

Buddhism on the silk road

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The Silk Road: a historic network of trade routes so famous that even today the average person knows about it, but why are some ancient exchanges of materials so relevant? The short answer is: they're not. The fact that some merchants traded a few olives for silk hundreds of years ago doesn't greatly impact today's world, but the conversations those merchants had revolutionized it. The most important items traded on the Silk Road weren't actually items—they were ideas. One of the most famous of these was Buddhism, a religion that has greatly shaped the world, and was greatly shaped by this ancient trade network.

Buddhism excellently exemplifies the modern implications of the Silk Road. Although today a thriving world religion, Buddhism was on the decline around the time of the birth of the Silk Road. In India, the homeland of Buddhism, the religion's popularity decreased due to several factors, such as the expansion of Hinduism and the mass destruction of Buddhist shrines and temples. Buddhist missionaries left from Northern India and made their way towards China and Southeast Asia, spreading the word of their religion along the way. Buddhism appealed to people, as it advertised a way to improve one's social standing and promised peace and fulfillment.

The religion soon began to gain popularity in these new lands. A new era began for Buddhism as it spread and interacted with different cultures. It was soon the most common religion of Asia. Merchants funded the establishments of monasteries along the silk road, there, travelers were given a place to stay and people from distant regions became acquainted with the religion. Missionaries commonly traveled to spread the religion, and

often leaders of different countries would send for them, having heard about the religion through merchants and eager to learn more.

The expansion of Buddhism began to change cultures, and its impacts are still present in today's world. Buddhism was a passive religion that welcomed but never forced people to convert, the religion's peaceful nature earned it attention and many people were lured to the Buddhist lifestyle. Buddhism soon became the most popular religion in China, Japan, and several Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam. A new branch of the religion was developed in Asia—Mahayana Buddhism. Much of Chinese culture is now connected to Mahayana Buddhism. Via the Silk Road, Buddhism soon took over Asia and greatly altered many cultures.

A large amount of emphasis is put on the goods exchanged along the Silk Road, however, their impact can not compare to that of the exchange of ideas (such as Buddhism). Trade is what facilitates cross-cultural interactions, but the introduction of foreign ideas, ways of life, and techniques are what make trade so impactful. The Silk Road is iconic because of how greatly it altered the many cultures involved. Today, Buddhism is a popular world religion and that can be largely attributed to the Silk Road. This is one example that demonstrates the importance of the Silk Road, and provides further reason for studying history—to understand the complex processes that have shaped (and continue to shape) our world.