

Silk Road Trade  
AP World History  
Kienast

The Silk Road was actually a series of trade routes that connected East Asia and the Middle East. The Silk Roads began in western China and ended in various Mideast cities such as Constantinople, Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo. Goods were then carried across the Mediterranean trade network into western Europe and Africa. The Silk Roads first became prominent during the time period when the Han Empire and Roman Empire existed at either end of the trade routes, around 200 BCE to 200 CE. When Roman began to decline and the Han government collapsed around 200 CE, trade along the Silk Roads lessened. Trade picked up again in the period from 600 CE to 1200 CE between the Byzantine Empire and Islamic Caliphates in the West and eastern powers such as the later Chinese Tang and Song Empires. The Mongols controlled the length of the Eurasian Silk Roads between 1200 and 1400. The trade routes eventually disappeared with the fall of the Mongol Empire and the rise of European sea trade in the 1400's and 1500's.

Though the Silk Roads connected trade empires at either end of the route, traders did not travel the length of the route until the Mongols united it in the 1200's. Throughout the rest of its existence, Silk Road trade was conducted by societies that occupied central Asia. One problem with the Silk Roads was that Chinese people did not want to associate with outside cultures. They saw their culture as superior to that of the west and wanted to have little to do with them. They did, however, realize that other cultures had items for trade that they wanted. They therefore arranged to have central Asian societies trade goods for them. These central Asian societies served as middlemen who took Chinese and western goods and exchanged them for the empires at either end. Trade was done by two central Asian peoples called the Kushans and the Sogdians, who occupied central Asia between 200 BCE and 1200 CE. Sogdian cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara became centers for trade and culturally diverse cities as traders travelled along the Silk Roads. An Iranian empire called the Parthian Empire served as a bridge between the different cultures of central Asia and China. Parthian traders, who were Persian, were culturally and ethnically similar to the Romans and thus, more trusted. The Parthians were familiar to the people of central Asia, which made the middlemen trust them.

Most of the trade items that were exchanged along the Silk Roads were luxury items, but ideas and inventions made their way along the trade routes as well. China desired western horses, gold and silver while westerners desired Chinese silk and citrus from Southeast Asia. Inventions like the stirrup, which made travel along the Silk Roads possible, printing, paper, the rudder and the navigational compass all made their way from East Asia to the rest of the world. Ideas such as Buddhism spread into China despite China's desire to avoid cultural influences from the rest of the world. The important thing to remember is that both the Silk Roads and the Indian Ocean trade network increasingly led to an interconnected world.