

# **The Silk Road**

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by  
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## **Introduction**

Once upon a time, long ago in the land of Persia, a young man name Madjnun fell desperately in love with a young woman named Layli. Madjnun was so much in love he could not conceal his emotions. He wrote poetry describing his love. He walked the streets reciting his love poems to any passerby. (1)

Dearest heart, if I had not given my soul to you,  
it would have been better to give it up for good,  
to lose it forever.

I am burning in love's fire;

I am drowning in the tears of my sorrow...

I am the moth that flies through the night to flutter around the candle flame. (2)

Madjnun's father asked for Layli's hand on his son's behalf. Her father refused, believing "Madjnun is a madman who is destroying his daughter's reputation by his open declarations of love on every street corner." (3)

Their love journey takes many turns, but Madjnun and Layli are never together. After many years alone, not able to bear the thought of not being with Madjnun, Layli is consumed with sorrow, and dies. Madjnun learns of this, “visits her grave, weeps desperately, and dies.”(4)

This is a love story for the ages. It is said the original version dates back to around the Seventh Century, A.D. and is found in Arabic literature. The excerpt heard today is from the Persian story, written by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century poet Nizami. Folk versions of Layli and Madjnun have been told from North Africa to India. (5)

An Azerbaijani composer created an opera around the story, and it was first performed in 1908, making it “the first work ever created in the Italian musical genre in the Muslim world.” (6) In 2007, international musicians adapted “the original three-hour opera score into a 35-minute chamber arrangement.” (7)

Many people may know that the Silk Road was a series of trade routes for valuables between China, the Middle East and Europe. Commodities, including silk, were indeed traded over these routes. However, the story of Layli and Madjnun represents the fact that some of the treasures exchanged along the Silk Road are more enduring and significant than commodities. These treasures were the art, literature, religion, language and values of many cultures. Exchanges of both culture and commodities have enriched lives for centuries, and continue to do so today.

Exploring the Silk Road’s cultural and economic impacts on the world while its routes were busily traveled is an adventure of art, music, food, politics, wars, religion, mystery and treasure.

Time does not permit this paper to be an exhaustive exploration. Marco Polo would understand. As the Silk Road's most famous explorer, who published tales from his 13<sup>th</sup> century travels from Italy to China and back, Polo could not exhaust his discoveries. On his deathbed in Venice in 1324, Marco Polo said: "I have only told the half of what I saw!" (8) This author can relate!

So this paper will explore three main themes: the definition and geography of the Silk Road; the exchange of commodities and culture along the Silk Road; and the way the Silk Road is being used today to teach lessons about cultural understanding and peace.

### ***Defining the Silk Road***

Defining the Silk Road is complicated because one such road did not exist. The Silk Road was a network of roads and pathways traversing mountains, desert regions and oasis towns from Central Asia eastward to China. No one loaded up a caravan of camels and took everything they could pack from one end of the road to another. "... goods were in fact transported by a series of routes, by a series of agents, passing through many hands before they reached their ultimate destination. The number of travelers who actually traversed the full length of the Silk Roads was always very small..." (9)

This travel occurred for centuries before the name "Seidenstrasse" or "Silk Road" was penned in 1877 by German explorer and geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. (10)

The western boundaries of the Silk Road routes included the Central Asian countries now known as Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Much of this area is known as

Sogdiana – it is the land between the Oxus River, now known as the Amu Darya, to the west and the Pamir mountains to the east. (11)

The ancient city of Merv, the subject of intense archeological exploration today in Turkmenistan, was the launching point for several trade routes leading to the Mediterranean Sea via Baghdad to Damascus, Antioch or Constantinople (Istanbul) and to the Black Sea. (12) Many sea routes are also included under the broad umbrella of the Silk Road.

