

The Silk Road

A Very Short Introduction

By James A. Millward

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- “Neither silk, nor a road”: discuss among yourselves.
- What is the usual conception or image of the "Silk Road"? What does the author suggest might be a more accurate way of looking at Eurasian exchanges over time?
- How is imperial consolidation related to the quickening of silk road exchanges? Are there political implications to suggesting that empires and armies ultimately did more to connect Eurasia than intrepid individual merchants and missionaries?
- Why are so many languages of Europe and Asia derived from ancient Proto-Indo-European?
- How are Central Eurasian steppe empires—conquering nomad confederations like those of the Turks or Mongols—involved in the story of the silk road? Can they be considered more than marauders? What positive role in world history might they have had?
- How are early modern and modern Russia, China, India, Iran and Turkey related to the Mongol empire?
- How has the study of genetics enriched our understanding of the silk road?
- The author introduces the notions of "convergence" and "diffusion" to talk about similar things and parallel phenomena found in different parts of Eurasia. Is the consumption of alcohol and example of diffusion or convergence? What about grape wine?
- How would Eurasian—and world—history have been different if the horse had gone extinct in Eurasia as it did in the Americas?
- Compare the impacts of the silk road with those of the Columbian exchange.
- Which was more important to "the silk road," silk or paper?
- How are western and eastern pre-modern medical theories and practices linked?
- Consider how gunpowder (a Chinese invention) and gunpowder weapons (developed most quickly in Western Europe) exemplifies the back-and-forth, mutual feedback pattern of Eurasian technological exchange.
- Consider the art and technology of "blue and white" ware in the same way, as an example of "a Eurasian joint project."
- Read stories in *Aesop's Fables*, the *Jâkata Tales*, and / or the *Panchatantra* and look for shared plots, motifs, structure or other aspects.
- What does the author mean by a "trans-Eurasian cultural substratum"?
- What explains the continued currency of the silk road in popular culture today? How is it expressed?
- Why is the silk road such a common metaphor in today's diplomatic parlance with regard to Eurasia?
- Did the silk road ever come to an end?
- Bonus question: What's in *your* manti?

Other books by James A. Millward

Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang (Columbia University Press and C. Hurst Co., 2007)

Edited, with assistance from Ruth Dunnell, Mark Elliott, and Philippe Forêt *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde* (Routledge Curzon, 2004)

Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity and Empire in Qing Xinjiang, 1759-1864 (Stanford University Press, 1998)

Further Reading

Golden, Peter B *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Hansen, Valerie *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Hopkirk, Peter *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (John Murray, 1980)

Levin, Theodore *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (Indiana University Press, 1999)

Liu Xinru *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

Tamm, Eric Enno *The Horse the Leaps through Clouds: A Tale of Espionage, the Silk Road, and the Rise of Modern China* (Counterpoint, 2011)

A full list of further reading can be found at the back of the book.

The Silk Road is commonly used as a convenient blanket term to describe the many trade routes and points of contact that criss-crossed Central Asia. The term is generally overused, to the point that everything in the history of the region is conceptualized within the confines of the Silk Road(s). By reading Greco-Roman and particularly Chinese sources on the contacts between the eastern and western termini of the Eurasian continent, this article demonstrates that the Silk Road is not only a nineteenth-century name but, indeed, a modern historiographical invention, serving to lump together and The silk road is a symbol of the Chinese nation's going to the world, and it is related to the rise and fall of the Chinese nation. In ancient times, under the circumstance that the communication between east and west countries was so inconvenient, the Silk Road created a platform helping the exchange of Chinese and western countries. It has been replaced by the 10900-kilometer new Eurasian Land Bridge, but it still has new value to be developed. Economic significance of Silk Road. Trading activities along the Silk Road over many centuries facilitated the transmission not just of goods but also ideas and culture, notably in the area of religions, Buddhism and art. The spread of religions and cultural traditions along the Silk Roads also led to syncretism.