GRADE 7, UNIT 3

The Silk Routes

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

This cave mural on the Silk Route shows Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist monk, returning from India. Image via Wikimedia Commons is in the public domain.

PRIMARY SOURCE
Educating global citizens

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China, Global History, and the Sea
Examples from China's Maritime History

(Excerpts from *Education About Asia* Vol 25(2), Fall 2020, p. 22; adapted for grade level)

Shipwrecks provide a unique "time capsule" of information that land sites rarely can. Land sites evolve over many centuries or longer as a complex "layer cake" of cultures. But a ship sinks in a matter of minutes or hours. The shipwrecks and their cargo produce a unique, virtual snapshot of maritime cultures and trade at that particular historical moment.

The waters off of China and throughout Southeast Asia are among the busiest sea lanes in the world. They are thought to contain thousands of wrecks spanning at least two millennia. They hold details about nautical technology and the history of commerce between China and East, Southeast, and South Asia. This maritime trade would eventually extend to Southwest Asia and the East African coast.

Many of these wrecks have been destroyed gradually by the destructive action of the currents or wood-eating marine worms. Others have been wiped out by modern weighted fishing nets that are dragged across the ocean floor, demolishing all they encounter. Many other wrecks remain preserved in place for centuries until they are found (usually accidentally by fishermen) and then excavated by maritime archaeologists or salvaged by private companies who divide the recovered finds among their investors for sale.

Coastal trade between China and Southeast Asia took shape at least as early as the Han dynasty (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE). In later periods, it expanded dramatically. One of the earliest wrecks discovered in Southeast Asia is the spectacular 9th-century CE Arab dhow ship known as the Belitung wreck. It sank in the reefs off the island of Belitung between Sumatra and Borneo, many hundreds of miles south from the trade's usual route through the Straits of Malacca. This Arab dhow is the only known early wreck in Southeast Asia that shows Arab (or possibly Indian) construction. It provides rich evidence to show direct sea trade between China and the Indian Ocean as early as the 9th century CE.

Excavations in 1998–1999 revealed that this ship was on a return journey from China to Southwest Asia, filled with Chinese cargo most likely destined for markets. Among the ship's 60,000 recovered objects were tons of ceramics from the Changsha kilns in south-central China. Some bore a date that corresponds to the year 826 CE. Many were decorated with Koranic inscriptions and with colors favored in the markets of Iran. The ship also carried a cargo of imperial Tang gold and silver. This was probably intended as a Chinese gift for a foreign ruler, earning this wreck the nickname "Tang Treasure Ship."

The Beilitung's diverse cargo reveals aspects of early Chinese trade across the Indian Ocean. The wreck also provides important details about early Arab ship construction. One part of the hull was well preserved, buried deep in the sediment and protected from marine worms. Like other early dhows, it was built with flexible stitched plank construction that provided flexibility in rough seas and made repairing damage easier. These and other details allowed for the reconstruction of a full-size replica, The Jewel of Muscat. It is currently on display in Singapore's Maritime Experiential Museum and Aquarium.

Silk Road Video Transcript

The Silk Road: Connecting the ancient world through trade
Shannon Harris Castelo
TED-Ed

A banker in London sends the latest stock info to his colleagues in Hong Kong in less than a second. With a single click, a customer in New York orders electronics made in Beijing, transported across the ocean within days by cargo plane or container ship. The speed and volume at which goods and information move across the world today is unprecedented in history. But global exchange itself is older than we think, reaching back over 2,000 years along a 5,000-mile stretch known as the Silk Road. The Silk Road wasn't actually a single road but a network of multiple routes that gradually emerged over centuries, connecting to various settlements and to each other thread by thread.

The first agricultural civilizations were isolated places in fertile river valleys, their travel impeded by surrounding geography and fear of the unknown. But as they grew, they found that the arid deserts and steppes on their borders were inhabited not by the demons of folklore but nomadic tribes on horseback. The Scythians, who ranged from Hungary to Mongolia, had come in contact with the civilizations of Greece, Egypt, India, and China. These encounters were often less than peaceful. But even through raids and warfare, as well as trade and protection of traveling merchants in exchange for tariffs, the nomads began to spread goods, ideas, and technologies between cultures with no direct contact.

One of the most important strands of this growing web was the Persian Royal Road, completed by Darius the First in the 5th century BCE. Stretching nearly 2,000 miles from the Tigris River to the Aegean Sea, its regular relay points allowed goods and messages to travel at nearly 1/10 the time it would take a single traveler. With Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia and expansion into Central Asia through capturing cities like Samarkand and establishing new ones like Alexandria Eschate, the network of Greek, Egyptian, Persian, and Indian culture and trade extended farther east than ever before, laying the foundations for a bridge between China and the West.

This was realized in the 2nd century BCE, when an ambassador named Zhang Qian, sent to negotiate with nomads in the West, returned to the Han Emperor with tales of sophisticated civilizations, prosperous trade, and exotic goods beyond the Western borders. Ambassadors and merchants were sent towards Persia and India to trade silk and jade for horses and cotton, along with armies to secure their passage. Eastern and Western routes gradually linked together into an integrated system spanning Eurasia, enabling cultural and commercial exchange farther than ever before. Chinese goods made their way to Rome, causing an outflow of gold that led to a ban on silk, while Roman glassware was highly prized in China.

