GEOGRAPHY ALONG THE SILK ROADS

The Silk Roads, which linked China, India, West Asia, and Europe, via Central and Inner Asia,1 are an “incurably romantic subject.”2 Over the centuries, caravans that traversed part or all of this vast territory encountered some of the world’s most daunting terrain. Treacherous deserts and lofty mountains impeded travel, yet merchants, missionaries, entertainers, craftsmen, and other voyagers continued their journeys along these roads from the second century BCE on, particularly when powerful dynasties, which could deter bandits, ruled China and Persia.

Four ecological zones, all of which were landlocked, marked Inner Asia. Forests and lakes characterized southern Siberia, northern Mongolia, and northern Manchuria, fostering a nomadic hunting and fishing economy. Grasslands dominated the areas to the south and were peopled by pastoral nomads, principally in Mongolia, northern Xinjiang, and Kazakhstan. The inhospitable Gobi and Taklamakan deserts were still farther south, with oases and even large towns, whose inhabitants survived on a self-sufficient agriculture and both short-distance and Silk Roads trade. Melting snow from the Tianshan, Nanshan, and Hindukush mountains provided water for the oases and, in the lower elevations, offered grass for herd- ers in summer. Indeed, these zones were not mutually exclusive. Farmers and herders often shared the steppes, and herders frequently hunted and fished to supplement their incomes. Inhabitants of all four regions shared one characteristic—a need for commerce. Eking out a fragile existence and unable to maintain a surplus to survive droughts or heavy snows, pastoral nomads had to trade either with China or Persia, the two mostly sedentary civilizations. They also benefited from the long-distance trade in such luxury items as silk, transporting these goods through Inner Asia, particularly after the second century BCE missions of Zhang Qian initiated commerce between China and Central Asia.

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1 Central Asia comprises the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang and the currently independent countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as northern Afghanistan. Inner Asia is more inclusive and includes Central Asia, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, southern Siberia, and Tibet.

The development of the Silk Roads trade stemmed from defensive measures against the Xiongnu, a pastoral nomadic confederation based in Mongolia and stretching all the way to northern Xinjiang. Commercial and territorial disputes between China’s Han dynasty and the Xiongnu resulted in repeated battles. Such conflicts prompted Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 BCE) to dispatch an expedition of approximately a hundred men to Central Asia to forge an alliance against the Xiongnu. However, one of the Xiongnu tribes captured Zhang Qian, the leader of the embassy, and detained him for ten years. He finally managed to escape and reached the territory of a group whom the Xiongnu had expelled from northwest China. The group’s leader rejected Zhang’s offer of an alliance.

Nonetheless, Zhang’s mission was not a failure. He returned to China following recapture and a second escape from the Xiongnu, and offered a report on his travels. The Emperor was delighted with the report, specifically Zhang’s account of the superior, so-called “blood-sweating” horses of Central Asia. Simultaneously, the peoples of Central Asia learned about silk from Zhang’s mission and developed a craving for it, both for themselves and for trade with peoples farther west. Shortly thereafter, commerce was initiated, and the Silk Roads trade was born.

I. *The Silk Roads in Traditional Times*

The courses of the Silk Roads varied according to the paths across the Taklamak Nagar desert. All followed the same route from Chang’an (modern Xi’an) to Dunhuang, which eventually emerged as a center of Buddhist learning and art. The southern route then entered the Tarim river basin and skirted the northern flanks of the Kunlun Mountains. The most renowned oasis on this route was Khotan, the source of some of China’s finest jades and still another important Buddhist center. From there, travelers either journeyed to India or continued adjacent to the Kunlun until they reached Kashgar and joined voyagers who had taken the northern route. The latter had made a sharp detour to the north from Dunhuang and crossed a section of the Gobi desert, where water was available approximately every other day, before reaching safety at Hami. They then followed the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains to Turfan and reconnoitred with the southern route travelers at Kashgar.

More desert, mountain, and river crossings awaited the intrepid traveler. Journeying through the Terek-davan pass, he reached Samarkand and Bukhara, two great commercial emporia that eventually became twin jewels of Islamic architecture. After trading with local merchants, he traveled