

Geographical Setting of the Silk Roads



by John Major

The term Silk Road denotes a network of trails and trading posts, oases and emporia connecting East Asia to the Mediterranean. Along the way, branch routes led to different destinations from the main route, with one especially important branch leading to northwestern India and thus to other routes throughout the subcontinent. The Silk Road network is generally thought of as stretching from an eastern terminus at the ancient Chinese capital city of Chang'an (now Xi'an) to westward end-points at Byzantium (Constantinople), Antioch, Damascus, and other Middle Eastern cities. Beyond these end-points, other trade networks distributed Silk Road goods throughout the Mediterranean world and Europe, and throughout eastern Asia. Thus in thinking about the Silk Road, one must

consider the whole of Eurasia as its geographical context. Trade along the Silk Road waxed or waned according to conditions in China, Byzantium, Persia, and other regions

and countries along the way. There were always competing or alternative routes, by land and sea, to absorb long distance Eurasian trade when conditions along the Silk Road were unfavorable. For this reason, the geographical context of the Silk Road must be thought of in the broadest possible terms, including sea routes linking Japan and Southeast Asia to the continental trade routes.

In dealing with the context of the Silk Road, it is important to remember that the nation-state is a modern invention, and clearly defined and bounded countries did not exist before modern times. Scholars, for example, are reluctant to use the word “China” in talking about pre-Han dynasty times (that is, prior to the 2nd century BCE), because no concept corresponding to a nation called China existed then.

Similarly, when we talk about the Silk Road passing through Afghanistan, it is with the understanding that there was in some sense no such place; the land existed, its population existed, but no nation-state called Afghanistan existed before modern times. Throughout history, boundaries shift, peoples move from place to place, countries and kingdoms come into being and vanish, cities change their names. It is hard to avoid using modern geographical names for convenience, but it is necessary at the same time to avoid projecting modern concepts, such as the idea of the nation-state, back into a past where they do not belong.

The Concept of Asia

Asia can be fruitfully thought of as the major part of a larger physical territory, the continent of Eurasia. The Eurasian landmass is bounded by the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, and the Red and Mediterranean Seas, including islands and archipelagos east and south of the landmass (excluding Oceania).

Asia may also be thought of as a collection of smaller entities, subcontinent- size regions occupying Eurasia's

other factors, while a wide range of cultural differences and formidable geographical boundaries have also separated them. Once Eurasia is seen as a whole, erasing the ancient but artificial and geographically meaningless division of the land mass into “Europe” and “Asia,” it becomes possible to visualize the important geographical and cultural regions into which the continent is subdivided, and the trade routes that linked them together, sometimes over very extensive distances and across formidable physical barriers.

Eurasia's Subregions

Different authorities define the borders and number of Eurasia's subregions differently. Subregional maps of Eurasia are all generally similar, however, since the subregions correspond closely to geographical realities. The major subregions are: the Intermontaine Desert and Oasis Belt; the Trans-Eurasian Steppe Belt; China; the Mediterranean; the Middle East; South Asia; Northeast Asia; Northern Europe; Mainland Southeast Asia; Island Southeast Asia; the Boreal Forest; and the Arctic Littoral. (Although the latter two occupy a significant fraction of the Eurasian landmass, they historically played little role in long-distance travel and trade, and so they are generally left out of this discussion.)

Intermontaine Desert and Oasis Belt

The zone of the Silk Road itself, this broad belt of oasis-punctuated deserts extends across Central Asia from northwestern China, to the Caspian and Black Seas, and on to the Middle East. The zone is bounded on the north and south by mountains, but can be traversed with only a few mountain ranges to cross along the way. Features including a high, dry terrain, infrequent and irregular water supplies, absent or scarce forage for caravan animals, and other difficulties made this zone passable only to highly skilled Silk Road caravaneers. Travel was made possible by people whose local knowledge and experience could enable them to survive and deliver their cargo safely from stage to stage.

The most clearly defined segment of the Silk Road was that leading northwest from Chang'an through the Gansu

Corridor. This segment passed through Lanzhou, Wuxi, Dunhuang, and Yumen (the famous Jade Gate of antiquity) and thus to the deserts and oases of Central Asia. Bounded by mountains to the south, and by the western Gobi Desert to the north (and defined as well by the western stretches of the Great Wall of China), the corridor forms in effect a narrow funnel through which all trade passed on the Silk Road into and out of China.

