



THE ROLE OF THE GREAT SILK ROAD AND THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE AND CENTRAL ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article reveals the role of the Great Silk Road and the historical development of Chinese and Central Asian civilization. Including the role of the formation and development of the Great Silk Road in the history of China, in particular, the efforts to develop this trade route during the Qin, Han, Ming and Qing dynasties.

INTRODUCTION

A remarkable feature of the past and what is now known as the Great Silk Road is one of the greatest achievements of the ancient Orient. The Great Silk Road is a monument to human inquisitiveness, entrepreneurship, and an unquenchable thirst for ever new knowledge and a desire to go beyond. Human civilization does not know any other road as famous as this trans-Eurasian system of routes linking together China and Western Europe. It was, in fact, a channel through which the unprecedented number of nations exchanged their wares, cultural and artistic achievements, and most revolutionary ideas.

The beginning of the Silk Road history coincides with the end of the II century B.C. For more than 15 centuries since then this caravan road system had been in the service of people, and this is an overall record for any overland road. The great civilizations of China, Hindu Valley, the Middle East, and Europe had lived through their ups and downs, wars to set control over the strategic stretches of this system or been pushed away from the mainstream. A glimpse of the map of the Great Silk Road immediately suggests that it's like a huge river taking in smaller streams and rivulets, and flowing around obstacles. The obstacles were numerous and many in the Great Silk Roads. In the 550s, the Sogdians made two attempts to reach Byzantium and failed because of the Iranian shahs. The first time they burned down the silks of Soghdian traders, and the second, they poisoned the Soghdian envoys. However, this didn't stop the Sogdians and they found another way – along the northern shores of the Caspian they reached Byzantium and established diplomatic and trade relations. Time went on, and the roads became more ramified and comfortable for travel. The road had been acquiring caravanserais, or inns, warehouses,

money changing, safety measures to protect foreign guests. The Great Silk Road was in need of many professions – cameleers, guardsmen, interpreters, moneychangers. Following the Templars, Oriental traders introduced the circulation of paper receipts. Leaving Khorassan for Soghd, for instance, one could give his gold coins to an Iranian moneychanger and receive a note which could then be exchanged for real money at Soghd.

The vastness of the Great Silk Road could not understandably be controlled by a single nation, and the resultant was only damaged trade along the Road. However, the Great Silk Road has proved its viability and outlived feudal strife, the fall of statehoods, the plunder of cities, and caravans, and the end of dynasties. Risks and profits were high. And what one could buy for almost nothing at one end of the Great Silk Road became real gold at its end.

The Chinese had enriched their culture by adopting Central Asian horses known for their beauty and endurance, and such plants as alfalfa, chestnut, vine, pomegranate, etc. that proved to be very effective there. It is from Central Asia that China had adopted cotton growing, while the Sogdians took over from the Chinese such arts and crafts as silk-making and gold and silver jewelry, paper making and weaponry. Remarkably, the Europeans were unable to offer similarly lucrative wares in exchange and had to pay in gold and silver. This resulted in the amassing of huge treasures in the Orient, which fact could not help concerning the European rulers.

Genghis Khan was the first to stretch his rule over the Great Silk Road in the XIII-XIV centuries, and these were the years of flourishing trade and prosperity. But thereafter trade was again damaged by feudal strife that ended in that the Great Silk Road was divided between the four owners: China, Central Asia, Iran, and the Golden Horde, who was trying to provide security for everybody on the Great Silk Road – no matter which faith or nationality they belonged to.

During the pre-Qin period, a channel connecting the East and West of China already existed, the formal spread of silk to the West began in the Western Han through the Western Regions, and the Silk Road really took shape when Zhang Qian opened it up in the Western Han. During this period, the source of the spread of silk, the destination of the spread, the route of the spread is very clear, there is history to support, there is evidence, the number of spread is also very large, the East and West is planned, and even organized silk trade, so the Silk Road really opened up in the Western Han Dynasty[1, P. 3].

When Emperor Wu of Han heard that the Da Yue Clan, who had been invaded by the Xiongnu and moved west, had a desire to take revenge on the Xiongnu, he sent a mission to the Da Yue Clan to contact them to attack the Xiongnu from the east and the west.

Zhang Qian, a native of Hanzhong in Shaanxi province, answered the call. In the second year of Jian Yuan (139 BC), Zhang Qian led more than 100 people to the West, but was captured by the Xiongnu on the way and was stranded for 10 years. Zhang Qian failed to achieve his goal and stayed in the West for over a year before returning back, but was detained by the Xiongnu for over a year on the way. The trip lasted more than ten years, and although it did not achieve its goal, it did yield a great deal of information about the Western Regions, and the historian Sima Qian called Zhang Qian's act "chiseling the sky"[2, P. 3].