One of the great cosmopolitan cities of Sogdiana was, and still is, Samarkand. Today it is the second largest city of Uzbekistan. Its 2,500 year history is marked by upheavals during the times of Alexander the Great, the Arabic Conquest, and the conquests of Genghis-Khan and lastly Tamerlane. The resulting culture is a mix of Iranian, Indian, Mongolian, Western and Eastern cultures. Samarkand is described in travel guides today as “the pearl of the Eastern Moslem World,” “majestic and beautiful,” with “marvelous and attractive power.” (13)

East of Samarkand exist some of the highest mountains in the world, the Pamirs, rising between Samarkand and the Chinese city of Kashgar, “a vibrant Islamic centre within Chinese territory.” (14) While it is at the eastern foot of the Pamir mountains, Kashgar is considered an oasis city, because to its east lies the Tarim basin and desert. The bazaar in Kashgar today is the biggest in central Asia, according to one Chinese travel agency’s internet site, which says Sundays at the bazaar now are the same as 2,000 years ago, with farmers from the suburbs riding donkeys or driving carts to get to the downtown by early morning. While livestock, handicrafts and “articles of daily use” are sold at the bazaar, Kashgar has a reputation for fine fruits and melons.

The Bashkeram Orchard of Kashgar is said to produce apricots, apples, pears, grapes, peaches, cherries, mulberries, figs and more. (15)

Silk Road merchants bound for China no doubt enjoyed some fruit as they thawed out after descending to Kashgar from the peaks of the Pamirs. In Kashgar, they exchanged their yaks and exhausted packhorses for camels to convey their merchandise into inner provinces of China. (16)

The next challenge Silk Road travelers faced was the Tarim basin, “a great pear-shaped depression extending for about 900 miles from Kashgar eastward to Lop-nor, and over 300 miles from the Tarim River in the north to the ...Kunlun Mountains in the south. The great part of the basin is occupied by the Taklamakan desert – not, in fact, a desert of sand but of fine, disintegrated particles of rock.” (17)

There were two routes around the basin, skirting it around the north or the south. On the east side, the two routes converged in the city of Dunhuang.

Besides being a major trading center for the Silk Road, Dunhuang served as a western frontier military garrison for China (18) and is the home to one of the most significant collections of cultural documentation of history, thanks to Buddhist monks. We will return to Dunhuang in a short while.

Most maps depict the Silk Road’s eastern-most city as Xi’an the capital of the Shaanxi province of China, about 500 miles southwest of Beijing. Called Chang'an in ancient times, Xi’an is one

of the birthplaces of the ancient civilization in the Yellow River Basin area of the country. During its 3,100 year development, 13 dynasties placed their capitals in Xi'an, including Western Han and Tang. (19)

There are so many relics and sites of cultural and historical significance in and around Xi'an that the entire Shaanxi province is called China's 'Natural History Museum.' The Museum of Terra Cotta Warriors and Horses is praised as 'the eighth major miracle of the world.' It is near the mausoleum of the first Emperor of all China, Qin Shi Huang, who ascended to the throne in 246 BC when he was 13 years old. In 1974, a group of peasants uncovered some pottery while digging for a well near the emperor's tomb, and soon archeologists from around the world were attracted. The State Council authorized to build a museum on site in 1975. Life size terracotta figures of warriors and horses arranged in battle formations are the star features at the museum which covers an area of 16,300 square meters. The statues are replicas of what the imperial guard looked like as it protected Qin Shi Huang. (20)

### ***The Trade of The Silk Road: Commodities and Culture***

As is obvious by the finding of the Terra Cotta Warriors, as one explores this geography of the Silk Road, much is revealed the exchange of commodities and culture along these routes. First, commodities:

Before Alexander the Great started conquering the Persian empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, "there were already established trade routes and large urban settlements in Central Asia, and agriculture, mining, manufacturing, metallurgy, and commerce were well developed.