Military expeditions in Central Asia also saw encounters between Chinese and Roman soldiers, possibly even transmitting crossbow technology to the Western world. Demand for exotic and foreign goods and the profits they brought kept the strands of the Silk Road intact, even as the Roman Empire disintegrated and Chinese dynasties rose and fell. Even

Mongolian hordes, known for pillage and plunder, actively protected the trade routes rather than disrupting them.

But along with commodities, these routes also enabled the movement of traditions, innovations, ideologies, and languages. Originating in India, Buddhism migrated to China and Japan to become the dominant religion there. Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula into South Asia, blending with native beliefs and leading to new faiths, like Sikhism. And gunpowder made its way from China to the Middle East, forging the futures of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires.

In a way, the Silk Road's success led to its own demise, as new maritime technologies, like the magnetic compass, found their way to Europe, making long land routes obsolete. Meanwhile, the collapse of Mongol rule was followed by China's withdrawal from international trade. But even though the old routes and networks did not last, they had changed the world forever, and there was no going back. Europeans seeking new maritime routes to the riches they knew awaited in East Asia led to the Age of Exploration and expansion into Africa and the Americas.

Today, global interconnectedness shapes our lives like never before. Canadian shoppers buy T-shirts made in Bangladesh, Japanese audiences watch British television shows, and Tunisians use American software to launch a revolution. The impact of globalization on culture and economy is indisputable. But whatever its benefits and drawbacks, it is far from a new phenomenon. And though the mountains, deserts, and oceans that once separated us are now circumvented through supersonic vehicles, cross-continental communication cables, and signals beamed through space rather than caravans traveling for months, none of it would have been possible without the pioneering cultures whose efforts created the Silk Road: history's first world wide web.

Silk Road Video Translation

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Un banquero en Londres envía la información bursátil más reciente a sus colegas en Hong Kong en menos de un segundo. Con un solo clic, un cliente en Nueva York encarga productos electrónicos fabricados en Pekín, que se transportan a través del océano en cuestión de días en avión de carga o buque portacontenedores. La velocidad y el volumen con el que se mueven los bienes y la información por el mundo hoy en día no tienen precedentes en la historia. Pero el intercambio global en sí es más antiguo de lo que creemos, remontándose a más de 2.000 años a lo largo de un tramo de 8.000 kilómetros conocido como la Ruta de la Seda. La Ruta de la Seda no era en realidad una única ruta, sino una red de múltiples rutas que surgieron gradualmente a lo largo de los siglos, conectando diversos asentamientos y entre sí, hilo a hilo.

Las primeras civilizaciones agrícolas eran lugares aislados en fértiles valles fluviales, cuyos viajes se veían obstaculizados por la geografía circundante y el miedo a lo desconocido. Pero a medida que crecieron, descubrieron que los áridos desiertos y los escalones fronterizos estaban habitados, no por los demonios del folclore, sino por tribus nómadas a caballo. Los escitas, que se extendían desde Hungría hasta Mongolia, habían entrado en contacto con las civilizaciones de Grecia, Egipto, India y China. Estos encuentros a menudo no fueron nada pacíficos. Pero incluso mediante incursiones y guerras, así como el comercio y la protección de comerciantes itinerantes a cambio de aranceles, los nómadas comenzaron a difundir bienes, ideas y tecnologías entre culturas sin contacto directo.

Uno de los hilos más importantes de esta creciente red fue la Ruta Real Persa, completada por Darío I en el siglo V a. C. Con una extensión de casi 3.200 kilómetros desde el río Tigris hasta el mar Egeo, sus puntos de relevo regulares permitían que las mercancías y los mensajes viajaran en casi una décima parte del tiempo que tardaría un solo viajero. Con la conquista de Persia por Alejandro Magno y su expansión hacia Asia Central mediante la toma de ciudades como Samarcanda y el establecimiento de otras nuevas como Alejandría Eschate, la red cultural y comercial griega, egipcia, persa e india se extendió más al este que nunca, sentando las bases para un puente entre China y Occidente.

Esto se materializó en el siglo II a. C., cuando un embajador llamado Zhang Qian, enviado a negociar con los nómadas de Occidente, regresó al emperador Han con relatos de civilizaciones sofisticadas, comercio próspero y productos exóticos más allá de las fronteras occidentales. Embajadores y comerciantes fueron enviados a Persia e India para intercambiar seda y jade por caballos y algodón, junto con ejércitos para asegurar su paso. Las rutas orientales y occidentales se unieron gradualmente en un sistema integrado que abarcaba Eurasia, permitiendo un intercambio cultural y comercial más amplio que nunca. Las mercancías chinas llegaron a Roma, lo que provocó una fuga de oro que condujo a la prohibición de la seda, mientras que la cristalería romana era muy apreciada en China.

