

# The Silk Road

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"The Bridge between Eastern and Western Cultures"

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*The Silk Road* is a publication of the Silkroad Foundation. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or contributions.

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## WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE!

Since the Soviet collapse, the nations of Central Asia have shaken off imposed obscurity to make headlines of their own. The emergence of these new states has helped to focus attention once again on their history, culture, and people. For most of us, these were places whose names we barely knew a decade ago. Collectively they form the heart of Eurasia. Today they may be known as Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but in the more remote past, along with Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and Gansu, they evoked images of the ancient Silk Road—oases, caravanserais, nomads, strange empires, fantastic beasts, and exotic people. The public fascination with these distant lands has rekindled a dormant curiosity in the obscure past and modern folkways of what we now call Central Asia—the lands which embraced the multitude branches of the ancient Silk Road.

Those of us, scholars and amateurs, who seek timely and accurate information on the Silk Road and Central Asia have many obstacles to overcome. *The Silk Road*, a newsletter, was conceived and developed to help those with an interest to overcome those obstacles and to provide a central reference source for accurate information on developments in various areas of Silk Road and Central Asian studies.

When we refer to "Central Asia" or "The Silk Road" we are not referring to one in the same thing—they are not interchangeable terms. Central Asia is relatively easily defined. It is roughly the geographic region of Asia from the Urals in the west to Xinjiang and Gansu in Western China. South to North, it includes the regions north of the Caucasus, Taurus, Himalayas, the Pamirs, and Kun Lun, to the Arctic Ocean. The Silk Road is centered on Central Asia but comprises, in our use of the term, more than geography—it stands by extension for complex historical and cultural processes which need to be further investigated.

Our knowledge of Central Asia and its Silk Road conduits is impeded by several factors. The native territory of our interest, for one, is as remote to us as the territory of native Americans is to a Russian enthusiast. In addition, we have inherited in the west a legacy of 19th Century romantic and exotic notions of Central Asia based on dated travel accounts and Victorian fictions. The distortions inherent in these notions have been ably and devastatingly deconstructed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

One reason for our distorted image of Central Asia has been the difficulty of access for western travelers, scholars, and archaeologists. Russian and Chinese investigators working in their respective languages have done most of the first hand observation and reporting. The more experienced field archaeologists in Russia and China—Elena Kuzmina from Moscow and Wang Binghua from Urumchi, for example—have more direct experience with Central Asian sites and materials than practically all of the American investigators combined. Their reports and publications, in Russian and Chinese, are available in the west to only a limited number of specialists. Much of this material is now becoming available, and only some of that more recently still in translation.

The remove of Central Asian studies has contributed to its orphan status in major western academic institutions. Mostly the region and its history is a ward of more entrenched and better-supported traditional disciplines. Since Herodotus in Greece and Ssu Ma Chien in China, Central Asia has been parceled out as a remote and vestigial appendage of the Greek or Chinese world. It has been viewed as a projection and subjectively constructed "other" to its better-known foils.

The status of Central Asia as a separate academic subject has also suffered because literary remains for the region are scant, for one, and not in well attested languages and scripts. Written Central Asian documents appear relatively late in time compared to its better known neighbors. The mission of unlocking the mysteries of these long lost regions has fallen almost exclusively to archaeology, and even then, only relatively recently.

The term "the silk road," as indicated earlier, presents another cluster of problems. There was a silk road long before silk was actively traded by China, and there was a silk road for thousands of years after that before the term "the silk road" was coined. In a sense, the silk road was brought to Eurasia by the first modern humans out of Africa some 100,000 years ago. As they discovered and adapted to new Eurasian habitats, they exchanged adaptations and technologies with one another and traded with each other for tools and goods. Gradually, modern humans developed adaptations to most of Eurasia, especially in the wake of the melting glaciers in the last 15,000 years. By the Neolithic, about 8000 years ago, modern humans had transformed the great expanse of Eurasia into a large cultural interaction sphere, which effectively connected, on many direct



and indirect levels, virtually all of the human inhabitants of the continent from one end to the other and from pre-historic times until the present. The silk trade out of China only began to be a major factor in Han times and reached its full flowering in the Tang Dynasty. It was not the silk that created the silk road, however. Rather, a complex network of trade routes, formal and informal, maritime and terrestrial, facilitated the silk trade and prospered from it. The necklace of caravan oases centered in Central Asia readily adapted to the silk trade across Eurasia. It could be argued that the complex network of links across Eurasia was the first manifestation of what we now call globalization. For historians, this silk road network is part of world systems theory. Ironically, the silk road label was itself not invented until the late nineteenth century by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), long after silk had seen its glory—he referred in German to “Die Seidenstrassen”. The term was late in coming, but it has stuck, at least in the west, as the name for the thing it describes.

