

2 Historical Background



Since the Neolithic Revolution (8,000 to 4,000 BCE in Eurasia, and later elsewhere in the world), agriculturalists and pastoralists have always expanded into territories suitable for their own pursuits, in the process displacing, absorbing, or exterminating neighboring peoples who practice the older lifestyle of hunting and gathering. Agriculturalists and pastoralists then compete for marginal lands, the former seeking to expand the region under agricultural cultivation, the latter seeking to maintain unplowed and unsown grasslands to provide pasture for flocks and herds of animals.

The ability of agriculturalists to produce wealth in the form of surplus calories that can support long-term population growth tends to out-compete pastoralists wherever farming is made feasible by climate, soil, and available technology. This agricultural way of life produced concomitant phenomena of urbanization, class structure, the proliferation of material goods and the techniques to make and improve them—in short, the full panoply of consequences of food production and population growth that we refer to as civilization.

Tomb brick painted with herder and animals
Wei-Jin period (220–317).
Excavated from tomb at Luotuocheng (Camel City), Gaotai District, Gansu. Clay with pigments. Height: 19.5 cm; length: 39 cm; thickness: 5 cm. Gaotai County Museum, Gansu.

The history of human settlement, migration, and cultural interaction in Eurasia is a history of displacement of hunter-gatherers by farmers and pastoralists, and then of a combination of both conflict and cooperation (including trade) between agrarian “civilization” and pastoral “barbarism.” The history of the Silk Road threads its way through the context of these large-scale cultural interactions. The Silk Road itself is a relatively late phenomenon, pioneered during the mid-1st millennium BCE and established as a regular trade route near the end of that millennium. The history of the Silk Road has its beginnings in the prior history of long-distance travel, trade, and population movements across the trans-Eurasian steppe belt.

While the agricultural revolution was underway in several different parts of Eurasia (earlier in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and later in China), hunting peoples in the steppe belt were learning to manage herds of wild horses. Horses, both as managed wild animals and in the early stages of domestication, were a significant element of the steppe diet long before they were used for transportation. Gradually, they came to be put in harness to draw the heavy-wheeled carts that became the first key to mobility on the steppe. Nomads of the steppes who followed their herds with wheeled vehicles—Scythians, Sarmatians, and others—formed part of a steppe culture that soon stretched all the way across Asia. The distinctive art of these steppe peoples, characterized by bronze weapons and ornamental goods decorated with depictions of stylized animals, is found everywhere from Europe near the Black Sea to northern China. This was not just the result of trade; peoples, too, were on the move.

As early as 2,000 BCE people who were genetically closely related to the Celtic peoples of Europe, and who spoke an Indo-European language, had moved into eastern Central Asia in regions that are now part of the Chinese territory of Xinjiang. We know this because their burial practices, combined with the dryness and saline soil of the region, preserved many of their dead as mummies that have yielded much valuable information through DNA studies, and because their textiles have shown close linkages to textile traditions of western Eurasia. We can further infer it because three innovations—a light, horse-drawn military chariot, wheat, and domestic sheep and goats—reached China through the intermediation of these people during the 13th century BCE.

Horseback riding, as opposed to the use of horses to draw wheeled vehicles, became common on the steppes during the second millennium BCE. This final step in the development of full-scale, pastoral nomadism in the steppelands further facilitated the long-range movement of peoples across the

steppe belt. It also set up the dynamic of competition for land—for agriculture or pasture—on the borderlands of China. For hundreds, even thousands of years to come, the enduring problem of Chinese foreign policy would be how to deal with mounted nomads on its northern frontier. Eventually, the Chinese looked to the Gansu Corridor and the Silk Road as an alternative to leaving their long-distance overland trade in the hands of steppe nomads.

Just as the domestication of the horse made steppe pastoralism possible, the domestication of the camel (around 800 BCE) made trade possible on the Silk Road. Deserts of Central Asia are impassable to carts and chariots, and horses are not hardy enough to carry pack cargo through the dryness, with lack of edible grass. With the domestication of the camel, generally used as a pack animal rather than for riding, caravan trade along these desert tracks began. Caravan trade offered China a shorter route to the oasis emporia of Central Asia and the Middle East. But the steppe trade never disappeared entirely.

Along both the steppe belt and the newly developing Silk Road, trade was still irregular and small-scale. It did succeed in carrying goods over long distances, however, as Chinese silk was known in the Middle East, Greece, and Egypt by the mid-1st millennium BCE. The Greeks, and the Romans who followed them, understood that it came from a land called Serica (“Land of Silk”), but nothing was known about that distant place. A later name for the same mysterious country was Sina, a name apparently derived from Qin, the name of the northwestern Chinese kingdom that engineered the unification of China under an imperial monarchy in 221 BCE.

Around the time of the Qin dynasty, a confederation of northern nomadic tribes, collectively known as the Xiongnu, greatly increased the political and military threat of the steppe peoples to China’s northern frontier. Under the Han dynasty (206 BCE–7 CE, and as the Latter Han, 25–220 CE), rulers dealt with the Xiongnu with a combination of military pressure and appeasement by bribes of silk, cash, and other goods, and by intermarriage with princess brides to Xiongnu chieftains.

