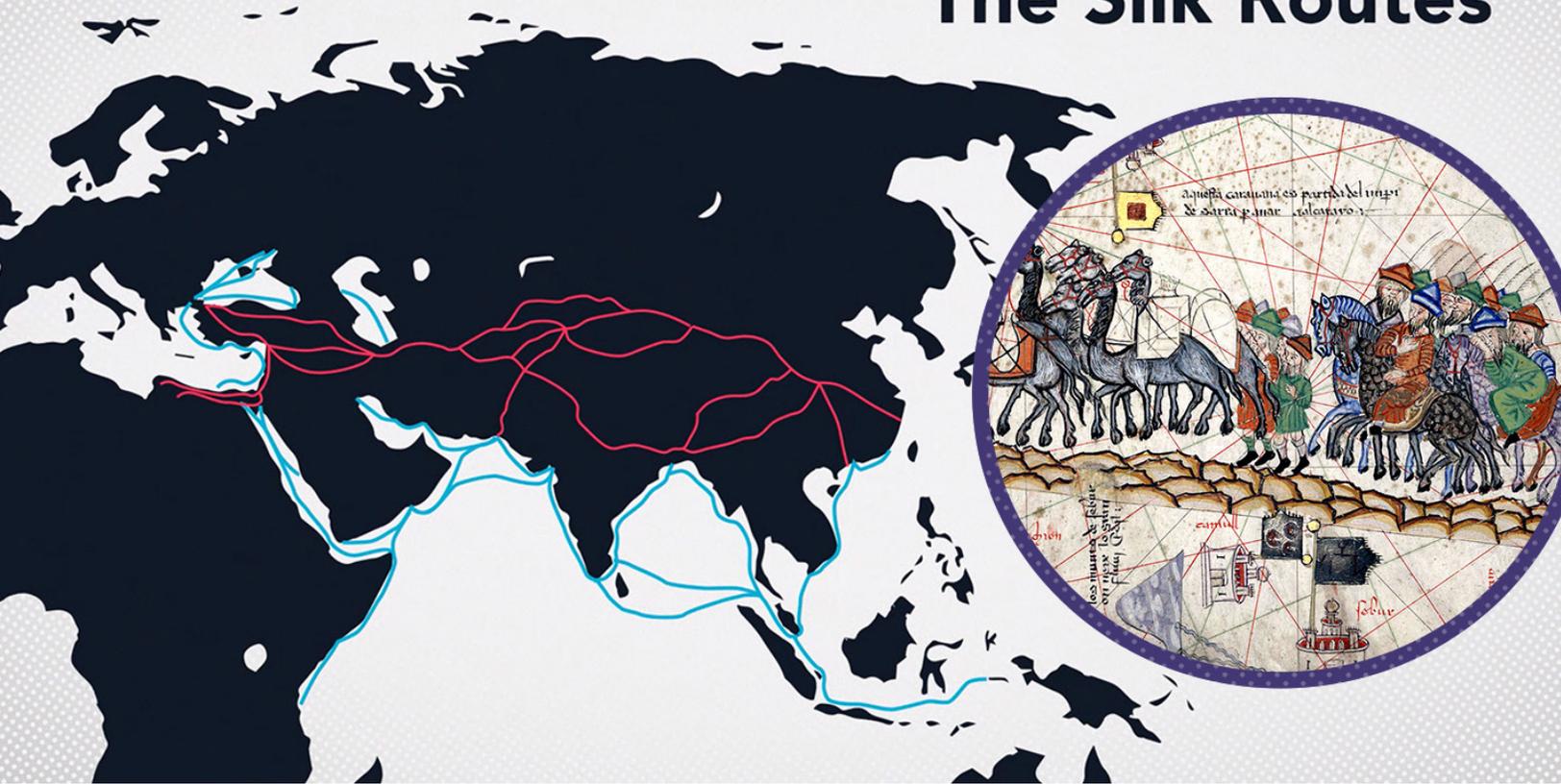


The Silk Routes



Rebuilding the Silk Road

The Han Dynasty's management of the Silk Road helped link together smaller regional networks and support trade across Asia. But when the Han Dynasty fell, the Silk Road did not collapse. Many of the traders at the time came from Central Asia and operated in smaller circuits, and other empires stepped in to provide stability until the Tang Dynasty, when Chinese imperial power recovered and a golden age was launched.