Beyond the Jade Gate, the Silk Road opens into a number of alternative trails. One possibility is to go northwest through Hami, Turfan and Urumqi, traveling north of the Tian (Heavenly) Mountains through Dzungaria, then on to Kokand and Tashkent in the Ferghana Valley. Another route leads southwest from the Jade Gate and soon poses a choice, whether to skirt the fierce Taklamakan Desert along the northern or along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin. The southern route via Khotan and Yarkand was perhaps marginally easier. Either way, the route converges again at Kashgar, at the foot of the Pamir Mountains, where the route crosses the Turugart Pass leading to Kokand and points west. Still another branch route took a more southerly pass through the Pamirs, and went on to Bactria leading to routes through Afghanistan and on to northwestern India.

Of the northern routes that converged in the Ferghana Valley, several routes led onward to Samarkand and Merv. Divergent trails led north of the Caspian to the Russian trade routes up the Volga and the Don; straight west, skirting the southern coast of the Caspian and Black Seas toward Byzantium; or south, through Herat and Persepolis toward Babylon, Damascus and Tyre. The Silk Road had not one western terminus, but many.

The terrain of the Silk Road was difficult, the possible routes were numerous and complex, and the dangers of the

What made the journey possible at all, besides the techniques of caravan travel and the expertise of the caravaneers, was the existence of substantial oases across Central Asia. These islands of greenery, watered by rivers and springs, ranged in extent from a few square miles to hundreds of square miles, but even the largest were isolated by huge expanses of surrounding deserts. In mapping routes of the Silk Road, one can easily imagine the terrors and hardships of the desert; one can imagine also the joys of arriving at oases like Dunhuang, Hami or Herat, filled with sweet water and fresh fruit to refresh the traveler and provide respite before the journey's next stage.

The Trans-Eurasian Steppe Belt

The Steppe Belt is a zone of rolling grassland, steppe being the Russian word for this kind of treeless, grassy plain. It extends from eastern Mongolia west all the way into Romania and Hungary. In prehistoric times, the steppe was inhabited for tens of thousands of years by groups of hunter-gatherers who lived off the abundant big game that the grasslands supported. Gradually, hunting gave way to a lifestyle of living off managed herds, which in turn led gradually to the domestication of cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. Hunters had become herdsmen, and pastoral nomadism developed into a highly specialized and sophisticated lifestyle that took maximum advantage of steppe resources.

As with any short-grass prairie, some of the Eurasian steppe can be returned to agricultural use with the application of modern methods, including the steel plow and extensive irrigation. The wheatlands of southern Russia and Ukraine are steppe lands put to the plow. Prior to the invention of such techniques, the steppe extended for thousands of miles in an unbroken belt, only partly interrupted by mountain ranges and forest.

With the mobility afforded by the invention of horse- and ox-drawn wheeled vehicles, and later still by horseback riding,

the steppe belt became a vast high way that facilitated the spread of populations, languages, and cultural traits across much of Eurasia long before the caravan trade routes of the more southerly Silk Road were ever imagined. Over the centuries, many groups of horse-riding warriors, including Huns, Turks, and Mongols, conquered their way across Asia, creating sometimes extensive but usually short-lived empires.

China

China can be divided basically into North China and South China, along a line roughly defined by the Han and Huai Rivers. North China is characterized by a relatively dry climate, where crops, especially grains such as wheat and millet, grow in the fertile soil of broad plains and terraced valleys. Geographically, North China is dominated by heavily eroded hills and valleys of loess soil in the northwest, and by the vast north-central flood plains of the Yellow River. The Yellow River has overflowed its banks many times throughout history, causing great damage to human settlements but also enriching the soil with a fresh layer of fertile silt. The northern frontier, site of the Great Wall of China, was long guarded against nomadic raiders, and people looked to the Silk Road and sea routes of the northeast for trade. Transportation in North China was land based, using pack animals and drawn carts. South China has a monsoonal climate. Its soils, leached by the heavy seasonal rains, require heavy fertilization, and the staple crop is rice. Transportation was often provided by riverboat or canal barge.

