learn about cultures to the west. He brought back word of such places as Persia, Syria, India, and Rome.

Some years later, Zhang Qian went on a second journey to the west. This time, he discovered a more powerful type of horse that was better suited for war than the smaller Chinese horse. He also discovered grapes, which were unknown in China. Most importantly, he was able to establish trade relationships with

some central Asian peoples.

Over time, Chinese traders traveled farther west. Smaller trade routes connected to form larger networks. The most famous of these became known as the Silk Road after the product that traders valued most of all: Chinese silk.

This wine cup is carved to show Zhang Qian floating down the Huang He in a hollow log.



Silk as a Trade Good

Silk is a fiber used to make cloth. Silk cloth is strong, but also warm, light, and soft.

Silk was a valuable good for trade because at first only the Chinese knew how to make it. As you learned in the last chapter, the Chinese discovered how to make silk from fibers taken from the cocoon of the silkworm. To protect the trade value of silk, the Chinese tried to keep the process for producing it a secret. Under the Han dynasty, revealing the secret was a crime punishable by death.

24.3 Rome Trades Glassware for Silk

When people of other cultures learned about silk, it became a highly prized material. The Romans, in particular, eagerly traded valuable goods for silk.

The first time the Romans saw silk was during a battle near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. At a key moment, the enemy unfurled many colorful silk banners. The Romans lost the battle, but this experience led them to want to acquire this wonderful new material.

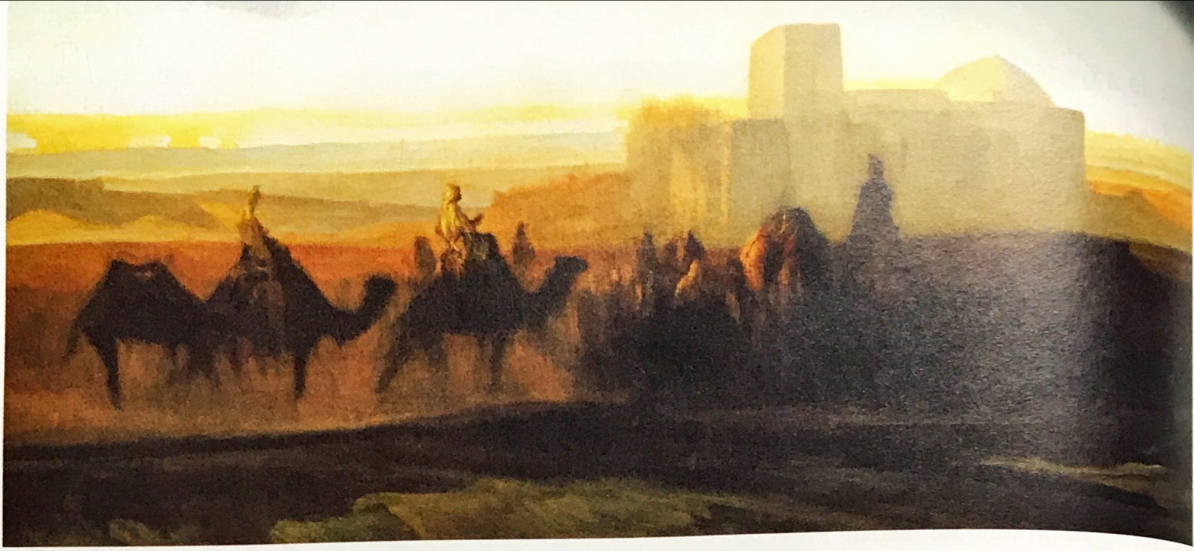
Chinese silk was a luxury item. It was rare and expensive. Even the richest Romans could afford to wear only a strip or a patch of silk stitched to their white **togas**. But silk was so highly prized that traders willingly went on the dangerous journey eastward to trade for it.

The Romans had gold to trade and something else the Chinese prized: glassware. The Romans knew how to blow glass into wonderful, delicate shapes. Just as the Romans had never seen silk, the Chinese were unfamiliar with glass production. The Romans were happy to trade glassware for silk.



These women are making silk. The Chinese closely guarded the secret of how silk was made.

toga a loose robe worn by men in Rome



Traders often formed long caravans to cross the Taklamakan Desert. Some caravans had as many as 1,000 camels.

24.4 The Eastern Silk Road

The Silk Road was not one continuous route. Instead it was a network of shorter trade routes between various stops. Most traders traveled between these stops rather than over the entire route. Goods changed hands many times before reaching their final destination.

The two major parts of the route were the Eastern Silk Road and the Western Silk Road. The Eastern Silk Road connected Luoyang to Kashgar, in the western part of the Taklamakan Desert. The Western Silk Road ran from Kashgar to Antioch and other Mediterranean ports.

Traveling the Eastern Silk Road

From Luoyang, the Silk Road led west along the Gobi Desert to Dunhuang, in northwestern China. This part of the route was protected to the north by the Great Wall.

From Dunhuang, travelers could choose either a northern or a southern route across the desert to Kashgar. Many chose the northern route, where the distances between oases like Loulan and Kucha were shorter.

Several dangers faced traders crossing the Taklamakan. Bandits often attacked travelers on the northern route between Dunhuang and Kucha. Throughout the desert, sudden sandstorms sometimes buried travelers in sand. Travelers may have been lured off the main path to their deaths by **mirages**.

Before entering the desert, travelers formed long camel **caravans** for protection. One type of camel was especially suited for desert travel. Bactrian camels have double eyelids and nostrils that can close to keep out blowing sand. They could carry enough food and water for a traveler to make it to the next oasis.

mirage an image of something that isn't really there, such as water

caravan a group of people traveling together

Goods Exchanged Along the Eastern Silk Road

It was very expensive to carry goods over the Silk Road. For traders to make a profit, goods had to be valuable and easy to carry. That way a merchant could take more goods on fewer animals.