00:01

*Eman M. Elshaikh,
University of Chicago*

EMAN ELSHAIKH: We've all learned that the Silk Road was the backbone of the greatest network of the ancient and medieval worlds, connecting vast parts of Europe and Asia. Things and ideas were produced on either end of this network, and then transported along the Silk Road to other areas.

00:26

*Image of an ancient brick
road*

In your mind, you're probably picturing an ancient Eurasian superhighway, where silk was transported in caravans along vast distances. And you're mostly right, but you're also wrong.

*Photos of desert terrain;
desert guides*

The thing is, the Silk Road is not really a very accurate term for a few reasons. First, the Silk Road wasn't really a road. Most routes on the Silk Road were unmarked, shifting, informal paths, connecting oasis towns and cities across land and sea. Much of it crossed deserts and mountains in central Asia, and travelers needed local guides to navigate it.

01:00

*Animated map shows a
network of intersecting
paths that make up the
Silk Road, or the "Silk
Routes".*

Second, it wasn't a single path, like many of us imagine. It was really a network of routes going in different directions across Eurasia and even into Africa. And that's why some historians prefer to call it the "Silk Routes." And among the goods transported across this network, silk and other luxuries weren't the most common. Silk was highly sought after in the West, but by some accounts, ammonium chloride, which was used to make metals and treat leather, was the most commonly traded good across some routes. The Ammonium Chloride Road doesn't really have same ring to it though, does it?

01:36

*Photo montage of colorful
spices; glazed pottery;
glassware; stones*

Some commonly traded goods included chemicals, spices, metals, lacquerware, saddles, leather goods, precious stones, glass, and paper. People moving along the Silk Road also brought technologies like paper, gunpowder, and the compass, which were invented in China. They even brought new ideas and belief systems, like Buddhism. Finally, people who lived along the Silk Road in the medieval era didn't say things like, "I live on the Silk Road." That term hadn't even been invented yet.

02:05

*Painting of weary desert
travelers resting*

Like many historical terms, the Silk Road is thoroughly modern. It was first used in 1877 by the German geographer and traveler Ferdinand von Richthofen, but it only became common during the 20th century. Instead, the road had many local names. Lots of people called the Silk Road the Road to Samarkand, which was a vibrant trading city in modern-day Uzbekistan. Some called it the road to... whatever the next major city was. Some people referred to it as a northern or southern route around the Taklamakan desert.

The thing is, the Silk Road was both entirely new and somewhat familiar. For some of the locals who moved along segments of this network, it appeared very similar to the ancient trade pathways they'd always used. They may have had access to some different goods at different times, but in many ways it seemed like business as usual.

02:58

*Animated map once again
shows small trade routes
being linked together,*

On a bigger scale however, one can see that these smaller networks were being linked together into a massive web, which allowed for an unprecedented flow across much farther distances. This is partly because, for much of its history, some parts of the Silk Road were also more directly managed by powerful empires like Han Dynasty China. As they expanded westward in 130 BCE, the Han sought

*forming a comprehensive
trade network
Image of the Great Wall of
China*

04:13

*Text: The Silk Road
after the Fall of the Han
Dynasty*

to protect valuable trade routes. They even extended the Great Wall to cover parts of it. They established settlements, purchased goods, and stationed troops in the central Asian segments of the Silk Road. Han influence created stability and ensured that the flow of goods was uninterrupted by raids and conflicts. Trade thrived as a result. Across Eurasia, the demand for luxury goods like silk and jade increased, further energizing the Silk Road. And when the Han Dynasty collapsed around 220 CE, economic activity took a hit. In China, devastating famines and natural disaster disrupted the flow of goods. But parts of the Silk Road still continued to thrive. Where? And what did that look like?

