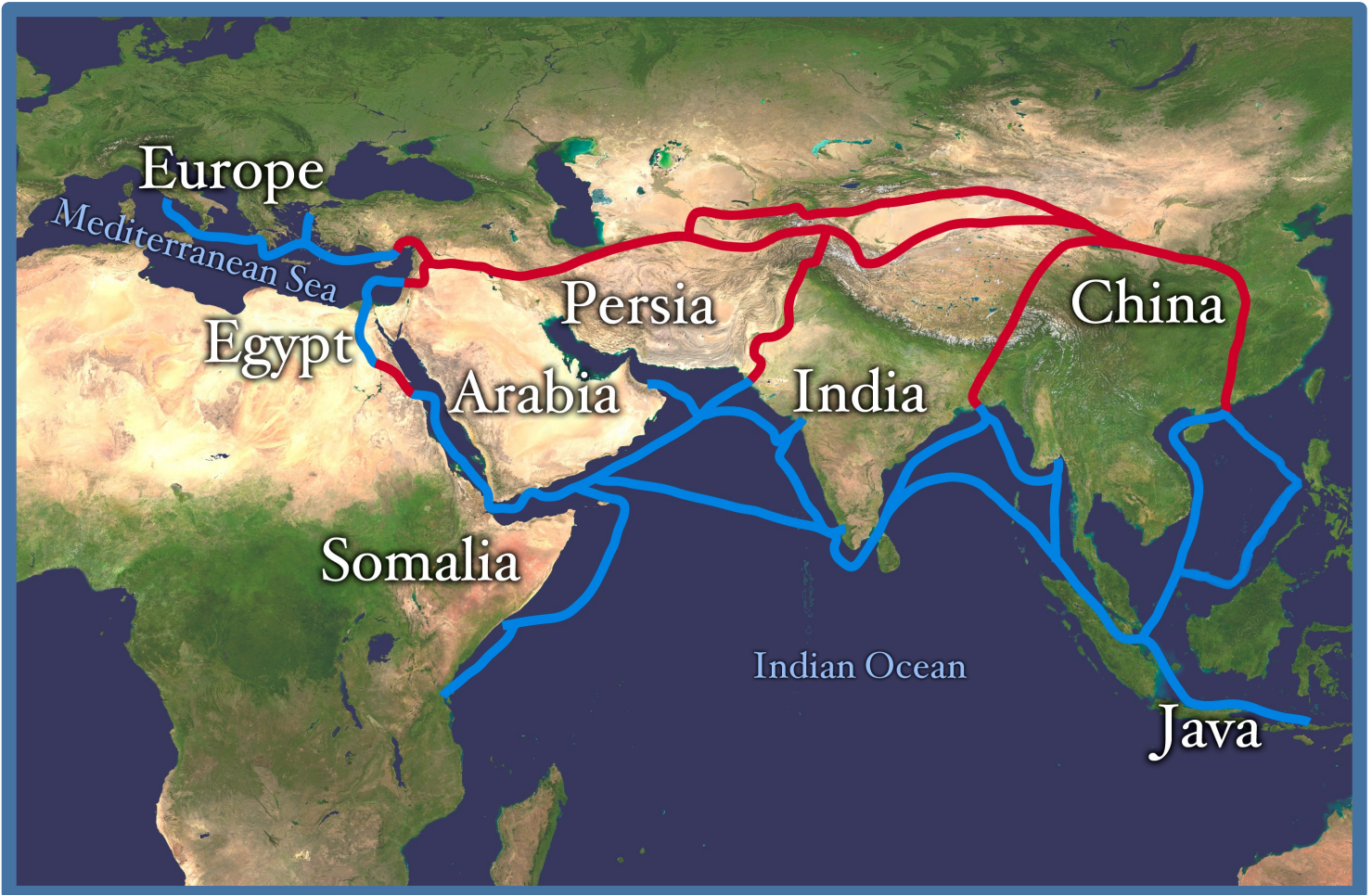


9th Grade Silk Road Inquiry

Should We Call It the “Silk Road”?



Public domain. NASA Visible Earth via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route.jpg

Supporting Questions

1. What was the “Silk Road”?
2. Why was silk so important?
3. What, besides silk and other goods, was shared on the Silk Road?
4. What else could this trade network be called?



9th Grade Silk Road Inquiry

Should We Call It the “Silk Road”?

| | |
|---|---|
| New York State Social Studies Framework Key Idea & Practices | <p>9.4 RISE OF TRANSREGIONAL TRADE NETWORKS: During the classical and postclassical eras, transregional trade networks emerged and/or expanded. These networks of exchange influenced the economic and political development of states and empires.</p> <p>✔ Gathering, Using, and Interpreting Evidence ✔ Comparison and Contextualization</p> |
| Staging the Question | Brainstorm the meaning of Ferdinand von Richthofen’s label of the Eurasian trade networks as the “Silk Road,” paying attention to the individual implications of both terms (i.e., “Silk” and “Road”). |

