

Grade 7, Unit 3

The Silk Routes



How does trade affect ideas and culture?

Framing the Unit

Cultural exchange and trade across the vast Eurasian steppes and mountains were practices that spanned millennia and drew in the whole of Asia, continuing into the present. This unit focuses on the first millennium of travel on the Silk Routes, which includes the heyday of traffic during the 7th and 8th centuries. The content of these lessons connects the three prior Asia units in the IH curriculum (Units 6.2, 7.1, and 7.2) and previews material from Units 7.4 (Southeast Asia) and 7.5 (Europe). Each of these regions was involved in bridging Asian cultures in ways that shaped their societies and brought social change.

Cluster 1 consists of eight lessons that orient students to what the “Silk Routes” were and the goods, people, and geographic features that a traveler or trader might encounter there.

Cluster 2 is an In-Depth Inquiry that involves a trade simulation in which students consider the question: *What would a traveler or trader on the Silk Routes experience?*

With the Silk Route travel and contact came an exchange of ideas, religions, technologies, cultural forms, and tolerance for differences.

In Cluster 3, students investigate both ancient and current policies toward religious and ethnic diversity in China while asking: *What happened over time to the Silk Road legacy of tolerance?*

Note: This interactive timeline: [Cultures of the Silk Road Timeline](#), created by Silk Road Seattle, may be enlarged and printed as a poster for classroom use.

Prepare to teach this unit by exploring the [Background Brief: The Silk Routes](#), which was designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. The brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present this unit with confidence.

Enduring Understandings

1. The geography and topography of regions affect how people travel and trade across distant regions. These factors help explain the success and lasting influence of the Silk Routes, which connected Asia, Africa, and Europe thousands of years ago with a trade network that continues to move goods and spread ideas today.
2. Trade routes spread cultures and beliefs across regions and continents because economic exchange also leads to the sharing of religious beliefs, languages, art, and technologies. These influences play an important role in shaping societies in both the past and present
3. Trade networks can promote openness and cultural exchange between societies, but they can also challenge policies about religious and ethnic diversity. Whether trade leads to acceptance of cultural differences or conflict and oppression often depends on how societies react during times of social change.

Connections to Current Events and Issues

Connections to today's world and students' lives are built into this unit. Other contemporary connections could be added or developed for various topics of study within this unit, and we encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to connect students' learning to contemporary local, national, and global developments that may arise as you teach this unit. Some ideas for linking this unit to current events and issues include:

- The Belt & Road Initiative: In 2013, the Chinese government announced the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure project now involving over 150 countries. Using the historical Silk Routes as an analogy, China promised to invigorate trade and expand its global influence through pipelines, ports, roads, railways, and power plants. See [Understanding the Belt and Road](#), a data visualization from Kontinentalist, to get started learning more. Students may appreciate the opportunity to consider whether the historical analogy of a “New Silk Route” is an appropriate one.
- In the first millennium of the Silk Routes, trade and travel could be halted by bandits or pirates, a failure to secure passes, or weather events. What causes travel to stop or slow down in our age? Explore examples like the story of the *Ever Given*, the megaship that got stuck in the Suez Canal in 2021, bringing global trade through the Canal to a halt. Or follow the journey of journalist Paul Salopek of Out of Eden Walk and his Esri Storymap, [On Foot in the Path of the Silk Road](#)—see the section on Barriers to Trade or his article on [police stops](#).
- Buddhas of Bamiyan: A recent example of religious intolerance on the old Silk Roads (corresponding to Lessons 11–13) is the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan at the hands of Taliban militants. The two colossal Buddhas were cut into the rockface of the Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan in the 6th or 7th century CE, standing for over 1,000 years before they were blasted away as an act of protest.

*Vocabulary (in order of appearance)***Tier 3 Vocabulary**

Silk Routes/Silk Road
oasis
terrain

globalization
cultural diffusion
imperial

ethnic minority group
separatism

Priority Tier 2 Vocabulary

culture

tolerance

persecution

Lesson Clusters*Cluster 1: Traveling the Silk Routes (Lessons 1-8)***What were the most important goods and ideas that moved on the Silk Routes?**

Focus Standards: 7.T1b.2g, 7.T2b.2f, 7.T2c.1, PS 2, PS 5, RCA-H.6-8.1, RCA-H.6-8.2, SLCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.9

In this cluster, students will explore what the “Silk Routes” were and the goods, people, and geographic features of the Silk Road by investigating artifacts, stories, and sources. They will begin by activating prior knowledge of the development of Asian cultures. Students will then explore the region's geography and its impact on traders and travelers. Throughout the lessons, students will begin to understand how cultures change through cultural diffusion and interaction. Students will use the information they gather to write an argument explaining which goods or ideas were the most important to move along the Silk Routes.