After Zhang Qian's return, Emperor Wu of Han sent an envoy to explore the opening of a transportation route through Rome to Daxia without going through Xiongnu, but without success. The Han army later defeated the Xiongnu and gained the Hexi Corridor region, opening up the passage between the Western Han and the Western Regions. Although Zhang Qian's earliest missions to the West were for political purposes, the establishment of the Western Capital Protection Office after the

military resistance was a watershed, and the Silk Road, a road of exchange between East and West from the Western Han Dynasty, began to enter an era of prosperity[3, P. 3].

During the Wei, Jin and North-South Dynasties, the Silk Road continued to develop, with three main routes: the Northwest Silk Road (also known as the Oasis Silk Road or the Desert Silk Road), the Southwest Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road. It was characterized by the transition from the Han Dynasty to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the further development of the Maritime Silk Road, and the frequent interactions between the two regimes in the north and south with the west at the same time[4, P. 3].

The heyday of the Silk Road interactions was the powerful Tang Dynasty, established after the Sui. Li Shimin, the second emperor of the Eastern Tang Dynasty, defeated the Turkic Tugun, and submitted to the North and South of the desert. Li Zhi, the third emperor of the Tang dynasty, also defeated the Western Turkic peoples and set up two capitals, Anxi and Beiting. The Tang Empire, which stretched from the Korean seashore in the east to the Dachang Water (Amu Darya, or Tigris River) in the west, was the most developed and powerful country in the world at the time, with the highest level of economic and cultural development in the world.

The Silk Road was used as a bridge between the East and the West, and there was full-scale friendly interaction between the official and private sectors. In the eastern section of the Silk Road, north and south of the desert and the countries of the Western Regions, many branch lines were built through the Silk Road, also known as the "Senkhan Road" (Tiankhan refers to Emperor Tang Taizong). Da Shi[5, P. 3] and the Eastern Roman Empire also sent envoys to Chang'an to communicate with China. Dunhuang, Yangguan and Yumen became the "sea markets on land" of the time. On the sea route, China could also travel by ship to Linyi (modern southern Vietnam), Chenla (Cambodia), Hailing (modern Java), Phyu (modern Burma), via Tianzhu (modern India) to the Great Food, and to European countries. Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Liujiagang (near the mouth of Wusong in modern Shanghai) were the most famous foreign ports. History records that Guangzhou was home to barge docks for ships of the South Sea, Kunlun, Lion, Brahmin, Western and Persian. The Western countries travelled by land through Central Asia and the West, with constant camel and horse traders along the way, and by sea from Baghdad, the capital of the Da Shi, to the Persian Gulf, with ships coming to the East almost every day[6, P. 3].

The actual territory of the Northern Song Dynasty was drastically reduced, with the government failing to control the Hexi Corridor, and by the time of the Southern Song Dynasty it was even less able to venture into the northwest, and the decline of the Silk Road became increasingly evident, while the rise of the Maritime Silk Road gradually showed signs of replacing the land-based Silk Road. [7, P. 3].

During the Mongolian and Yuan dynasties, when the Silk Road was open and economic exchanges between Europe and Asia were flourishing at all levels, a number of trade centers were formed and developed as hubs of international trade between East and West or as regional and national markets and distribution centres for goods and materials with close ties to international trade. Almost all Chinese and foreign histories of the Yuan dynasty record the undisputed status of Yuandu as an international trade Centre in the East. It was a place where "merchants from all countries converged and department stores gathered"[8, P. 3].

During the Ming Dynasty the Maritime Silk Road routes had expanded globally and entered a period of great prosperity. The seven voyages of Zheng He to the west, organized by the Ming government, reached 39 countries and regions in Asia and Africa, and were a precursor to the local routes from Europe to India set up by Da Gama and to Magellan's voyage around the world. The 'Guangzhou-Latin

America Route' (1575) sailed east from Guangzhou, out to sea via Macau, to the port of Manila in the Philippines, across the strait into the Pacific Ocean and east to the west coast of Mexico.

The Maritime Silk Road trade in Guangzhou during the Ming Dynasty developed even more than during the Tang and Song Dynasties, creating an unprecedented global trade cycle that continued until the eve of the Opium War. After the Opium War, China lost its maritime power and the coastal ports were forced to open up and become markets for Western dumped goods. From then on, the maritime silk route fell into decline. This state of affairs continued throughout the Republican period until the eve of the founding of New China[9, P. 3].

The Oasis Road of the Ming Dynasty was an important part of the Silk Road. It refers to the great corridor of commerce and trade between the Mongolian steppe belt and the Eurasian continent. As the artery of nomadic cultural exchange at the time, it ran from the Central Plains northwards across the ancient Yinshan Mountains (present-day Daqing Mountains) and Yanshan Mountains along the Great Wall, northwestwards across the Mongolian Plateau, the steppes of Southern Russia and northern Central and Western Asia, and directly to the European region on the northern continent of the Mediterranean Sea[10, P. 3].

The Oasis Road during the Ming and Qing dynasties was no longer a single channel for trade in silk and porcelain goods and limited cultural exchange as it had been in ancient times, but more diverse and modern. The nomads, especially the Mongolian nomads, made an important contribution to the expansion and operation of the Silk Road, reflecting the important position of the nomads in the Silk Road.

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