| Supporting Question 1 | Supporting Question 2 | Supporting Question 3 | Supporting Question 4 |
|---|---|---|--|
| What was the “Silk Road”? | Why was silk so important? | What, besides silk and other goods, was shared on the Silk Road? | What else could this trade network be called? |
| Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task |
| Create a map that illustrates exchanged commodities and their movement along the trade routes. | Write a paragraph on the silk market’s impact on Chinese and Western societies. | Create a T-chart that lists cultural and technological knowledge shared along the Silk Road. | Propose a different name for the Silk Road and cite reasons for your suggestion. |
| Featured Sources | Featured Sources | Featured Sources | Featured Sources |
| <p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Travels of Marco Polo</i></p> <p>Source B: Excerpt from “Traveling the Silk Road”</p> <p>Source C: Excerpt from “The Great Silk Road”</p> | <p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Suleiman</i></p> <p>Source B: Excerpt from “Silk Road: Connecting People and Cultures”</p> | <p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Letter to the West</i></p> <p>Source B: Excerpt from “Silk Road: Spreading Ideas and Innovations”</p> <p>Source C: Excerpt from “The Legacy of the Silk Road”</p> | <p>Source A: Excerpt from “Following the Mythical Road”</p> <p>Source B: Excerpt from “The Silk Road in World History: A Review Essay”</p> |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Summative Performance Task | ARGUMENT Should we call it the “Silk Road”? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views. |
| | EXTENSION Create an eBook of your community that highlights your local culture(s). Share with international students through Skype Classroom. |
| Taking Informed Action | <p>UNDERSTAND Research current efforts to foster cultural exchange through organizations such as the Silk Road Foundation.</p> <p>ASSESS Determine the extent to which various cultural traditions and practices impact your local culture.</p> <p>ACT Create a “Sharing the Road” web page to encourage dialogue with students from the Skype Classroom connection.</p> |



Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of the complex trade networks throughout Eurasia, collectively known as the “Silk Road.” By investigating the compelling question, students evaluate the descriptor “Silk Road” by considering its accuracy and determining whether or not this label should continue to be used or if there is a more appropriate title that better reflects the network’s historical, sociocultural, and economic role. Students begin by gathering research about the types of commodities traded, as well as the geographic reach of the network. The next task asks students to consider the importance of silk within various cultures of Eurasia and the sharing of both cultural and technological knowledge. Using the previous formative performance tasks along with the featured sources, students will propose one or more different names for the Silk Road, supporting their suggestions with defensible reasons. After considering the complexities of the Silk Road trade networks and the appropriateness of its name, students should be able to make a claim supported by evidence as to whether we should continue to call it the “Silk Road.” The progression of the inquiry will help students recognize the problematic nature of simplistic titles applied to complex historical phenomena.

In addition to the Key Idea listed previously, this inquiry highlights the following Conceptual Understandings:

- (9.4a) Afro-Eurasian transregional trade networks grew across land and bodies of water.
- (9.4c) Interregional travelers, traders, missionaries, and nomads carried products and natural resources and brought with them enslaved people and ideas that led to cultural diffusion.

NOTE: This inquiry is expected to take four to six 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “Should we call it the ‘Silk Road?’” students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument with evidence while acknowledging competing viewpoints.

Staging the Compelling Question

The compelling question could be staged by having students brainstorm what the “Silk Road” title implies about the trade network. Teachers should ask students to pay attention to the implication of the individual words (“Silk” and “Road”), rather than just their collective meaning. The origin and purpose of the term “Silk Road” should be considered in order to assess both its value and limitations as an identifier.



Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—“What was the ‘Silk Road?’”—helps students establish the basic functions of the Silk Road as a transcontinental trade network for various commodities. The formative performance task asks students to create a map illustrating the movement of these goods across the various land and sea trade routes, collectively referred to as the Silk Road. Students are provided with an excerpt from Marco Polo’s travelogue, which describes the movement of some items exchanged. The two additional featured sources are articles that describe the trading of various commodities in greater detail. Teachers will also want to provide students with maps of various scales from which they could draw inspiration. The following websites could be used for such maps:

<http://www.amnh.org/education/resources/rfl/web/silkroadguide/map-routes.php> or

<http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/lesson-or-activity/mapping-silk-road-lesson>.

Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question—“Why was silk so important?”—asks students to reflect on the importance of silk in order to understand why it was chosen as the symbol for the trade network. The formative performance task asks students to summarize silk’s importance for both the Chinese (the primary society associated with the production of silk) and the consumers who demanded it. Students should be encouraged to consider the sociocultural and economic impact of silk for both Western and Eastern societies. The first featured source is a brief description of the functionality of silk illustrating, in part, its value. The second featured source speaks to silk’s cultural and economic value.

Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“What, besides silk and other goods, was shared on the Silk Road?”—challenges students to consider the Silk Road trade network as a means of cross-cultural exchange, rather than being limited to the trading of commodities. The formative performance task asks students to consider the types of knowledge shared amongst the various cultures along the trade routes and to categorize them as either an example of cultural or technological knowledge. The first featured source comes from a missionary who discusses his religious conversions in Eastern societies. The additional featured sources provide overviews of the knowledge, ideas, and technological innovations shared. Because of the richness of this supporting question, students should be encouraged to conduct further research.



Supporting Question 4

The last supporting question—“What else could this trade network be called?”—challenges students to consider the complexities of all that the Silk Road encompasses and to propose a different name for it that they feel better reflects its historical, sociocultural, and economic significance. Students should cite reasons to justify their proposed names. The featured sources offer students varied historiographical perspectives concerning the Silk Road label’s impact.

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have determined the types of commodities exchanged along the Silk Road, the geographic extent to which these items were traded, the importance of silk across various cultures, the type of knowledge exchanged, and other possible names for the trade network. Students should be able to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students are asked to construct an evidence-based argument responding to the compelling question “Should we call it the ‘Silk Road?’” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster, or essay.

