**The Silk Road**

There is perhaps nothing that better symbolizes Afroeurasian trade than the Silk Road, a thousands-mile network of routes that has linked the merchants, goods, and ideas of dozens of civilizations over the past two thousand years. The Silk Road, aptly named due to the demand for Chinese silk across Afroeurasia, is actually made up of many routes that encompass lands stretching from Eastern China to Western Europe.

The origins of the Silk Road date back to the time of the Han Dynasty of China, a little over 2,000 years ago. The amount of activity along this route has risen and fallen throughout the centuries. During the earlier part of the Middle Ages, there was very little European activity, though Arab traders continued to utilize the Silk Road for trade with other eastern cultures.

In the 13th century, an Italian named Marco Polo travelled to East Asia, eventually returning to Venice after more than two decades. While he was not the first European to reach East Asia, he was the first to leave behind a detailed account of his travels. Marco Polo’s stories reignited European interest in the Silk Road.

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| **Region** | **Goods Contributed to Silk Road Commerce** |
| China | silk, bamboo, gunpowder, mirrors, paper |
| Siberia and Central Asia | furs, livestock, horses, saddles |
| India | cotton textiles, herbs, gemstones, spices |
| Middle East | nuts, almonds, dried fruit, swords |
| Mediterranean Basin | gold, glassware, grapes, olives, perfume |

While valuable Chinese silk was in high demand across Afroeurasia (it was even used as currency), it was far from the only good being traded along the Silk Road. Gold, silver, precious gems, glassware, porcelain, and textiles were all prized trade goods. Fruits and vegetables and their seeds, as well as spices brought variety to the diets of people across Afroeurasia via the Silk Road. Animals were traded as well, from work animals like horses, camels, and dogs, to exotic animals such as leopards and lions. These and countless other items made merchants wealthy and exposed people from all parts of the Silk Road to new cultures.

This was perhaps the most important historical role of the Silk Road. As goods were exchanged between the peoples of Afroeurasia, they also passed on their ideas to one another. Major world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity were “traded” along the Silk Road. New technologies were shared as well. The great Chinese dynasties of the 6th-13th centuries were often on the leading edge of technological advancement. Gunpowder and movable type were important Chinese inventions that eventually spread west to other parts of Afroeurasia via the Silk Road.

Not everything that was passed along the Silk Road was positive. The Mongol Empire of the 13th and 14th century brought peace and security to the Silk Road, increasing the flow of people and goods along its paths. This ease of travel contributed to the rapid spread of a horrific disease called the Bubonic Plague, which killed tens of millions of people across Afroeurasia in the mid-14th century.

Eventually, trade along the Silk Road diminished due to a variety of factors. The demand in Europe for Asian goods increased, leading to the search for a faster, sea-based route to China. Further, advancements in the art of silk production in the Middle East and Europe decreased the dependence on China for silk. Despite its eventual decline, the Silk Road maintains its relevance as the greatest example of early intercontinental trade.