Silk was the perfect trading good, because it was both light and valuable. Huge quantities of silk traveled from China along the Eastern Silk Road. After being traded for other goods, the silk eventually reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Then it was taken by boat to Rome and other Mediterranean cities.

Besides silk, the Chinese also traded fine dishware (which became known as *china*), ornaments, jewelry, cast-iron products, and decorative boxes. In return, they received a variety of goods from other traders. They particularly valued horses from Central Asia. Other goods from Central Asia included jade, furs, and gold. India sent various goods north to Kashgar, including cotton, spices, pearls (from oysters), and ivory (from elephant tusks). From Kashgar, the goods made their way east to China.



Strong horses from Central Asia were traded and highly valued. This bronze statue depicts a spirited horse such as those the Han Chinese admired.

The Eastern Half of the Silk Road During the Han Dynasty





Crossing the Pamir Mountains presented many challenges. In winter, travelers could be caught in snowstorms and freeze to death.

24.5 The Western Silk Road

Kashgar was the central trading point where the Eastern and Western Silk Roads met. Goods from various areas were exchanged there and sent in both directions along the trade route. Goods traveling westward went by yak rather than camel. The Western Silk Road ended in Mediterranean ports like Antioch.

Traveling the Western Silk Road

The journey west from Kashgar began with a difficult trek across the Pamir Mountains. Some peaks rose over 20,000 feet. Travelers often experienced headaches, dizziness, and ringing in the ears caused by lack of oxygen in the thin air of the high mountains.

Many of the mountain passes were narrow and dangerous. This part of the route was sometimes called the “trail of bones” because of the many animals and people who died there. Pack animals such as donkeys could slip off the narrow trails and tumble over cliffs. Sometimes traders unloaded their animals and carried the goods through the passes themselves.

After the Pamir Mountains, the route took travelers through a fertile valley in what is now Afghanistan. Then it headed across the Iranian Plateau, passed south of the Caspian Sea, and crossed Mesopotamia. A major stop along this part of the route was Ctesiphon (in modern-day Iraq). Ctesiphon was located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, north of ancient Babylon.

From Ctesiphon, the Silk Road turned north and crossed the Syrian Desert. Travelers across the desert faced many difficulties. They were threatened by tigers, lions, and scorpions, and they were tormented by flies.

The goods finally reached Antioch and other Mediterranean ports. From there, they were transported by ship throughout the Mediterranean world.

Goods Exchanged Along the Western Silk Road

Many goods traveled along the Western Silk Road and eventually ended up in China. Traders from Egypt, Arabia, and Persia brought perfumes, cosmetics, and carpets. Central Asian traders brought metal items and dyes. They also sometimes traded slaves.

Rome sent a number of products to be exchanged for Chinese silk. The Chinese highly valued Roman glass products, including trays, vases, necklaces, and small bottles. They also prized asbestos, which they used for making fireproof cloth, and coral. Chinese doctors used coral to help them locate illness, as it was said that coral lost its color when placed on the skin of someone who was sick.

The Romans also sent massive amounts of gold to trade for silk. In fact, so much gold was shipped out of Rome that in the first century C.E. the Roman emperor Tiberius passed a law forbidding men to wear silk. Legend says the emperor was afraid that wearing so much finery would make the Romans soft and weak. More likely, he wanted to reduce the amount of gold that was flowing out of his empire.



Carpets like this one from Persia were traded along the Silk Road.

The Western Half of the Silk Road During the Han Dynasty



24.6 Cultural Exchanges Along the Silk Road

Goods weren't the only things to travel along the Silk Road. The trade between East and West also resulted in cultural exchanges.

For example, China and Rome didn't just learn about new products from each other. In time, they learned how to make these products for themselves. By 500 C.E., the Chinese had learned how to make glass. About the same time, the West learned how to produce silk.

Buddhism entered China by way of the Silk Road. This is the earliest Chinese statue of Buddha that has been found.



Diets, gardening, and agriculture also changed as new plants were introduced into different areas. China imported many new foods and spices. Among them were grapes, alfalfa, cucumbers, figs, pomegranates, walnuts, chives, sesame, and coriander. The West imported roses, azaleas, chrysanthemums, peonies, camellias, oranges, peaches, and pears.

The Silk Road also helped to spread Buddhism. As you have learned, Buddhism began in India. Because the Silk Road passed through many different nations, religious travelers used the route to spread their beliefs.

Buddhism was introduced to China around the middle of the first century. Some Chinese Buddhists journeyed on foot across Central Asia to India to learn more about their new religion. They returned to China with copies of sacred Buddhist texts. Buddhism would eventually become a major religion in China.

24.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you explored the Silk Road, the network of trade routes between China and the West. The Silk Road was opened under the Han and remained a major route of trade for more than 1,000 years.

The eastern and western parts of the Silk Road presented many dangers and difficulties to travelers. The Eastern Silk Road connected the capital of China to Dunhuang, on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. From there, the northern route took travelers across the desert through Kucha to Kashgar. From Kashgar, the Western Silk Road crossed the Pamir Mountains and passed through Ctesiphon on its way to Mediterranean ports like Antioch.

Many goods were exchanged along the Silk Road, including silk from China and glassware from Rome. In addition to new products, trade brought cultural changes to both East and West. One of the most important changes was the introduction of Buddhism to China.

In the next unit, you'll return to the Mediterranean world. You'll explore ancient Greece, a civilization that has had a deep and lasting influence on our own culture.



This fragment of ancient Chinese silk was probably part of a valuable garment or piece of cloth.