The strong geographical and agricultural differences between North China and South China tended to make the country fracture into northern and southern political entities during the periods of disunion.

Some trade routes in China historically fed into the Silk Road or distributed goods from it. Other trade routes competed with the Silk Road, including maritime trade from southeastern ports across the South China Sea, and a

route from the mountainous southwest down the Red Sea to Han and Haiphong in what is now Vietnam. In China, people were likely to look variously inland, toward Central Asia, or seaward for trade.

The Mediterranean

The Mediterranean is the western convergence point of the overland and the maritime trans-Eurasian trade routes. The Mediterranean channeled widespread distribution of Silk Road goods throughout western Eurasia—just as Northeast Asian sea routes distributed Silk Road goods onward to Korea and Japan. Chinese silk brocade that had come overland for thousands of miles on the Silk Road and Chinese porcelain that had made the trip by sea might eventually be loaded on the same ship in Tyre for shipment westward to Rome or Marseilles.

It is important to see the Mediterranean as a single region, uniting North Africa and southern Europe, and marking the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean. Trading ships criss-crossed in every direction, from at least the early 1st millennium BCE. As early as 500 BCE, Phoenician mariners had likely passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and explored routes both down the Atlantic coast of Africa and up the Iberian coast to the Bay of Biscay.

The Middle East

A region with few firm physical boundaries, the Middle East is generally taken to include all of the territory between the eastern Mediterranean and the western reaches of Persia (modern Iran), extending from the Anatolian (Turkish) shores of the Black Sea in the north to the Arabian Peninsula in the south. It has close ties to the Mediterranean world, to Egypt and North Africa, and to the Silk Road networks of Persia and Central Asia.

Mesopotamia, the area bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in present-day Iraq, was perhaps the world's earliest cradle of civilization, part of the "fertile

return) Eastern and western coastal cities of India served as intermediaries on sea routes linking East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and points beyond, trans-shipping goods in both directions and adding new goods as well.

Northeast Asia

This region encompasses the rocky Shandong and Liaodong Peninsulas of northeastern China, southern Manchuria, Korea, and Japan. Its coast is lined with many harbors, while peninsulas and islands enclose several seas—the Bohai, the Yellow Sea, and the East Sea/Sea of Japan. In ancient times this region was relatively isolated from the inland culture and political states of northern China, and formed part of an East Asian coastal culture that is still imperfectly understood.

Gradually, Northeast Asia came under an expanding Chinese cultural zone. Sea and overland traffic from Shandong and Liaodong to Korea, and trade to Japan either directly or via Korea, spread elements of Chinese culture to the northeast by around the 4th century BCE, and at an accelerating rate thereafter. Eventually, Buddhism spread to Korea and Japan by this route. Silk Road goods were also dispersed via these searoutes from as far away as Persia.

Northern Europe

Europe is virtually just a peninsula on the western tip of the great Eurasian continental landmass. For much of history northern Europe was too remote, too sparsely settled, and too culturally “backward” to play more than a marginal role in long-distance trade across Eurasia. But, even in ancient times, trade routes within Europe connected the region to the Mediterranean and thus to the Silk Road. Goods were carried from the Black Sea, up the Danube, and down the Oder to the Baltic even before the Roman conquest of Gaul in the middle of the 1st century BCE.

In medieval times the growing prosperity of Europe led to an increasing appetite for the spices, gems, textiles, and other luxury goods of lands to the east. New trade routes were pioneered, such as, beginning around 1000 CE, the Viking route from the Baltic through the trading settlement of Rus (near modern Moscow) and down the Volga to the Caspian Sea. Eventually, the European search for direct access to the riches of India and China led to entirely new maritime routes around Africa and across the Atlantic, and a revolution in the distribution of political and economic power throughout the world.

Mainland Southeast Asia

The huge peninsula that today includes Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and mainland Malaysia is a land of fertile, rice-growing river valleys and coastal plains, and rugged, forested interior mountain ranges. The narrow Strait of Malacca, between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, is one of the few navigable routes between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. As a historic choke-point for long-distance Eurasian maritime trade, control of the strait was a rich prize, much fought over by local peoples and invaders over the course of the centuries.

