

The Dynamics of Trade along the Silk Road

Major Sections along the Silk Road

Because Silk Road trade involved such long distances, goods had to be light and valuable. This meant that the goods traded along the Silk Road were often luxury goods such as silk, precious stones, felt, glass, coins, and dyes.

The Silk Road can be divided into three major sections representing different geographical regions and different aspects of Silk Road trade. The three sections of the Silk Road trade routes are:

- 1) an eastern section beginning in Chang'an, China, and running along the northern and southern borders of the Taklamakan Desert to the Pamir Mountains;
- 2) a Central Asian section crossing the Pamirs and the Central Asian region of Samarkand; and
- 3) a western section running through Persia to the Mediterranean.

Along the eastern section of the Silk Road, the Chinese produced silk to trade or sell to Central Asian traders and merchants. Merchants from Central Asia would go to the western borders of China and trade their herbal medicines and pieces of jade from Khotan for luxurious Chinese silks. These traders would then transport the silk by caravan through the oasis towns of Central Asia. In the oasis town markets, the traders would exchange the silk for other goods from traders from the other side of the Pamir Mountains, who would then transport the silk through the region of Samarkand. Other Persian, Armenian, and Jewish traders handled the silk trade through Persia to the Mediterranean regions, where the silks were finally purchased with gold from Rome.

Trade Resembled a Chain

Trade from the eastern end of the Silk Road (Chang'an, China) to the western end (the Mediterranean) was indirect. Goods passed from one trader to another in short segments. Trade resembled a chain, with each trader and segment of the trade route representing a crucial link in the trade.

The trading that occurred along each trade route segment was known as peddling trade. The trader would carry his goods, selling them and buying others while traveling from one market to another. Sometimes, traders would exchange their goods for other goods without the use of money. This is called bartering. For example, a Middle Eastern trader might set out on an eastward trade route with goods he knew were unavailable farther east, such as colored glass. He would trade these goods for a profit and then buy other goods, such as silk, that could be sold for a high price in Europe.

Preparations

A trader or merchant who wished to make a profit from trading at the different centers along the Silk Road would initiate a trade expedition. He would save or borrow the money he needed for his trip. If he borrowed the money, the lender expected him to give back more than he borrowed at a high interest rate. This made the trip riskier and more costly. After the trader had obtained enough money, he had to decide which trade routes to take. Each route had advantages and disadvantages. Some routes were more dangerous; other routes took longer to travel. Deciding on the routes was very important to the success of the trade expedition. If one section of the route fell prey to bandits or was impassable because of the weather, then the trader would have to alter his plans and would lose valuable time and energy.

For the trader to make money, he had to sell his goods at a price high enough to cover his travel expenses. Because it was costly to transport his goods from his original location to the final destination, he needed to estimate his expenses. This was difficult because information concerning

trade routes and market conditions could easily change by the time he had reached that location. The trader had to plan for travel and transportation costs, taxes, and money for protection of his goods against bandits. Sea trade routes become popular later on precisely because it was easier to estimate expenses for sea journeys.

Embarking on the Journey

The trader often traveled in a caravan, a group of traders with a line of camels, to carry the goods to be traded. The caravan would move from one trading center to another, from market to market. When the caravan reached a town, it would go to the caravanserai, a special place for the traders to stay and leave their animals. The traders would eat, drink, and socialize together. They would exchange stories about different regions and travel conditions along the Silk Road. Two popular destinations, Bactria and Samarkand, were filled with bazaars—large and bustling centers of trade. Traders from many different regions would barter and sell their goods. Some large bazaars were said to spread across entire towns for miles. Local merchants would exchange goods with the caravan traders, who would buy goods to sell further along the Silk Road.

Goods Traded

A wide variety of goods was available at these bazaars. Coming from the west would be items like gold, grapes, pomegranates, woolen rugs, and colored glass. From China came silk, gunpowder, paper, compasses, and bamboo. It was often advantageous for traders to buy a diverse range of goods in case the price of one item fell below the price necessary for the trader to make a profit. The trader had to be clever in order to exchange goods quickly and gauge the demand for the item at the market.

Chang'an, the capital of China, was a major destination for most Western travelers during the Tang (618–906) and Yuan (1279–1368) Dynasties. Sogdians¹, Turks, Persians, Indians, Arabs, and other peoples of Central Asia and Europe crowded a section of the city called the Western Market, where they traded and sold their wares at innumerable bazaars. Different products and exotic goods from many places were peddled in this bustling center of trade, where foreign traders profited handsomely. Temples and taverns also lined the market. Western performers entertained the visitors and helped them forget their loneliness by reminding them of the delights of their homes.

Importance of the Silk Road Trade

A large volume of goods traveled along the Silk Road. Successful trading meant high profits for the trader and also for the towns along the Silk Road trade routes. Local town people profited from trade by catering to the needs of the passing traders. Regional governments made a profit as they levied taxes on foreign traders passing through their regions. The revenue (money) from taxes was so great that wars were fought to see who would control the lucrative trade along different sections of the trade routes.

Beyond enriching people, trade along the Silk Road also contributed to rich cultural exchange. Pilgrims and monks traveled along the trade routes to spread their beliefs. Envoys of the different kingdoms also traveled along the Silk Road to bring gifts to other rulers. Traders and other travelers gathered at the marketplaces, caravanserais, and teahouses and learned about the cultures of one another. Consumers who bought goods from different lands were introduced to the cultures of the people who made those goods.

¹The Sogdians were a tribe who specialized as caravaneers. They lived in the area of Samarkand and Bukhara (modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and served as middlemen in Silk Road trade.