

China, Rome, and the Silk Road

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INTRODUCTION

In 117 CE, during the early years of trade along the Silk Road, dominant positions were held by two main superpowers—the Roman and Chinese Empires. Contacts between the two empires were usually indirect and involved the exchange of goods and information. Trade between the two took place primarily along the Silk Road, which connected the West with sources of unique products from India and China. While an early route ran through the Parthian Empire and to cities such as Petra, Antioch, Doura, and Odessa, a southern route from China stretched through the Karakoram Mountains and spanned the borders of China, Pakistan, and India. This route then turned westward and also had southward branches connecting to points along the Arabian Sea. The route then passed through Northern Pakistan, over the Hindu Kush Mountains, and into Afghanistan, where it joined a northern route near Merv, Turkmenistan. From Merv, the route went west through northern Iran, Mesopotamia, and the northern part of the Syrian desert, then reached the Levant and the border of the Eastern

Mediterranean Sea where Mediterranean ships carried cargoes to Rome.¹

THE SILK ROAD

In 202 BCE, Chinese Emperor Gaozu founded the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), which is composed of two distinct periods: Western Han (202 BCE–9CE) with Chang'an as its capital, and Eastern Han (25–220 CE) with Luoyang as its capital. Two major divisions in Rome's history during this time period included the Republic (509–27 BCE) and the Empire (27 BCE–476 CE). Chinese emperors expanded territory under their control westward; and in 107 CE, Roman Emperor Trajan expanded Roman territory eastward to include part of Arabia around Petra.² Such territorial expansions made the difficult journey from Rome to China a little easier.

Most of the trade that took place along the Silk Road occurred in small communities through a chain of area merchants. Rare items, such as jewels, pearls, silk, spices, and medical herbs produced high profits that made the long and

difficult journey worthwhile. For example, the West exported goods such as honey, wine, grapes, raisins, wool, medicinal herbs (such as the antiparasitic known as storax or *Liquidambar orientalis*), glass, amber, silver, and gold.³ Exports from the East included items such as incense, ivory, precious stones (including jade), rare spices (such as pepper), tea, dyes, perfumes, porcelain, medical substances (such as the powerful analgesic known as opium poppy or *Papaver somniferum*), delicate clothes, and—of course—silk.

Ladies of the wealthy Roman patrician class coveted garments made from Chinese silk. Pliny the Elder, who had much to say about trade on the Silk Road, noted that “the Chinese produce luxurious clothing material for women, called *silk*.”⁴ At that time—during the first century CE—many conservative Romans objected to women wearing silk garments, as recorded in Pliny the Elder’s writing: “I can see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one’s decency, can be called *clothes*.”⁵

Regardless of conservative objections, the prolific import of silk continued, causing a huge outflow of gold from Rome and a trade deficit with China.⁶ In fact, modern estimates reveal that the average price paid for an article of export from China was roughly 100 times the item’s actual value.⁷ Regarding this high trade cost, the Greek philosopher Dio Chrysostom—who believed that it was crucial to not become the slave of one’s desires—stated that merchants from China and elsewhere “exact tribute from us because of our stupidity and self-indulgence and of our own volition.”⁸ However, Pliny the Elder had a different perspective, as he wrote, “Who would not think that life has benefited from the exchange of things; all those things which were previously hidden have now been made widely available.”⁹ In exchange for Chinese silk and other goods from the East, the Romans offered elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, and turtle shells.¹⁰ Pliny the Elder documented that “the most expensive produce found on land is ivory; in the sea, the turtle’s shell.”¹¹

Valuable cargoes on the Silk Road traveled overland by caravans of camels and via sea on merchant ships. Armed guards protected the caravans on land while Roman warships defended cargo that sailed throughout the Mediterranean Sea and was vulnerable to the plundering of pirates. In 67 BCE, Roman General Pompey defeated the Cilician pirates and restored relative tranquility in the sea’s trading lanes.¹² By the time of Augustus’s reign (27 BCE–14 CE), approximately 120 ships set sail every year from Egypt to India.¹³ Over time, the various routes of the Silk Road evolved into roads, rail lines, and highways, such as the Karakoram Highway which connects Pakistan and China.