Despite its proximity to China, mainland Southeast Asia as a whole was more strongly influenced by Indian culture. Indian merchants traded across the Bay of Bengal to the coast of mainland Southeast Asia, as well as to the western islands of Indonesia. These merchants brought Hinduism wherever they settled in trading communities, and brought as well Buddhism which spread rapidly among local populations. Today, mainland Southeast Asia remains largely Buddhist.

Island Southeast Asia

This vast zone of islands—stretching from Taiwan through the Philippines to Indonesia—was settled beginning probably around the early 1st millennium BCE by the most remarkable mariners of the ancient world. These people, known as Austronesians or Malayo-Polynesians, became

export seafarers, moving from their homelands on the southeastern coast first to Taiwan, then down through the Philippines to Borneo. From there they radiated in all directions in a process of exploration and settlement that paved the way for vigorous interisland and long-distance maritime trade that conveyed goods between southern China and India. In time, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and eventually European ships plied these waters.

Several times over the long history of the Silk Road, trade shifted to this maritime route when conditions made overland trade difficult. A strong and enduring Arab presence in island Southeast Asia led to the conversion of most of the region's population to Islam beginning in the 13th century.



(/)
***We Know Asia,
Get to Know Us***

Visit Us

- Hong Kong (/hong-kong)
- New York (/new-york)
- Texas (/texas)

Global Network

- Australia (/australia)
- India (/india)
- Japan (/japan)
- Korea (/korea)
- Northern California (/northern-california)
- Philippines (/philippines)
- Southern California

Resources

- Arts (/arts)
- Asia Blog (/blog/asia)
- ChinaFile (<http://chinafile.com/>)
- Current Affairs (/current-affairs)
- Education (/education)
- For Kids (<http://kids.asiasociety.org/>)
- Policy (/policy)
- Video (/video)

Shop

- AsiaStore (<http://asiastore.org/>)

Initiatives

- Arts & Museum Summit (/arts/arts-museum-summit)
- Asia 21 Young Leaders (/asia21-young-leaders)
- Asia Arts Game Changer Awards (/asia-arts-game-changer-awards)
- Asia Game Changer Awards (/asia-game-changer-awards)
- Asia Society Museum: The Asia Arts & Museum Network (<http://transfuze.org/>)

About Asia Society

- Mission & History (/about)
- Our People (/officers)
- Become a Member (/support/membership)
- Career Opportunities (/about/career-opportunities)
- Corporate Involvement (/support/corporate-engagement)

Connect



VISIT US [HONG KONG \(/HONG-KONG\)](#) [NEW YORK \(/NEW-YORK\)](#) [TEXAS \(/TEXAS\)](#) [INDIA \(/INDIA\)](#) [JAPAN \(/JAPAN\)](#) [KOREA \(/KOREA\)](#) [NORTHERN CALIFORNIA \(/NORTHERN-CALIFORNIA\)](#) [PHILIPPINES \(/PHILIPPINES\)](#) [SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA \(/SOUTHERN-CALIFORNIA\)](#) [SWITZERLAND \(/SWITZERLAND\)](#) [WASHINGTON, DC \(/WASHINGTON-DC\)](#)

Asia Society
 Policy Institute
 (/policy-institute)
 Center for
 Global
 Education
 (/education)
 Center on U.S.-
 China Relations
 (/center-us-
 china-relations)
 China Learning
 Initiatives
 (/china-learning-
 initiatives)
 Coal + Ice
 (/http://coalandice.org/)
 Creative Voices
 of Muslim Asia
 (/creative-voices-
 of-muslim-asia)

GLOBAL NETWORK
Email Signup
(Email
subscriptions)
For the Media
(/media)

©2020 Asia Society | [Privacy Statement \(/util/privacy\)](#) | [Accessibility \(/accessibility\)](#) | [About AsiaSociety.org \(/util/site-credits\)](#) | [Terms & Conditions \(/util/terms-conditions\)](#) | [Site map \(/sitemap\)](#) | [Contact \(/util/contact\)](#)

Asia Society takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with any government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.