Las expediciones militares en Asia Central también propiciaron encuentros entre soldados chinos y romanos. Posiblemente incluso transmitieron la tecnología de las ballestas al mundo

occidental. La demanda de productos exóticos y extranjeros y las ganancias que aportaban mantuvieron intactos los hilos de la Ruta de la Seda, incluso durante la desintegración del Imperio romano y el auge y caída de las dinastías chinas. Incluso las reservas mongolas, conocidas por sus saqueos y pillajes, protegieron activamente las rutas comerciales en lugar de interrumpirlas.

Pero junto con las mercancías, estas rutas también facilitaron la circulación de tradiciones, innovaciones, ideologías e idiomas. Originario de la India, el budismo migró a China y Japón para convertirse en la religión dominante allí. El islam se extendió desde la Península Arábiga hasta el sur de Asia, mezclándose con las creencias nativas y dando lugar a nuevas religiones, como el sijismo. Y la pólvora se abrió paso desde China hasta Oriente Medio, forjando el futuro de los imperios otomano, safávida y mogol.

En cierto modo, el éxito de la Ruta de la Seda condujo a su propia desaparición a medida que nuevas tecnologías marítimas, como la brújula magnética, llegaban a Europa, dejando obsoletas las largas rutas terrestres. Mientras tanto, el colapso del dominio mongol fue seguido por la retirada de China del comercio internacional. Pero aunque las antiguas rutas y redes no perduraron, cambiaron el mundo para siempre y no había vuelta atrás. Los europeos, en busca de nuevas rutas marítimas hacia las riquezas que sabían que les aguardaban en el este de Asia, dieron origen a la Era de la Exploración y la expansión hacia África y las Américas.

Hoy en día, la interconexión global moldea nuestras vidas como nunca antes. Los canadienses compran camisetas hechas en Bangladesh, el público japonés ve programas de televisión británicos y los tunecinos utilizan software estadounidense para impulsar una revolución. El impacto de la globalización en la cultura y la economía es indiscutible. Pero, independientemente de sus ventajas e inconvenientes, está lejos de ser un fenómeno nuevo. Y aunque las montañas, los desiertos y los océanos que una vez nos separaron ahora se sortean mediante vehículos supersónicos, cables de comunicación transcontinentales y señales transmitidas por el espacio en lugar de caravanas que viajan durante meses, nada de esto habría sido posible sin las culturas pioneras cuyos esfuerzos crearon la Ruta de la Seda: la primera ruta mundial de la historia.

Keeping Up-to-Date on Uyghurs

Additional Resources with Information on Modern-Day Uyghurs

The Uyghurs (University of Washington)

Uyghurs (*Wikipedia*)

China's Uyghurs: A Minority In Their Own Land? (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*)

"Eradicating Ideological Viruses" China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims (Human Rights Watch)

Uyghurs (Human Rights Watch)

Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide? (BBC)

What is happening with the Uyghurs in China? (PBS)

A Secret Look Inside a Chinese Labor Program for Uighurs: Visual Investigations (*New York Times*)

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (UN)

The moral urgency of the Uyghur crisis (*Worldy* podcast)

How extensive restrictions have shaped the story in Xinjiang, China (*Columbia Journalism Review*)

Envoys on the Silk Routes and Their Gifts

At a time when Dunhuang was independently ruled, its leaders sent a delegation (group of envoys) to Chang'an.

"Between 848 and 1002...the travelers who appear most often in the documentary record are envoys and monks. The Zhang and Cao families [of Dunhuang] maintained diplomatic relations with all of their neighbors. They sent and received gift-bearing missions from the Tang capital at Chang'an. They also received gifts from other closer rulers as well, most notably the rulers of the Khotan and the Uyghur Khaganates. Although many documents record the coming and going of envoys, few say what gifts they presented and what they received in return. For that reason, one list of gifts given and received by a delegation that traveled to Chang'an in 877 is particularly important.

In 877 Zhang Huaishen...had been ruling Dunhuang for 10 years. But the Tang emperor had not yet accepted him as an official successor. Zhang sent a delegation with a request for a formal banner that would acknowledge him as the military governor of Dunhuang. This was the title that his uncle had held before him. The 877 delegation presented one ball of jade (weight not specified), one yak tail, one antelope horn (probably for medicine), and one letter to the Tang emperor.

Hosting the delegation for nearly 4 months...the Chinese divided the group into three levels. They gave different gifts to each group. The group collectively was given a total of 561 bolts of cloth, five silver bowls, 14 silver cups, and 50 suits. In addition, each member of the group received 43 bolts of cloth to cover travel expenses, a total of 1,247 bolts. In 878 the delegation returned without the banner. Only in 888 did the Tang court grant the desired honor."

Note also:
In additional to presenting formal gifts to rulers, envoys sometimes:

- Engaged in private trade
- Brought information about their homelands to foreign rulers, then returned with new information
- Spied on the rulers they visited

Text source: Hansen, Valerie. 2017. *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents*. Oxford University Press, 2012 (p. 191). Adapted for grade level. https://valerie-hansen.com/books/the-silk-road/