The international trade that occurred via the Silk Road from 206 BCE–220 CE significantly impacted the cultures of the communities involved. People living during that time period were just as curious about other people, places, and things as humans are today. Trade along the Silk Road facilitated contacts between many different cultures, which resulted in exchanges not only of goods but also of language, religion, values, norms, and beliefs.¹⁴

While the majority of trading took place between common merchants, official political parties traveled the Silk Road as well. Chinese historian Fan Ye reported that, in 166 CE during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in Rome, a Roman delegation traveled through the central Vietnamese coast to visit Huang, the Han Emperor of China.¹⁵ However, the Romans in this delegation were likely freelance traders rather than an official embassy from the Roman emperors. Roman historian Lucius Florus (74–130 CE) provided an account of the first official visit by Chinese and Indian delegations to Rome, which occurred during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE). Florus wrote, “The Seres [Chinese] and the Indians sent ambassadors seeking friendship. They brought elephants amongst their gifts as well as precious stones and pearls and regarded their long journey of four years as the greatest tribute which they rendered.”¹⁶

After a failed attempt at traveling to Rome in 97 CE, Chinese diplomat and explorer Gan Ying reported, “The king of this country [Rome] always wanted to send envoys to Han, but Anxi [Parthia], wishing to control the trade in Chinese silks, blocked the route to prevent the Romans getting through to China.”¹⁷ Although the Romans and Parthians often fought wars, they also traded with one another, as Parthian textiles and woven fabrics were in particularly high demand.

Chinese merchants who traveled via the Alexandrian port often visited Haixi (Roman Egypt) after trading with Parthia.¹⁸ While these Chinese merchants mainly sought gold and silver from the Roman tradesmen, they also highly valued red coral from the Western Mediterranean Sea. However, the primary recipient of the coral delivered via Roman cargo ships was India, with whom Rome had a very lively trade relationship and from whom the Romans received spices, gems, ivory, perfumes, cotton, jewelry, incense, and exotic animals. In 107 CE, Roman Emperor Trajan received an official visit from “the Indi,” and historian Ammianus Marcellinus recorded that “Indian peoples as far away as Ceylon and other islands sent him gifts.”¹⁹ Official Roman delegations visited China in 226 and 284 CE.²⁰

IMPEDIMENTS TO TRADE

The 5,000-mile journey along the Silk Road was extremely difficult. Merchants and their caravans had to face hostile peoples, communicable diseases, dangerous animals, harsh weather conditions, and—in some places—almost impassable trails. Land routes could be blocked by large boulders, fallen trees, and other obstacles. Fortunately, except for diplomatic missions, merchants traveled only a reasonable distance before someone else took over. The Silk Road on land was a large relay system. Travel by sea was faster and safer, but attacks by pirates posed a problem; and merchant ships, laden with merchandise, were vulnerable to violent storms at sea. Regardless, China and Rome found ways to exchange items and ideas, and each empire used

the Silk Road to send political delegations to visit the other.

Geopolitical instability was a problem during the days of trade on the Silk Road and seems to have remained a problem ever since. In 1453, the Ottoman Empire’s expansion and control of Constantinople significantly affected the Silk Road by monopolizing key land-based trade routes, imposing heavy taxes, although this interference did prompt European nations to launch the age of exploration. Even in modern days, problems due to geopolitical instability are evidenced in many ways, such as the 2022 destruction of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 natural gas pipelines, which connected Russia to Europe.²¹ The blasts, which were considered to be an act of sabotage, ruptured three of the four pipelines near Bornholm, Denmark, causing massive leaks. The incident marked a definitive halt to Russian gas supplies.

In March 2026, a very recent example of geopolitical instability occurred when the hostilities between Iran and the United States blocked most international shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.²² This blockade—which is still an issue as of the time of this writing in May 2026—has caused major disruptions to global energy supplies, including oil and liquefied natural gas.

CONCLUSION

The Silk Road spanned the Asian continent to include Europe and constituted a form of international economy. Despite formidable barriers and geopolitical instability, nations traded goods and shared architectural, scientific, philosophical, and religious ideas. Cultural exchanges took place, enriching the lives of the people in the many communities along the Silk Road. As important Eurasian trade continues to take place today, and geopolitical issues still cause challenges, studying the complicated facets of ancient trade along the Silk Road could reveal ideas for collaborative solutions to today’s complex trade-relations problems.

NOTES.....

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“The important thing
is to not stop questioning.
Curiosity has its own
reason for existence.”
—Albert Einstein