The Significance of the Silk Road in World History Until 1500

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The Silk Road, a complex and vast network of ancient commerce routes, connected East Asia, Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia, northern Europe, the Mediterranean, India and Central Asia with one another. Its vast network of connecting routes made it a trans-Eurasian network. This network flourished and expanded between 100 BCE and 1450s. It emerged during the Han dynasty (206BCE-222CE) and began to promote exchange between the nomads of steppe and agricultural China. This exchange was driven by the inter-dependence as well as conflicts between these two different societies. The Han Empire further extended its control to acquire wealth and resources from the oases that existed around the desert of Takla Makan. Their exports of Silk eventually reached the Mediterranean World. The Mediterranean was accessed either through the land routes reaching Syria or via sea routes that went through the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, leading to Alexandria. Even after the fall of both the Roman Empire and the Han Empire, the Silk Road survived. It reached its hay-day or golden period during the early middle ages. By then, the Tang Empire and the Byzantine Empire had become the hubs of silk culture. Both had emerged as the model of high culture that encompassed the Eurasian world. Islam contributed to the further extension of silk culture. Resultantly, markets for textiles and other commodities were extended to even larger areas. Due to increased improvements in sea routes of the Indian Ocean., the Silk Road saw a decline during the 11th century. The Silk Road network remained functional until the 1450s when these roads were closed by the Ottomans who boycotted trade with China. The interaction caused by the forces of demand and supply had far-reaching consequences. When the nomadic pastoralists interacted with the sedentary agriculturists, not only did they exchange goods and services, but also ideas, religious beliefs, values and norms within the world connected through commerce. These cultural forces were underlying economic transactions. The Silk Road exchanges have had an everlasting impact- not only on commerce but also history and culture- that resonates till today. This transcontinental exchange facilitated by the Silk Road demonstrates that even before the present era of globalization, the world was connected through forces of economics and ideology.

Trade along this trans-continental road not only included silk but also fruits vegetables, grain, livestock, tools, artwork, metal and much more. But more important was the exchange of religious beliefs, culture, language, science, and philosophy. The inventions of Han Dynasty of China such as paper and gunpowder had a lasting impact on the history and culture of the West. Although paper was invented in the 3rd century B.C in China, it arrived in Samarkand only in 700 A.D Afterwards it reached Europe. The arrival of paper in Europe triggered massive changes. As the Gutenberg press was invented, the power of paper more than doubled. Likewise, the export of gunpowder from China to Europe through the Silk Road had a huge impact on the history of the West. Those nation-states who had acquired the gun powder enjoyed enormous advantages in conflicts and wars.

During the Han Dynasty in China, the Silk Road formally commenced trade between the Far East and the West (Europe). This dynasty ruled China between 206BC and 220AD. But even before this formal opening of trade, goods and services were exchanged along these routes. The Royal Road established by the Darius 1 (Persian ruler) connected Mesopotamia to Africa through Egypt and to the Indian Subcontinent. This connection was established nearly 300 years prior the formal opening of the famous Silk network. Alexander the Great made inroads into Persia through the same Royal Roads and part of this network was later included into the Silk Road.

The first and second centuries B.C saw the flourishing of the east-west exchange between China and Greece. Both the Kushan Empire (present northern India) and the Roman Empire were beneficiaries of the flourishing commerce along the Silk Road. Ancient Greeks would call China as "Seres" which means "the land of Silk". The Silk routes to China included markets, trading posts, and smaller thoroughfares to ensure smooth transportation and exchange of goods and services.

China needed healthy and superior horses that existed in the Eurasian Steppes, bred by nomads. Nomads, on the other hand, needed silk and grain. Hence, the Silk Road enabled both to meet their needs. The exchange through Silk Route at the time of the later Han promoted the dissemination of Buddhism in the river basin. It also resulted in the spread of Indian Literature (Strayer n.d.).

Trade among China, South East Asia, the Subcontinent (India), Middle-East, Europe and Africa flourished after the Roman conquest of Egypt (30 BCE). As a result, the Roman Empire prospered. China also grew wealthy as it supplied silk and other good to the Roman Empire. As Central Asia and Northern India underwent unification in the 1st -3rd centuries, the role of merchants expanded from Taxila to Bactria, resulting in cultural exchanges.

It was during the times of Tang dynasty that Silk Road reached its golden age. Both Sogdians and Persians benefited from east-west trade. Since the Chinese empire had opened its doors to foreign culture, its urban centers had become very cosmopolitan. Tang dynasty, in addition to reviving the land routes, also develop maritime Silk Route.

Due to interregional trade, the Silk Road resulted in political and cultural integration. In its golden period, it sustained a trans-border culture that encompassed Chinese, Armenians, and Magyars (Integration, Nomadic Empire and Eurasian n.d.). The tribal societies which previously lived in isolation and the barbaric pastoralists were attracted by the wealth and avenues offered by civilizations connected by the Silk Route. The barbarian tribes after acquiring skills of warfare conquered rich and fertile land.

The city of Baghdad, built by the Abbasid dynasty, became one of the most vital cities along the Silk Road between 767 and 912. Under the Umayyads, during the 8th century, the Islamic empire expanded into Central Asia. The Abbasids who succeeded them halted the Chinese expansion (Battle of Talas 751). However, the trade legacy of the Sogdians was continued by the Persian Samanid empire (819-999) which had a seat in Bukhara (Fadlan 2012). As the Islamic Turks conquered Central Asia by the end of 10th Century, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity virtually disappeared. In the early 13th century, Khwarezmia was invented by the Mongols. The cities of Bukhara and Samarkand were burned to ashes by Genghis Khan (Fadlan 2012). However, the Turko-Mongol ruler Timur took measures to revive the status of Samarkand as the trade center and cultural hub of the Islamic world.

The Silk Road routes promoted eastward exploration by enabling explorers to become well-versed with the geography, culture and traditions of the East. One pertinent example is Marco Polo who traveled from Italy to the Mongolian controlled China through the Silk Road. The Mongolian Emperor in 1275, when the Marco Polo and his team arrived, was Kublai Khan. These explorers spent more than 24 years in Asia. Some of them worked in Kublai Khan's court as collectors of tax. his book The Travels of Marco Polo gave the West a better insight into the Eastern culture and commerce.

The Mongol expansion between 1207 and 1360 helped to revive the Silk Road (Bentley, Ziegler and Salter 2005). The dominance of the Caliphate over international trade was brought to an end. The Mongol Empire, which is the largest continental empire ever, had its political capitals (Beijing, Karakoram, Samarkand, Tabriz) along the Silk Route (trayer and Nelson 2016). It helped the Mongols to politically unify the several zones of the empire which were previously only loosely connected. For the Silk Road, this was the period of the beginning of the end of its glory.

The economic, cultural and political unity of the Silk Road began to disintegrate with the fragmentation of the Mongol Empire. The land surrounding the western portion of the Silk Road was captured by the Turkmeni lords from the dying Byzantine Empire. All the great powers became economically and culturally isolated after the fall of the Mongol Empire. The regional states became consolidated and the nomadic power declined (Bentley, Ziegler and Salter 2005, 368-378). The overland trade was revived to some extent when Ottoman and Safavid empires consolidated themselves in West Asia and kept flourishing until the 1720s when it was disrupted by the fall of Safavids.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the trading activities fostered by the Silk Road over centuries not only involved the exchange of goods but also culture ideas and religions. It was through the trade networks of Silk Road that Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam reached and flourished across Eurasia. Indeed the mobility of nomadic lifestyle played a vital role in facilitating such inter-regional exchanges along with the vast networks of the ancient Silk Road.

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