Students’ arguments likely will vary, but could include any of the following:

- This title is appropriate because it emphasizes the importance of silk, which is representative of the goods exchanged on this expansive trade network.
- This title is misleading because ideas were the most influential thing exchanged, not luxury items.
- Although many cultures were connected across the Silk Road, naming it after silk is appropriate because the name emphasizes the dominance of Chinese ideas and goods in the exchange.

Students could extend these arguments by considering the cross-cultural connections in existence today. Utilizing the networking capabilities of the Internet, students could share their cultural backgrounds with a foreign classroom through the Skype Classroom platform. Creating an eBook is one way the students could create a cultural profile of their local community.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by further fostering the cultural exchange established in the summative extension activity. They demonstrate that they *understand* by investigating current efforts to foster cultural exchange through organizations such as the Silk Road Foundation. They show their ability to *assess* by determining the extent to which various cultural traditions and practices impact their local culture, creating a unique cultural mosaic. And they can *act* by creating a “Sharing the Road” web page to encourage an ongoing dialogue with students from the Skype Classroom connection.



Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source A: Marco Polo, description of Polo's travels, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (excerpts), 2004

NOTE: Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant, achieved fame from his travelogue, The Travels of Marco Polo (c. 1300), wherein he described many of the cultural and economic activities of Asian societies. Though the authenticity of his experiences in China has come into question, his book nonetheless introduced Europe to Eastern cultures. In the following excerpts, Polo provides descriptions of Silk Road trading.

The people of Tabriz [Iran] live by trade and industry; for cloth of gold and silk is woven here in great quantity and of great value. The city is so favourably situated that it is a market for merchandise from India and Baghdad, from Mosul and Hormuz, and from many other places; and many Latin merchants come here to buy merchandise imported from foreign lands. It is also a market for precious stones, which are found here in great abundance. It is a city where good profits are made by travelling merchants....

Merchants come here by ship from India, bringing all sorts of spices and precious stones and pearls and cloths of silk and of gold and elephants' tusks and many other wares. In this city they sell them to others, who distribute them to various customers through the length and breadth of the world. It is a great centre of commerce, with many cities and towns subordinate to it, and the capital of the kingdom....

When the traveller rides through this province [Tenduc, Northeast China] for seven days towards the east in the direction of Cathay, he finds many cities and towns inhabited by Mahometans [follower of Muhammad], idolaters, and Nestorian Christians. They live by commerce and industry, weaving the cloths of gold called *nasich* and *nakh* and silk of various types. Just as we have woolen cloths of many different types, so have they of cloth of gold and silk. They are subject to the great Khan....

Ho-kien-fu [in Cathay province, China] is a great and splendid city, lying towards the south. The people are idolaters and burn their dead. They are subject to the Great Khan and use paper money. They live by trade and industry, for they have silk in plenty. They produce cloths of gold and silk and sandal in great abundance. This city has many cities and towns subject to its dominion. Through the midst of the city flows a great river, by which quantities of merchandise are transported to Khan-balik; for they make it flow thither through many different channels and artificial waterways.

Public domain. Polo, M., & Rugoff, M. (2004). *The Travels of Marco Polo*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin.



Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source B: American Museum of Natural History, exhibition description, “Traveling the Silk Road” (excerpts), 2009

Xi'an

A Cosmopolitan Capital

The Silk Road begins in the massive Xi'an, capital of China's Tang Empire. It was the largest city in the world around 750 CE. This metropolis is home to nearly a million people, and another million live just outside the imposing walls. Imperial buildings, temples and markets line the streets, and the city buzzes with activity. Foreign merchants, ambassadors, scholars, and musicians flock to this urban center, stocking the markets with exotic goods and filling the streets with sights and sounds from distant lands.

The Secret of Silk

The secret of silk, carefully guarded for centuries, brought wealth and prestige to Chinese empires. Legend has it that almost 5,000 years ago, a Chinese empress named Xi Ling was drinking tea in her garden when a small cocoon dropped from the branches of a mulberry tree into her cup. As she fished it out, the cocoon unwound into a single shimmering silk strand. Mesmerized by the thread, the empress gathered more cocoons, plunged them in hot water, unraveled the strands and wove the world's first silk cloth.

The Sound of Music

From a solitary flutist in the desert to grand orchestras in the palaces of Xi'an, musicians played all along the ancient Silk Road. Drumbeats rhythmically pounding in the distance, airy notes from a flute drifting by on the breeze, gentle tones from a bow drawn against strings, all punctuated by the sharp clash of cymbals--these made up the soundtrack of Xi'an during the Tang dynasty. Indeed, music was a constant feature of life in Xi'an, enhancing rituals, telling stories, and bringing communities closer together through festivity and celebration.

Turfan

After months spent baking under the blazing sun, the caravan has reached Turfan. At last, here is a lush oasis refuge from the harsh Taklimakan Desert of Central Asia. Ingenious irrigation systems bring cool water from nearby mountains, offering you and your thirsty camels a refreshing drink. More important, the water allows farmers here to grow an incredible array of fruits and vegetables. What's not eaten by residents or hungry travelers will be traded along the Silk Road, reaching kitchens thousands of miles away.

Market Place

Luxury Goods

Fashionable hats, elegant coats and dazzling jewelry might seem out of place at gritty Silky Road markets like this one. But in fact, the raw materials for such luxury goods--as much about style as practicality--were widely traded across Asia along the Silk Road. Merchants brought expensive skins, feathers and gems from afar to marketplaces where eager buyers awaited.

