

International trade along the silk road

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The Silk Road, which is also known as the Silk Route is a trade route that started somewhere in the 1st century and the early years of the 2nd century BC. This route began in China and extended as far as the eastern Mediterranean countries. It also served as a connector of other western Asian countries such as India. The peak of the route flourished until when the firm establishment of the sea routes in the 7th century AD. It came up as China made concerted efforts aimed at consolidating a route that would be ensured in India and the Western world. This was done through diplomatic relations that ended hostility between China and some of these countries/states (e. g. the Dayuan, Bactrians, and the Parthians), as well as direct settlements into some areas of the Tarim Basin (Melvin, 2000, p. 13).

Silk was the initial commodity that was transacted via this route. Not much later, other commodities found their way to the trading countries between Europe and China. Some of these items included: fine ceramics, furs, iron, jade, elegant bronze, and lacquer. The soft and beautiful fine silk from China was particularly loved by the Romans, while the Chinese particularly chafed the sparkling glass products and gold from Europe. Most importantly, people were taught Buddhism by the Chinese travelers which they readily embraced and instituted in their religious system. Moreover, Christian churches were established through which Asian countries were taught Christianity, and this in detail means that people learnt new religious beliefs from these travelers who hailed from different religious backgrounds along the Silk Road.

The Silk Road therefore comprises the most significant ancient Chinese civilization trading route which magnificently thrived during the Han Dynasty in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD between 202BC-AD220. Before introduction of the Silk Road, the Chinese primarily conducted internal silk trade where silk was carried by caravans from the interior parts of the Empire to other western edges of Empire. Regularly, there were some Central Asian small tribes that would attack the caravans with the hope of capturing the valuables which were transported by the traders. This made the Han Dynasty to spread its military defense deeper into the Central Asia to give protection to the caravans from 135BC to 90BC (Rudelson, 1997, p. 19).

The idea to include the lesser tribes into the silk trade was brought up Chan Ch'ien, who was the first Chinese traveler who made contact with the smaller tribes in Central Asia with an objective of forging alliances with them, and this marked the birth of the Silk Road. The Roman Empire rise also contributed significantly to the growth of the route because initially the Chinese would give silk as gifts to the governments of the roman-Asian coalitions. The route pned within two continents. From China, Northern India, Roman Empire, the Parthian and Central Asia and at the same time it connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Yellow River Valley, as well as passing places like Sinkiang and Kansu (Chinese cities). It further reached the present day countries like Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

In the process of the trade, some tribes and communities acted as middlemen who would facilitate trade negotiations and transactions between sellers and the buyers. Among these included the Northwestern Indians who were positioned along the Ganges River, and who mediated silk trade

between china and Mediterranean countries. These middlemen had long knowledge of silk as a precious and lucrative Chinese Empire product, and with the increased penetration of Han into the Central Asia, the Chinese-Indian trade relationship was strengthened. The Indians traded silk with the Chinese who in return received precious stones and metals such as silver, gold and jade. The Indians would then trade the silk with the Roman Empire which treasured it as its most expensive import commodity. The business became very lucrative to the Indians since the Parthian Empire had adamantly heavily controlled Roman trade across Central Asia and Indian. Apart from these valuable items that were traded along the Silk Road, the route also served as a conduit for other things such as ideas, spread of knowledge, diseases, technological advancement, and cultures (Soucek, 2000, p. 53). It therefore played a paramount role in the establishment of the great ancient civilizations of Indian, Persia, Arabia, India, Rome, and China. In some cases, it also laid foundations for the development of the modern world.

There were some impeding factors that really made it difficult to trade through the trade road. The climate through which trade was conducted was extremely severe including the desert which was commonly known as the “Land of Death” (Takliamakan). In this part of the route, traders were forced to endure freezing winters and sweltering summers, with high scarcity of water and unbearable sand storms. Other portions of the route included the Tianshan, Kunlun, Karakorum, Pamir, and the Himalayan mountain regions, most of which were always covered with snow, and which made traveling very dangerous. Nonetheless, the traders prevailed through all the

circumstances and this led to the introduction of valuable commodities and cultural exchanges to the rich European countries (Heidi, 1997, p. 32). There were hardships which further hardened trading in this route. These included the killings of many traders by bandits who always stole from them their expensive cargos, and this in some instances made the traders and their carriages to take several years before they could safely reach their expected destinations.