In 138 BCE, the Han emperor sent an envoy, Zhang Qian, to what the Chinese called “the western regions” to scout out the territory and to form an anti-Xiongnu alliance with a western people, the Yuezhi. The latter goal failed, but Zhang Qian, who traveled for years and went as far as the Pamir Mountains, brought back much valuable intelligence about trade routes and local products, as well as military intelligence. The Chinese inflicted a severe military defeat on the Xiongnu in 121 BCE, and spent the next sixty years trying to consolidate control of the western regions. By 60 BCE, Chinese control extended



Prancing cavalry horse
Eastern Han dynasty, 2nd century CE. Excavated in 1969 from a tomb at Leitai, Wuwei county, Gansu. Bronze. Horses Height: 38 cm. Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou.

far along the Silk Road to approach the Tarim Basin, and state-sponsored trade had begun on a regular basis. Thus began the first great era of trade along the Silk Road.

The Chinese government was especially eager to buy good horses for military use, and the best horses in the world, it was thought, were bred in the Ferghana Valley, just north of what is now Afghanistan. To obtain them, government procurement agents, traveling with military escorts, went as far as Ferghana on caravans laden with silk (silk was collected by the Chinese government from the peasantry, in payment of land taxes) via the Silk Road as far as Ferghana. The return trip was made as quickly as possible, yet even with fodder and water for the horses carried by camels, losses of horses were sometimes heavy. The security provided for the silk caravans inspired private merchants to tag along, and both state and private Silk Road trade flourished. The Chinese exported mainly silk textiles, but also medicinal herbs, carved jade, and a wide variety of luxury goods; they imported not only horses, but also glassware, raw jade, gold and silver, and other luxury goods from the western regions of Eurasia. Anything that had a high value-to-weight-and-bulk ratio and would satisfy a craving for unusual and luxurious goods was fair game for the caravan trade.

The early trade on the Silk Road followed a pattern that was to hold throughout the era of caravan trade, which was that trade was carried out mainly by intermediaries, and goods changed hands several times during the course of a journey between China and the Middle East. Caravan drivers and their animals customarily traveled back and forth over one particular segment of the route, perhaps loading goods in one oasis and unloading them again at the next before heading back in the other direction with new goods. Each time an item changed hands its value rose, so that goods were very expensive indeed by the time they reached their final destination. The oasis merchants who served as intermediaries in this down-the-line trade, as it is called, were careful to discourage longer-distance trade by exaggerating the distances and dangers involved, and they suppressed detailed accounts of distant lands, treating such information as trade secrets. One odd result of this is that the two greatest empires of the classical world, Rome and Han China, were in regular trade contact but were still almost entirely ignorant of each other. As far as we know, no Chinese merchant ever visited the Rome of the Caesars, and no Roman ever crossed the Silk Road to the Chinese capital at Chang'an. If there were any such, in either direction, they left no clear record of their feat, though during the Latter Han dynasty (25 CE–220 CE), two Middle Eastern

merchants arrived in China via the maritime route, claiming to be envoys from the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.

The period of political disunion that followed the fall of the Latter Han dynasty in 220 CE, lasting until the reunification of China under the Sui dynasty in 586 CE, mark a watershed in the history of China. During this period northern China was ruled by a succession of (sometimes overlapping) non-Chinese dynasties of various ethnic origins and affiliations. The breakdown of imperial rule had important consequences. No longer did rulers look solely to the historic “high culture” of China for models, but instead became more open to influences from outside. These influences were both secular and sacred, as nomads, merchants, emissaries, and missionaries flooded into China, bringing new customs, purveying exotic wares, and propagating new religious beliefs. Foremost among these was Buddhism, born in India, but which now took root in China. Its influence on China was profound and pervasive, offering a new spirituality to both the elite and the poor, fostering the establishment of many temples, and inspiring the creation of new art forms.

The period from the Han defeat of the Xiongnu, in the 1st century BCE, through the post-Han period of disunion (usually known in Chinese history as the age of Northern and Southern Dynasties), marks the first great era of Silk Road trade. In part this contradicts the usual rule that Silk Road trade tended to decline during periods of political weakness and disunity in China. The reason for this exception to the rule is that during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, northern China (ruled by non-Chinese “conquest dynasties”) was part of a great Central Asian and East Asian Buddhist cultural zone that extended from the eastern margins of Persia to the East China Sea. Though the strong military protection of trade routes customarily provided at times of Chinese dynastic strength was lacking, this defect was more than overcome by the impulses for trade and cultural contact within this great area where Buddhism flourished, partly blurring or erasing political and military frontiers.

The next great era of Silk Road trade began not long after China was reunified under the short-lived Sui dynasty (586–618), and continued under its successor, the Tang (618–907). The Tang, often regarded as the most powerful and glorious dynasty in all of Chinese history, was also to some extent a “conquest dynasty” partly of non-Chinese descent, as some ancestors of the Tang ruling family were Turks. Tang power extended far into Central Asia, almost to the Pamirs, and that power was used to encourage and defend the Silk Road trade. Tang China was open to foreign goods and ideas to an unprece-



Gold coin of Justin I and Justinian I
Byzantine, sixth century,
Justin I and Justinian I (ruled as co-emperors 527), mint of Constantinople. From the tomb of Tian Hong (d. 575), Northern Zhou dynasty, western suburbs of Guyuan, Ningxia. Weight: 2.50g; diameter: 1.62 cm; clipped, pierced four times. Guyuan Municipal Museum, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.