Foreign Flavors

Walk into your local supermarket and you may well find French wines and Japanese pears. Surprisingly, visitors to markets along the ancient Silk Road--long before overnight shipping and refrigeration--could also choose from an array of foreign delicacies. As travelers moved along trade routes, they introduced their own ingredients and recipes to foreign lands. Over time, such exotic edibles became familiar features on local menus.



Samarkand

City of Merchants

As the caravan approaches the fabled city of Samarkand, the gates swing open. Are you seeking the finest silk brocade? A sable coat, a packet of fragrant musk or a smooth roll of cream-colored paper? Whatever you desire, chances are a Sogdian merchant from Samarkand can deliver it. These shrewd traders have built up a fortune buying and selling in distant countries. The Sogdians are ambitious go-betweens, controlling a network of commerce that extends to India, China and Persia--and the heart of their trading empire is here, deep in Central Asia.

Paper

Samarkand was famous throughout the Islamic world for its especially fine paper.... Paper is made from plant material or cloth that is mashed to a pulp and then formed into a sheet.

Baghdad

The Scholarly City

The journey along the Silk Road has taken you thousands of miles from the imperial city of Xi'an, China. At last, here is its western rival: Baghdad, capital of the Islamic world. Founded in 762, this elegant metropolis is known as the City of Peace. Its gleaming palaces and fragrant gardens look down on Iraq's Tigris River; foreign goods arrive daily by ship as well as by camel caravan. An illustrious family of Islamic rulers holds court here. Under their patronage, Baghdad has blossomed into a remarkable center of learning--a meeting place for scholars, scientists and philosophers, and a storehouse for knowledge from many lands.

House of Wisdom

The Golden Age

Great minds from many lands gathered at a Baghdad library called the House of Wisdom, one of many centers of learning in an era known as the Islamic Golden Age.

Whenever you look at a map, gaze at the stars or take down a phone number, think of Baghdad. Long ago, brilliant scholars in this booming city studied geography, astronomy and mathematics--and made advances that are still relevant today.

Star Finder

Islamic astronomers used a tool called an astrolabe as a guide to the sky. By measuring the position of the sun and stars, they could precisely tell the time of the day or night, or predict the moment when the sun would rise in the morning.

To develop the astrolabe, Islamic scholars took a Greek idea, refined it and added many new features to make it more versatile. According to one early astrolabe expert, this all-purpose astronomical instrument had 1,000 uses in all!

New Numbers

At the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad, scholars pored over Indian books on mathematics. These works used a set of ten symbols to represent numbers--not letters of the alphabet, as in Baghdad and Rome. In the early 800s, mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi wrote a book on how to do math using the Indian system. Three centuries later, it was translated into Latin. Eventually, people all over Europe followed Al-Khwarizmi's example--and switched to the "Arabic" numerals we use today.



Master of Medicine

One of the greatest minds in early medicine was Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (A.D. 865-925). It is said that al-Razi chose the most sanitary location for a Baghdad hospital by hanging meat in different neighborhoods to see where it took longest to rot. A firm believer in logic and close observation, al-Razi wrote some 200 books, from a pamphlet on toothaches to a medical handbook that was used in Europe for hundreds of years.

Glorious Glass

Glass blown in Baghdad and other Islamic cities traveled over the trade routes toward China, where it was treated as the rarest of jewels. Glass catches the light. It can flash crystal clear or sparkle with color. When molten, it can be shaped as no other material can: with a simple puff of air. The art of glassblowing developed in the Middle East around 100 B.C. Centuries later, it reached new heights of craftsmanship under Islam. Glass blown in Baghdad and other Islamic cities traveled over the trade routes toward China, where it was treated as the rarest of jewels.

Sea Routes

Trading by Sea

While caravan merchants of the Silk Road risked their worldly assets transporting goods over mountains and deserts, other traders placed their bets on the sea. To reach China, ships sailing from Baghdad had to travel some 6,000 miles (9,600 kilometers). The voyage took about six months--yet this was considerably faster than overland travel, which could take as long as a year. Despite the peril of pirate attacks and shattering storms, sea trade expanded and eventually overshadowed the caravan trade.

Across the Seas

In 851, an Arab traveler gave an account of the sea voyage from the Persian Gulf to Guangzhou, the Chinese port formerly known as Canton.

A Magnificent Exchange

Islamic merchants who traveled by sea contributed to the flow of ideas as they traded glass and other goods for Chinese decorated ceramics. In Arab and Persian households, clay pots with colorful glazes and fine white porcelain from Chinese kilns were especially prized. Over time, potters in both China and the Middle East developed new styles and techniques in response to the overseas trade.

© American Museum of Natural History. Used with permission.



Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source C: Dmitry Voyakin, description of the Silk Road, “The Great Silk Road,” *Silk Road: Dialogue, Diversity & Development*, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, (excerpt), no date

NOTE: Teachers and students can read this article by clicking on this link: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/knowledge-bank/economy-and-trade/great-silk-road>.



Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source A: Suleiman, description of Suleiman’s 851 C.E. travel through India and China, translated into English by Jerry H. Bentley, *Voyage du marchand arabe Sulayman en Inde et en Chine* (excerpts), 1922

NOTE: Suleiman, an Arab merchant, describes his travels through India and China. The excerpts below are his description of the Chinese use of silk.

Young and old Chinese all wear silk clothes in both winter and summer, but silk of the best quality is reserved for the kings....During the winter, the men wear two, three, four, five pairs of pants, and even more, according to their means. This practice has the goal of protecting the lower body from the high humidity of the land, which they fear. During the summer, they wear a single shirt of silk or some similar material.

Bentley, J. H., & Ziegler, H. F. (2006). *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.



Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source B: Richard Kurin, description of the role, value, and uses of silk, "Silk Road: Connecting People and Cultures" (excerpts), Smithsonian Institute, 2002.

Since the concept of "*Seidenstrassen*" or "Silk Roads" was first invented by the German geologist and explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, the "Silk Road" has been used as a metaphor of European and Asian cultural interchange. While largely commercial, the Silk Road provided the vehicle for all sorts of creative exchange between tremendously diverse peoples and cultures.

Given the Silk Road's symbolic meaning of sharing and exchange, it is somewhat paradoxical that the desire to control its namesake commodity, silk, was so strong. The ancient Chinese guarded the secret of silk production for centuries. The Ottoman Turks and the Persians fought a war over it. The English and French competed to restrict its markets. But despite such attempts, silk moved across the planet with remarkable ease and was a vehicle of cultural creativity wherever it went. The degree of borrowing and choosing of techniques and patterns, [and] the invention and discovery of uses and styles is incredible. Every culture that touched silk added to its adornment of humanity.

And silk turns up everywhere — aboard medieval Viking ships sailing out of Constantinople and as kerchiefs from India (bandannas, from *bandhana*) around the necks of cowboys in the American West. The terms used for silk reveal its history and influences. Damask silk, referring to the style of Damascus, Syria, is actually Chinese in origin. Silk *chinoiserie* is not Chinese but a European imitation of Chinese style. Martha Washington wore a dress of Virginia silk to her husband's inauguration, and Native Americans learned silk embroidery to decorate traditional apparel. In the 19th century Paterson, New Jersey, of all places, declared itself "Silk City."

What is so special about silk? How did it go around the globe, and connect diverse civilizations for millennia? And what is the current significance of the Silk Road?

Chinese Silk Cultivation

Silk cultivation and production is such an extraordinary process that it is easy to see why its invention was legendary and its discovery eluded many who sought its secrets....

Silk has been long thought to be a special type of cloth; it keeps one cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It is extremely absorbent, meaning it uses color dyes much more efficiently than cotton, wool, or linen. It shimmers. It drapes upon the body particularly well. Silk is strong enough to be used for surgical sutures — indeed, by weight it is stronger than steel and more flexible than nylon. It is also fire and rot resistant. All these natural characteristics make silk ideal as a form of adornment for people of importance, for kimonos in Japan and wedding saris in India, for religious rituals, for burial shrouds in China and to lay on the graves of Sufis in much of the Muslim world.

Early in Chinese history, silk was used to clothe the emperor, but eventually it was adopted widely throughout Chinese society. Silk proved to be valuable for fishing lines, for the making of paper, for musical instrument strings. Under the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), silk became a great trade item, used for royal gifts and tribute. It also became a generalized medium of exchange, like gold or money. Chinese farmers paid their taxes in silk. Civil servants received their salary in silk.



Silk on the Road

...The growth of silk as a trade item both stimulated and characterized other types of exchanges during the era. Curative herbs, ideas of astronomy, and even religion also moved along the Silk Road network. Arabs traveled to India and China, Chinese to Central Asia, India, and Iran. Buddhism itself was carried along these roads from India through Central Asia to Tibet, China, and Japan. Islam was carried by Sufi teachers, and by armies, moving across the continent from Western Asia into Iran, Central Asia, China and India. Martial arts, sacred arts like calligraphy, tile making, and painting also traversed these roads. The Tang capital city of Chang'an, present-day Xi'an, became a cosmopolitan city — the largest on earth at the time, peopled with traders from all along the Silk Road, as well as monks, missionaries, and emissaries from across the continent.

The Mongol Silk Road and Marco Polo

Though some new silk styles such as silk tapestry made their way eastward from Iran to Uyghur Central Asia to China, the transcontinental exchange of the Silk Road diminished in the later Middle Ages and through the period of the Christian Crusades in the Holy Land from 1096 to the mid-1200s. Yet Crusaders, returning home with Byzantine silks, tapestries, and other spoils, rekindled European interest in trade with Asia. Moorish influence in Spain also had an enormous impact. It was through Arab scholars that Europeans gained access to Indian and Chinese advances in medicine, chemistry, and mathematics, and also to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that had survived in Arabic translations and commentaries. This flow of knowledge eventually helped to fuel the Renaissance.

With the Mongol descendants of Genghis (Chinghis) Khan in control of Asia from the Black Sea to the Pacific, a third Silk Road flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries. The emissary of King Louis IX of France, Willem van Rubruck, visited the court of the Mongol ruler in 1253, and, seeing the wealth of silks, realized that Cathay, or China, was the legendary Seres of Roman times. The Venetian Marco Polo followed.

Setting out with his uncles in 1271, Polo traveled across Asia by land and sea over a period of 24 years. The tales of his travels, narrated while a prisoner in a Genoa jail cell, spurred broad European interest in the Silk Road region. He told of the Mongols, who under Genghis and then Kublai Khan had taken over China and expanded their dominion across Asia into Central Asia, India, Iran, and Asia Minor. Polo related fantastic tales of the lands he had visited, the great sites he had seen, and the vast treasures of Asia. The 13th and 14th centuries were characterized by considerable political, commercial, and religious competition between kingdoms, markets, and religious groups across Eurasia....