For our newsletter, *The Silk Road*, however, “the silk road” is not simply a time or merely a place. While it embraces the traditional meaning of a complex network of caravan routes and oases linking China and the Levant, “the silk road” for our purposes encompasses in addition more abstract processes and dynamic interactions. The Silk Road is not an historical artifact, a thing that was deliberately created by human agency, existed for limited purposes, and then died out. Rather, in our wider use of the term, the Silk Road is a by-product of human interaction and exchange on many levels, concrete and abstract. As a concept, the Silk Road embraces the pre-history and history of modern humans since their arrival in Eurasia. In this sense, the Silk Road corresponds to the entire continent, it still exists, and it is still active in transforming peoples’ lives in ways which are worth our effort to identify and understand.

Recent historians and archaeologists have evolved a new model of Eurasia as an extensive cultural interaction sphere, a “world system” if you will, with direct and indirect interaction across the continents entire expanse on many levels going back 50,000 to 100,000 years. In this wider context of space and time, the Silk Road is a symbol of the manifold interactions and processes by means of which peoples and cultures influenced each other’s material culture, behavior, and beliefs—for example, by trade and exchange certainly, but also by less direct diffusion of ideas and technologies, by migration and conquest, by genes and jeans, by art and literature, by music and dance, by costume and design, by food and drink. These examples are not meant to preclude other less or more obvious possibilities. And in this wider sense, the Silk Road as symbol transcends its traditional idea of

oases and caravans transporting trade and exchange via intermediaries between dispersed peoples and cultures. There are more nuanced dimensions to the Silk Road than simply trade and exchange which are worth our while to explore.

The obscurity of Central Asia has begun to be dispelled. Over the past one hundred years, methodical exploration of this region has revealed traces of larger communities and settlements dating from very early times. These were first brought to light by bold military emissaries dispatched to this region by the political authorities of the combatants in what is now referred to as “the great game”. A generation of no less emboldened explorers followed them on either side of the turn from the 19th to the 20th centuries. As word of the finds of Sir Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, and others finally came out, the archaeologists came in. Beginning with Pumpelly’s excavations at Anau in Turkmenistan in 1904, there followed, especially in the past twenty-five years, a series of spectacular archaeological discoveries in the once remote and presumably isolated reaches of Central Asia. These discoveries have begun to reveal just how central Central Asia’s role was to the evolution of Eurasian society and civilization. And as a result of these discoveries, we are now also aware of the existence of many peoples, cultures, and civilizations in Central Asia of which we were previously unaware. The Kushans for example; the Sogdians; the Bactrians; the Bronze Age people of the Khopet Dag; the Uighurs; the mysterious, perhaps “Tocharian,” people of Xinjiang; as well as the Sarmatians.

There remain many obstacles to a fuller understanding of the pivotal role the Central Asian peoples played in the dynamics of the Silk Road. Through time, Central Asia has been the geographical context for myriad empires and innumerable cultures, continuous migrations and conquests, revolts and wars, as well as contested religions and ideologies. No less today than in the past. Given the broad canvas, the sources and materials for the study of the Silk Road are necessarily fragmented. It is not surprising, then, that the studies of subjects related to the Silk Road are generally limited in time and place, focused on a particular culture or people. But Central Asia is also central to the history of greater Eurasia. It is its position at the center of Eurasia, as Andre Gunder Frank’s pamphlet *The Centrality of Central Asia* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992), has so persuasively argued, that makes Central Asia the pivot at all levels of the Silk Road phenomenon. In spite of the obstacles, interest in the Silk Road and Central Asia has grown globally in recent years. There have been many major exhibitions of art from the Silk Road region. Yo Yo Ma, in a series of recent appearances, has highlighted Silk Road music. The spectacular discovery of Caucasoid

mummies in Xinjiang has focused major attention, and subsequent controversy, on the early interactions between Chinese and Indo-Europeans. The stream of scholarly articles in specialized journals dealing with the Silk Road and Central Asian history has also burgeoned in recent years. More explorations and excavations of the region commence each year. Even television specials have appeared with some regularity. And finally, there have been a number of specialist and popular book length studies on the Silk Road and its peoples. These developments have helped to create an informed public interest in the Silk Road and Central Asian.

In response to this growth in interest, *The Silk Road’s* purpose is to monitor research, exhibitions, publications, and events relating to Central Asia and the Silk Road, and to communicate this information, at no cost, in print and online, to interested subscribers. Though our format is still evolving, *The Silk Road* will include non-specialist articles on relevant subjects, a calendar of events, exhibitions, and performances, notices of published research, articles, and books, progress reports on important archaeological field surveys and excavations, reviews of important new books in the field, announcements of guided tours, excavations, and special events and courses. In this effort we invite and encourage our readers to participate in the creation of our newsletter. We will give serious editorial attention to unsolicited contributions which are relevant to the focus of our publication and consistent with our mission.

**Roger L. Olesen**

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