The central Asian caravan trade linking Europe, the Middle East, and China, which had developed as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), began to decline during Sung (960–1279) times and truly collapsed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It flourished during the Han and T’ang (618–907) dynasties, but the turbulence in northwest China during the Sung period disrupted trade along the so-called Silk Roads. In the Mongol era (midthirteenth to midfourteenth centuries), trade across Eurasia witnessed a resurgence that continued through the first century or so of Ming (1368–1644) rule. By the late Ming, however, the long-distance trade between China and the Middle East and Europe had dwindled to a trickle.1

Decline of this central Asian caravan trade has often been attributed to competition from the European oceangoing vessels that began to reach China in the sixteenth century. This new trade conveyed bulkier items, was less costly, and was freer of harassment and plunder. Such economic advantages, it has been asserted, enabled the sea trade to supersede the overland commerce, resulting ultimately in the collapse of the traditional caravan trade. This paper proposes, however, that though rising costs and competition from the oceangoing trade undermined land commerce across Eurasia, the political disruptions and the religious and social changes of the time must also be considered. These transformations were as critical as the economic pressures challenging merchants who were intent on maintaining the caravan trade.

An analysis of the reasons for the changes in the central Asian caravan trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries needs to take into account two other considerations. First is that the short-distance caravan trade did not diminish. Commerce between the sedentary civilizations and the pastoral nomadic societies across Eurasia continued relatively

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1 For additional details on these developments, see Morris Rossabi’s essay “Trade Routes in Inner Asia,” in Denis Sinor, ed., Cambridge History of Inner Asia, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.
uninterrupted even after the seventeenth century.\footnote{2} Second is the paucity of precise information about this commerce. The merchants who conducted the long-distance trade kept few records of their transactions nor did they wish to reveal what they perceived to be their commercial secrets. As Niels Steensgaard has observed in his study of the European-Asian trade: “Information concerning the costs of caravan transport is unfortunately extremely scanty. This is hardly an accident, since it was one of the peddler’s business secrets just like routes and prices. The information at our disposal is scattered and difficult to interpret precisely.”\footnote{3}

**Difficulties of Long-Distance Trade**

Formidable obstacles had traditionally confronted long-distance trade across Eurasia. The caravan trade required an enormous investment of time and capital. Ghiyāth al-dīn Naqqāsh, who traveled in 1419 on an official embassy sent by Tamerlane’s son Shāhrūkh to the Ming court, wrote that the journey from Herat (in Afghanistan) to Peking took about a year.\footnote{4} In the same decade, the Chinese envoy Ch’en Ch’eng traveled for approximately the same length of time to reach Samarkand from Peking.\footnote{5} About nine to ten months elapsed between the papal legate John of Marignolli’s departure from Constantinople and his arrival in central Asia in 1339.\footnote{6} Thus a trip from the Middle East to the Chinese capital might last a year and a half to two years. The individual states and papacy defrayed the costs of these aforementioned official embassies, but the expenses of most caravans were borne by merchants and other private individuals.

Since the caravans needed to obtain supplies and to rest their animals en route, a series of oases, free from bandit harassment, were essential if the caravan trade were to survive. The oases relied on a subsistence agriculture and generally had small populations, though the inhabitants were of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. They owed their significance to their fortuitous geographic locations, not to their resources or other

\footnote{2}{For the continuation of this trade, see Saguchi Toru, *Juhachi jukyuseiki higashi torukistan kenkyu* (Tokyo, 1963), and idem, “Kashgaria,” *Acta Asiatica* 34 (1978): 61–78.}
\footnote{3}{The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade (Chicago, 1973), 31.}
\footnote{6}{Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (reprint, Taipei, 1966), 3:190.}