During this "third" Silk Road, silk, while still a highly valued Chinese export, was no longer the primary commodity. Europeans wanted pearls and gems, spices, precious metals, medicines, ceramics, carpets, other fabrics, and lacquerware. All kingdoms needed horses, weapons, and armaments. Besides, silk production already was known in the Arab world and had spread to southern Europe. Silk weavers and traders — Arabs, "Saracens," Jews, and Greeks from Sicily and the eastern Mediterranean — relocated to new commercial centers in northern Italy. Italian silk-making eventually became a stellar Renaissance art in Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Lucca in the 14th and 15th centuries. New stylistic techniques were added, like alto-e-basso for velvets and brocades, while old motifs, like the stylized Central Asian pomegranate, took on new life.

Commercial trade and competition was of great importance by the 15th century with the growth of European cities, guilds, and royal states. With the decline of Mongol power, control over trade routes was vital. The motivation behind Portuguese explorations of a sea route to India was to secure safer and cheaper passage of trade goods than by land caravans, which were subject to either exorbitant protection fees or raiding by enemies. Indeed, it was the search for this sea route to the East that led Columbus westward to the "New World." When Vasco da Gama found the sea route to India and other Europeans subsequently opened direct shipping links with China, contact with Central Asia decreased dramatically....

Silk became both a component and a symbol of this cultural diffusion. It was seen as a valuable index of civilization with regard to religious ritual, kingship, artistic production, and commercial activity. Silk stood for the higher things in life. It was a valuable, traded commodity, as well as a historical medium of exchange. Silk both epitomized and played a major role in the early development of what we now characterize as a global economic and cultural system. Europeans of the 19th century saw this new globalism not just as an interesting historical occurrence, but also as something that resonated with the growing distribution of silk use and manufacturing of the time....

© Smithsonian Institute. Used with permission. http://www.festival.si.edu/past_festivals/silk_road/program_richard_kurin.aspx.



Supporting Question 3

Featured Source

Source A: Friar John of Monte Corvino, historical letter, *Letter to the West* (excerpts), 1305

I, Friar John of Monte Corvino, of the Order of Friars Minor [The Franciscans], departed from Tauris, a city of the Persians, in the year of the Lord 1291, and proceeded to India. And I remained in the country of India, wherein stands the church of St. Thomas the Apostle, for thirteen months, and in that region baptized in different places about one hundred persons....

I proceeded on my further journey and made my way to Cathay [China], the realm of the emperor of the Tatars who is called the Grand Khan. To him I presented the letter of our lord the pope, and invited him to adopt the Catholic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, but he had grown too old in idolatry. However he bestows many kindnesses upon the Christians, and these two years past I am abiding with him.

The Nestorians, a certain body who profess to bear the Christian name, but who deviate sadly from the Christian religion, have grown so powerful in those parts that they will not allow a Christian of another ritual to have ever so small a chapel, or to publish any doctrine different from their own....

I have built a church in the city of Khanbaliq [modern Beijing], in which the king has his chief residence. This I completed six years ago; and I have built a bell tower to it, and put three bells in it. I have baptized there, as well as I can estimate, up to this time some 6,000 persons; and if those charges against me of which I have spoken had not been made, I should have baptized more than 30,000. And I am often still engaged in baptizing.

Also I have gradually bought one hundred and fifty boys, the children of pagan parents, and of ages varying from seven to eleven, who had never learned any religion. These boys I have baptized, and I have taught them Greek and Latin after our manner.

Dated at the city of Khanbaliq in the kingdom of Cathay, in the year of the Lord 1305, and on the 8th day of January.

Public domain. Henry Yule, ed. and trans., *Cathay and the Way Thither*, 2nd ed., (rev. by H. Cordier), 4 vols. (London; Hakluyt Society, 1913-1916), pp. 45-51. Reprinted in: Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, 3rd ed., Vol. I: To 1700 (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1998) pp. 420-422.



Supporting Question 3

Featured Source

Source B: John Major, description of impact, “Silk Road: Spreading Ideas and Innovations” (excerpt), Asia Society, 2015

NOTE: Teachers and students can view this article by clicking on this link:

[http://www.asiasociety.org/countries/trade-exchange/silk-road-spreading-ideas-and-innovations.](http://www.asiasociety.org/countries/trade-exchange/silk-road-spreading-ideas-and-innovations)



Supporting Question 3

Featured Source

Source C: Valerie Hansen, description of the legacy of the Silk Road, “The Legacy of the Silk Road” (excerpt), *Yale Global Online*, 2013

Despite all the talk in diplomatic circles of a new Silk Road and restoring trade in Central Asia, in actuality, these routes were among the least traveled in human history - possibly not worth studying if tonnage, traffic or the number of travelers at any one time were sole measures. The Silk Road found a place in history because of its rich cultural legacy in written records and artifacts, and because trade and tolerance were so intertwined.

Trade was not the primary purpose of the Silk Road, more a network of pathways than a road, in its heyday. Instead, the Silk Road changed history, largely because the people who managed to travel along part or all of the Silk Road planted their cultures like seeds of exotic species carried to distant lands. Thriving in new homes, newcomers mixed with local residents and often absorbed other groups who followed. Sites of sustained economic activity, oasis towns like Turfan, Dunhuang or Khotan, enticed still others to cross over mountains and traverse oceans of sand. While not much of a commercial route, the Silk Road became the planet’s most famous cultural artery for the exchange between East and West of religions, art, languages and new technologies.

We use the term “Silk Road” to refer generally to the exchanges between China and places farther to the west, specifically Iran, India and, on rare occasions, Europe. Most vigorous before the year 1000, these exchanges were often linked to Buddhism.