The traders' major form of transportation involved use of caravans which mostly comprised of donkeys, horses and camels. Donkeys and camels were particularly crucial because the geographical range the route mostly passed was the desert, and these animals could relatively withstand the severe conditions. In mountainous regions, horses also played significant roles as they could be used by patrol guards especially for the protection of the caravans.

The Silk Road, though it is taken to mean the continuous, complete journey between the countries involved, only a very few number of traders actually traversed it from one end to the other. Goods were for the most parts transported through a series of middlemen or agents along the various routes. The oasis towns provided bustling mercantile markets in which most of the products were traded. However, even before expansion of the international silk trade into other regions, there had existed other forms of international trade. Land routes transcontinental trade of the Silk Road gradually declined as the sea trade gained significance in the Middle Ages. Several military states clusters were brought about by the Silk Road (Walford, 1970, p. 22). In China, these included some nomadic societies in

the Northern China. It also, towards its end, resulted to the creation of an influential state called the Khazar Federation, as well as leading to introduction of Nestoria, Buddhist, Islam, and Manichean religions all which later developed into different factions in China and the Central Asia. The largest of all continental empires was the Mongol Empire which was a result of this Silk Road. This came about as its political affiliations were centered along the road with Beijing taking control of the Northern China, through central Mongolia's Karakorum, and going all the way to Central Russia. This kind of military dominance realized a renowned political unification that brought together zones which had previously been intermittently and loosely connected by cultural and material goods (Esposito, 1999, p. 67).

For any military organization or factional group to trade in the Silk Road, some form of control or military power was inevitable. This control was largely based on local orientation of the group on a particular part of the road. This implies that there several groups that competed for the domination of this road's portions and as a result the Han Empire decided to take overall control over all the routes that were within its jurisdiction. The Mongol era thus lasted throughout the Asian continent from about 1215 to 1360, and it is seen as the political icon of the time that enhanced stability during this period.

In due course, failure of cohesion in the huge empire brought about disintegration since control in most of its city states had proved quite demanding and impossible. This disintegration came with it the discontinuation of the Silk Road in many perspectives. The most fundamental

ones included the economic, cultural, and political unity (Ambrosio, 2002, 38).

The western part of the road, the Byzantine Empire, was seized by the marching Turkmeni lords and after the fall of the Mongol Empire, supreme political might all along the Silk Road result to the forceful cultural and economic separation. The Black Death's devastating effects also to a large effect led to the decline of the Silk Road. At the same time, it happened that around this time came the sedentary civilizations' encroachment, having been equipped with gunpowder. The gunpowder effect and Europe's early modernity had marked the initial integration of territorial societies, which in turn had increased mercantile. On the other hand, gunpowder, early modernity, and the Silk Road had an opposite impact on the Mongolian Empire. The final blow and attack to the trade route was brought about by the later Chinese dynasties' attitude. Prominent of these was the isolationist policies among the Ming dynasties (Frost, 1999, p. 46). They did not do anything on their part to encourage or promote trade between the West (which was rapidly developing at the time) and China. The attitude continued throughout several dynasties and it slowly began to change in the 19th century when the Western powers infiltrated and introduced inroads in the country.

Traffic along the Road substantially declined with decline in the trade with the West. At the same time, all but the well watered oases dried out making it almost impossible for any successful traversing of the region. Religious sites and other grottos were abandoned since the local inhabitants had embraced and espoused a totally new religion. And as a consolidation of the

Silk Road's end, old sites and towns were deeply buried in the sands, and it is from them and other archeological investigations that historians gather information we study today. Silk Road had come to along dead end.

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