Despite the collapse of the Han Dynasty around 220 CE, activity continued along the Silk Road in central and west Asia. In this era, very few merchants would have traveled across the entirety of central Asia. And we sometimes forget how huge this area is. For perspective, the distance between Xian in northwestern China and Samarkand is 2,000 miles. That's about as far as Chicago is from San Francisco. Instead, most people continued to travel in much smaller circuits, usually no more than the few hundred miles between their home towns and the next oasis. Goods were usually exchanged for other goods, not for currency, moving slowly from town to town. In fact, the long-distance caravans we usually imagine are mentioned only rarely in historical documents.

05:02

*Artwork depicting a town
in central Asia: we see
a decorated home, and
people on horseback in a
grassy field*

At this time, much of the trade was carried out by people from central Asia. And these communities played an important role in world history. They were skilled at horse riding and herding animals. And by riding these animals from place to place, they could move quickly. By interacting with many people in those places, they could rapidly spread ideas. And because they interacted with so many people, they also had better immunity to diseases, making them more resilient travelers.

05:30

So even though the Han weren't around to regulate trade in Central Asia, other powers were. Empires like the Kushan and Sassanid created stability across large areas of land. And non-imperial central Asian peoples, like the Sogdians, also continued to participate in vibrant trade along the Silk Road. The Sogdians were skilled merchants and Chinese figurines depict them as tradesman. So while the Han collapse did impact trade, it also continued in most places.

06:01

*Artwork depicting Chinese
soldiers*

*Painting of women holding
out a large silk tapestry*

*Mongolian artwork
features Mongolian
soldiers protecting a
structure*

While the Silk Road survived the collapse of the Han, it didn't really boom again until Tang Dynasty Golden Age, starting around 626 CE. Around this time, the Tang emperors and empresses encouraged exchange with China's neighbors and reestablished a military presence along the western edges of their territory. They even paid many of these soldiers in bolts of silk, which were considered currency at the time. The Tang also reestablished large-scale silk production. Women played a big role in the production of silk and other textiles, though they had little to do with its distribution along the Silk Road corridors. During this age of new empires, imperial networks got bigger and linked up to other big networks. While the Tang, for example, protected and encouraged trade in the eastern parts of the Silk Road, there was vibrant activity in the Muslim empires energizing the flow in the western parts. Even after these powers faded, the Mongol Empire protected huge areas of the Silk Road.

07:01

Across these different empires, we can see that economic prosperity led to increased production and exports, as well as an increased demand for luxury goods. The Tang Golden Age totally energized the flow coming in and out of China, and it's not so different from what's happening today.

A modern trade map that reaches from Xian to Germany, down to Kenya and to Indonesia

In the midst of what some describe as yet another golden age, the Chinese government is working on bringing back the Silk Road, in the form of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. This initiative will create and reinforce trade routes to and from China. Through loans, investments, and the building of infrastructure, the Chinese government hopes to make imports and exports easier. It also hopes to exert political influence through this initiative as its projects stretch beyond China's borders.

07:49

This is kind of like the Han and the Tang's investment in the Silk Road, but about a billion times bigger. It's a trillion-dollar project that involves over a hundred countries. But unlike the Han and the Tang, the Chinese government today is actively building things thousands of miles away to support trade. One of the biggest parts of its new trading system is the Eurasian Land Bridge, a rail transport route that's meant to run through dozens of countries, from the Pacific to western Europe.

Is this new Silk Road a continuity of the ancient and medieval trading network? Are the two comparable? Only time can tell, but certainly its worth thinking about the historical roots of the modern-day resurgence of trade between China and its western neighbors.