And that’s why cities of Khotan and Kashgar in Xinjiang, northwestern China, are famous for their Sunday markets, where tourists can buy locally made crafts, naan and grilled mutton on skewers. As visitors watch farmers fiercely bargaining over the price of a donkey, it’s easy to imagine Xinjiang always this way, but that’s an illusion. The predominantly non-Chinese crowds in the northwest prompt a similar reaction: Surely these are the direct descendants of the earliest Silk Road settlers.

In fact, though, a major historic break divides modern Xinjiang from its Silk Road past. The Islamic conquest of the Buddhist kingdom in 1006 brought a dramatic realignment to the region. Eventually Xinjiang’s inhabitants converted to Islam making that the principal religion in the region today. They also gradually gave up speaking Khotanese, Tocharian, Gandhari and other languages spoken during the first millennium AD for Uighur, the language one hears most often in the region today.

Excavated materials shed light on the nature of the Silk Road trade. These materials, written on paper, silk, leather and wood, survive only in dry locales, places like Niya, Loulan, Kucha, Turfan and Khotan in Xinjiang; Samarkand in Uzbekistan; Chang’an, Dunhuang in Gansu province; and Chang’an, the capital during the Former Han dynasty (206 BC-9 AD) and the Tang (618-907). These documents were recovered not only from tombs, but also from abandoned postal stations, shrines and homes, beneath the dry desert - the perfect environment for the preservation of documents as well as art, clothing, ancient religious texts, ossified food and human remains.

Many documents, found by accident, were written by people from all social levels, not simply the literate rich and powerful. These documents were not composed as histories. Their authors did not expect later generations to read them, yet they offer a glimpse into the past that’s often refreshingly personal, factual, anecdotal, and random.

Documents later recycled as shoes for the dead or in the arms of figurines show that Silk Road trade was often local and small in scale. Even the most ardent believer in a high-volume, frequent trade must concede that there is little empirical basis. Scholars offer varying interpretations of these scraps of evidence, but there’s no denying that the debates concern scraps, not massive bodies, of evidence.



The modern discovery of the Silk Road began in 1895 when the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin launched his first expedition into the Taklamakan Desert in search of the source of the Khotan River. After 15 days, he discovered that he was not carrying enough water for himself and the four men with him. He did not turn back, not wanting to admit his expedition had failed. When their supply ran out, he began a desperate search, eventually locating a stream, but not before two men perished.

As he made his way out of the desert, Hedin encountered a caravan of merchants and pack animals, and he purchased three horses, saddles, maize, flour, tea, utensils and boots. This list, described in his biography, is revealing. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, almost all the goods traded in the Taklamakan were locally made necessities, not foreign imports.

Similarly, during the first millennium, markets offered more local goods for sale than foreign-made imports. At one market in Turfan in 743, local officials recorded prices for 350 items, including typical Silk Road goods like ammonium chloride, used for dyeing cloth and softening leather, as well as aromatics, sugar and brass. Of course, locally grown vegetables, staples and animals, some brought over long distances, were also available.

Despite the limited trade, cultural exchange between East and West was extensive – first between China and South Asia, and later west Asia, especially Iran. Refugees, artists, craftsmen, missionaries, robbers and envoys traveled along these routes in Central Asia. The most influential people moving along the Silk Road were refugees. Waves of immigrants brought technologies from their respective homelands, practicing those skills or introducing motifs in their new homes. Frequent migrations of people fleeing war or political conflicts meant that some technologies moved east, others west. As techniques for making glass entered China from the Islamic world, the technology for manufacturing paper was transported westward. Invented in China during the 3rd century BC, paper moved out of China, first to Samarkand, arriving sometime around the year 700, and then into Europe from the Islamic portals of Sicily and Spain. Paper, the most convenient and affordable material for preserving writing, encouraged great cultural change, including the printing revolution in Western Europe. Of course, the Chinese developed woodblock printing much earlier than Gutenberg, starting around 700 AD.

Cultural transfer took place as the Chinese learned from other societies, specifically India, the home of Buddhism. Buddhist missionaries were key translators and worked out a system for transcribing unfamiliar terms in foreign languages, like Sanskrit, into Chinese that remains in use today. Chinese absorbed some 35,000 new words, including both technical Buddhist terms and common everyday words.

People who spoke different languages often encountered one another on the Silk Road. Some had learned multiple languages since childhood. Others had to learn foreign languages as adults, a more arduous process than it is today given how few study aids were available. Surviving phrasebooks shed light on student identities and reasons for their studies. Used in monasteries throughout the first millennium, Sanskrit attracted students, but so, too, did Khotanese, Chinese, and Tibetan.

The most important legacy of the Silk Road is the atmosphere of tolerance fostered by rulers of small oasis kingdoms strung along the northern and southern Taklamakan. Over the centuries these rulers welcomed refugees from foreign lands, granting them permission to practice their own faiths. Buddhism entered China, and so too did Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and the Christianity of the East. Archeological sites and the preserved artifacts offer a glimpse into this once tolerant world. The new Silk Road is indeed far removed from the legacy of the historic network.

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Supporting Question 4

Featured Source

Source A: Warwick Ball, historian's essay on the Silk Road, "Following the Mythical Road" (excerpts), *Geographical* (Campion Interactive Publishing), 1998

In 1877 a German geographer of Central Asia, the Baron von Richtofen (an uncle of the First World War flying ace of the same name), coined a new term to describe the ancient caravan routes of innermost Asia: "die Seidenstrasse," or the Silk Road. News soon began to trickle back to Europe of fabulous treasures buried in the sands that had long blown over these caravan routes deep in Chinese Turkestan: silks, manuscripts, precious objects in a perfect state of preservation, cave paintings as fresh as the day they were painted, ordinary houses and elaborate temples.