*Cluster 2: In-Depth Inquiry: Exchange at the Oasis (Lessons 9-11)***What would a traveler or trader on the Silk Routes experience?**

Focus Standards: 7.T1b.2g, 7.T2b.2f, 7.T2c.1, PS 2, PS 5, RCA-H.6-8.1, SLCA.6-8.1

Cluster 2 comprises the simulation activity and debrief. Through question development, research in sources, character development, and presentation in the simulation, students demonstrate their command of PS 2 and PS 5 as well as W1 and W9. Students will review multiple sources and synthesize information to embody a character during the simulation. Finally, students will interview each other to learn more about the experiences of traders and travelers along the Silk Routes.

Cluster 3: The Silk Road Legacy (Lessons 12-16)

What happened over time to the Silk Road legacy of tolerance?

Focus Standards: 7.T2b.2f, 7.T2c.1, PS 2, PS 5, RCA-H.6-8.1

With the Silk Route travel and contact came an exchange of ideas, religions, technologies, cultural forms, and tolerance in different ways. In the last group of lessons in Cluster 3, students investigate ancient and current policies toward religious and ethnic diversity, specifically in China. They ask: What happened over time to the Silk Road legacy of tolerance? The cluster culminates with students writing a one-pager that illustrates the contrasts between religious tolerance in the past and present along the Silk Road.

Summative Assessment: The Silk Routes: Trade and Cultural Exchange Across Asia (Lesson 17)

Focus Standards: 7.T1a.1, 7.T1b.2g, 7.T2a.1, 7.T2a.3, 7.T2b.2e, 7.T2b.2f, 7.T2c.1, PS 2, PS 5, RCA-H.6-8.1, RCA-H.6-8.2, SLCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.9

The Summative Assessment for Unit 7.3 provides students with the opportunity to showcase the knowledge and skills they have developed throughout the unit. Students will engage in structured activities that guide them toward crafting a well-supported written response to the Unit Essential Question:

How does trade affect ideas and culture?

Students will begin with a collaborative Discussion Diamond activity, where they will generate and organize possible responses to the Essential Question using evidence from the unit. They will then individually compose a two-paragraph written argument utilizing unit sources and explaining how those sources support their claim. By engaging in collaborative discussions and evidence-based writing, students will demonstrate their understanding of the ways in which trade influences cultural exchange and the spread of ideas.

Unit Focus Standards

Content Standards

- **7.T1b.2:** Describe important economic, political, and religious developments in Indian and Central Asian history and evaluate the ways in which they conform to or differ from developments in societies in other regions of the world.
 - **7.T1b.2g:** the role topography and geography played in making trade along the several routes of the Silk Road viable and lucrative; connections through trade routes to Africa, Europe, and China

Unit Overview

- **7.T2b.2:** Describe important economic, political, and religious developments in early Chinese history and evaluate the ways in which they are similar to or different from the characteristics of societies in other regions of the world.
 - **7.T2b.2f:** China's role in trade across Asia and to and from Africa and Europe along the Silk Roads and the introduction of Buddhism in China starting c. 1st century CE.
- **7.T2c.1:** Trace the spread of Buddhism from India in the 4th century BCE to China, Korea, and Japan, and its development in Japan from the 6th through the 13th century CE; explain significant cultural contributions of ancient Japan (e.g., Buddhist philosophy, art, calligraphy, and temple and landscape architecture).

Practice Standards

- **PS 2:** Develop and evaluate relevant guiding questions with peer support.
- **PS 5:** Critique the usefulness of a historical source for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Literacy Standards

- **RCA-H.6-8.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, quoting or paraphrasing as appropriate.
- **RCA-H.6-8.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- **SLCA.6-8.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on discipline-specific topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **WCA.6-8.1:** Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
- **WCA.6-8.9:** Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, interpretation, reflection, and research.

Acknowledgements

This Investigating History unit was developed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in partnership with the following organizations and individuals:

Lead Curriculum Authors: Primary Source

Lead Authors

Deborah Cunningham
Jill Stevens

EL Specialist

Tanya Bogaty

Contributing Authors

Rachel Barker
Christine Gonzalez
Jennifer Boyle Nigro
Sara Wahid
Susan Zeiger

2024–25 Curriculum Revisions: Educurious by NCEE

Lead Author

Tricia Farquharson

Lead Reviewer

Kasha Browning

EL Specialist

Becky Lawrence

Editor

Gayle Klim

Multilingual Learner Specialists: Transformative Learning Collaborative

Allison Audet
Paula Merchant

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Kathryn Gabriele
Dylan Geesey
Reuben Henriques
Rebekah Judson
Miesha Keita
Katherine Tarca

Copyright Notice



All original content in this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) and © 2025 by DESE. Third party content including, but not limited to, images, illustrations, and photographs, are subject to their own license terms.

Reference in this curriculum to any specific commercial products, processes, or services, or the use of any trade, firm, or corporation name is for the information and convenience of the public, and does not constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Our office is not responsible for and does not in any way guarantee the accuracy of information in other sites accessible through links herein. For more information please contact: InvestigatingHistory@mass.gov.