By the turn of the century the archaeologists started arriving. The first objects brought back to Europe caused a sensation. Unimaginable art treasures that combined elements of Greek, Persian, Indian and Chinese civilisations perfectly preserved in the dry sands sent scholars hurrying to rewrite their books. An entirely lost ancient Indo-European language was discovered which some linguists claimed was related to Celtic. An entire lost civilisation was revealed, where Christian monks rubbed shoulders with Zoroastrian priests, Buddhist mystics and Taoist sages in perfect amicability. The first tentative archaeological probes soon became a stampede, so that by the early years of this century British, French, German, Russian, Japanese and Americans were competing with each other to bring these treasures back to museums at home.

The Silk Road has become one of the most romantic and evocative of images known to geography, with its great caravan cities from Damascus to Loyang; long lines of camels and remote caravanserais; impenetrable mountain barriers and endless deserts. These images were echoed in the poetry of Flecker and Coleridge and a vast array of travel writing from Marco Polo to Colin Thubron. This writing has conjured up the picture of a great international and multinational highway where Romans, Chinese, Indians and Tartars freely met and intermingled. The Silk Road has become one of the best known "facts" of Asian geography.

Such images could not be further from the truth. For such is the power of the Silk Road today that few realise the whole thing is a modern fabrication. The first "fact" one must learn about the Silk Road is that there was no such thing. The Baron von Richtofen was the first person to use the name, yet the one person now associated with the Silk Road more than anybody else, Marco Polo, would never have heard of it.

Edward Gibbon, writing of Roman trade with the East over 200 years ago, makes no reference to any purported "Silk Road" or route nor even any reference to China. Eastern trade was seen solely in terms of Arabia and India, China is not mentioned, and silk only referred to in reference to India and the spice trade.

Arguably the greatest "Silk Road" explorer, the British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein -- who excavated the ancient sand-buried ruins of Chinese Turkestan and publicised them to astonished audiences -- never once used the term...

Hence when we turn to India, there is copious evidence for sea trade with the West... Items imported from India were mainly luxury goods, as only their high retail value in western markets could justify the high cost of transporting them across such vast distances. They included silk, pearls, precious woods, ivory, precious stones, and occasionally exotic animals such as tigers and leopards. Above all it was spices, such as cinnamon, balsam, cassia, cardamom and pepper. Spices were always the main import from the East, and especially pepper. Silk was never a major commodity, despite the high profile given to it in modern accounts.

In searching for evidence for the Silk Road and other trade routes one senses that perhaps we have inherited a little of our Victorian forebears' obsession with routes, dominated as it is by concerns with wheeled transport. In

actual fact, established routes -- lines drawn with such confidence across maps -- were largely non-existent in ancient times. Outside the Roman and Persian Empires there were never roads or even routes in an organised sense. Such routes as did exist went simply from city to city or, at best (and more rarely), from country to country. There were never any transcontinental routes. Any ancient route, therefore, was at best simply a broad channel of communications across a region. It consisted of a series of short irregular hops, rarely following any fixed or time-worn pathway....

The arrival of silk in the West was more a result of a series of accidents rather than organised trade. When it did come, it was via India and the sea routes -- and certainly not overland. Both ancient Rome and China had only the haziest notions of each other's existence and, more importantly, even less interest.

The greatest value of the Silk Road to geography is as a lesson -- and a very important one at that -- in how quickly and how thoroughly a myth can become enshrined as unquestioned fact.

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Supporting Question 4

Featured Source

Source B: Alfred Andrea, historian's essay on the Silk Road, "The Silk Road in World History: A Review Essay" (excerpts), *Asian Review of World Histories*, 2014

THE SILK ROAD AS A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCT

Silk Road? Silk Roads? Silk Routes? Which is it and why? Today, most Anglophone scholars who write books and articles that are focused exclusively on these trans-Eurasian caravan routes that crisscrossed Eurasia's heartland in Late Antiquity and following prefer the evocative and admittedly misleading singular "Silk Road." Yet many (but certainly not all) world historians, whose historiographical vision impels them to view the past on a grand scale, choose to use the more correct plural form. Likewise, some contemporary world historians, who see the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and similar avenues of maritime transportation as integral parts of the network of long-distance interchange in Late Antiquity and following, favor the term "Silk Routes," which lacks connotations of singularity and terrestriality. French historians almost universally favor the singular and romantic *la route de soie* (the Silk Route). German scholars likewise largely prefer the traditional and singular *die Seidenstrasse* (the Silk Road). It is significant, and tells us quite a bit about how old historical labels remain in vogue long after their accuracy has been questioned, that although historians now agree that silk was only one of many valuable items transported and traded along the Silk Road and also that, in the final analysis, the most historically important "commodities" carried along these routes were ideas and culture and not goods, we still preface Road, Roads, or Routes with "Silk."

...We have to ask ourselves, are the terms "Silk Road," "Silk Roads," and "Silk Routes" valid today, given the expansion of our knowledge and perspectives over the past 137 years since Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen gave life to these terms and concept? This writer's answer is a resounding "Yes!" There is no good reason to abandon these evocative, albeit inexact, terms. History without romance is sterile. Moreover, it is clear that the current institutionalization of Silk Road studies and its expanse on a global scale due to digital technology ensure that we are now in an era of profound advancement in our understanding of the Silk Road. The Silk Road lives on.

Courtesy of A. J. Andrea.