For example, Chinese silk dating from 1500 BC has been found in Bactria (present day Afghanistan)...” (21)

During the Han dynasty, from 206 BC to AD 220, “Chinese emperors first expressed a considerable interest in the lands beyond their western frontiers and... Rome was equally interested in acquiring Chinese silks.” Four hundred years later, during the Tang Dynasty of AD 618 to 907, there was an increase in contact along trade routes between the Chinese and Central Asian kingdoms and with Buddhist religious sources in India – all using various routes of the Silk Road. (22)

Tales of Silk Road treasures and romantic images of caravans, thieves, power and riches grew through the centuries. Items of great value from China included “silk, satins, musk, rubies, diamonds, pearls and rhubarb.” (23)

Yes, rhubarb. “It had been valued as a purgative and laxative for many centuries: A bag of rhubarb was considered sufficiently valuable to have been listed in the will of Marco Polo. ...in the mid-nineteenth century one Chinese official, unaware that it was , by then, a familiar feature of Victorian vegetable gardens, threatened Queen Victoria with a complete ban on the export of rhubarb. His intention was to bring a constipated nation to its knees and thus to end British sales of opium in China.” (24)

But what about silk? It is regarded as the “first significant commodity to be exported from East to West,” reaching the Mediterranean during the second century BC. (25) Silk at that time not

having tags of a manufacturer, Romans were not sure exactly where it originated. And some Roman and Greek writers did not like the idea of women clothing themselves in flimsy, transparent silk, and urged modesty. Nevertheless, perhaps not surprisingly, silk remained very popular. (26)

A Chinese invention that impacted the world via the Silk Road was paper, invented during the Han dynasty sometime in the first two centuries AD. Far superior to anything else that had been tried, “paper soon became the writing material of choice throughout China and East Asia. It was found also in the Buddhist temples of China’s northwest, but seemed not to make inroads beyond that for a long time, perhaps in part because the Chinese tried to protect the secret of its manufacture, and perhaps in part ...because other writing materials, such as parchment and papyrus, were well established in the west.” (27)

A group of Chinese papermakers established production in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in Samarkand. Paper soon became the preferred writing material in most of western Eurasia. (28)

“Central Asia was the main source of jade and certain gems, such as lapis lazuli, while India provided spices, cottons and ivory to both China and the west. ...Merchants brought salt from the Tibetan plateau, and gold from the Altai mountains in southern Mongolia was sold in ...Samarkand to artisans skilled in fashioning beaten gold ornaments.” (29)

Ancient texts reveal that medicinal drugs on sale in Dunhuang, China in the early centuries of the first millennium came from Greece, Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet and China. (30) “...There were



schools of acupuncturists, pulse readers and masseurs. ...Spells, charms and exorcism were an essential part of most traditions. ...There was even a handbook that advised Chinese magistrates on the conduct of post-mortems in cases of suspicious death...” (31)

Horses and other livestock were also traded across the mountains and deserts. During the Han dynasty, the west’s better horses were valued for military battles. Horse trade flourished for centuries because “the land and water in Central China contains too little calcium for successful horse-breeding and ever since the Chinese had learned the arts of horsemanship from their Central Asian neighbours, these neighbours continued to be their main source of new stock. ...They preferred horses with Arab ancestry to the pure tarpan pony...” (32)

“The two-humped Bactrian camel had been the main beast of burden in Turkestan for thousands of years and became quite a common sight in northern China right up until the mid-twentieth century.” (33) During the Tang dynasty, the high demand for camels was partly because of their utility and also because of their flavor – the hump was particularly tasty, apparently. (34)

Other food commodities came via the Silk Road and many are still used in Chinese cooking today, including sesame, peas, onion, coriander, cucumber, kohlrabi, sugar beets, spinach and Persian pistachios. (35)

While China was exporting silk, it was also importing a variety of textiles through trade on the Silk Road. Central Asian felts were used for tents, draperies, curtains, mats, saddle covers and boots. ...Rugs and carpets were imported from Bokhara, Kapisa and Persia. (36)

The Silk Road also brought China a new piece of furniture: the chair. Since Persia and Arabia used cushions and divans, the speculation is that chairs came from Roman or Byzantine empires in Asia Minor. They were first mentioned in Chinese writing from the second century AD. The chair changed architecture. “Where earlier Chinese houses had a low focus, with long windows reaching almost to the floor,” chairs and accompanying tables meant that windows were set higher in walls. (37)

These are just some of the treasured commodities exchanged via The Silk Road routes. As the example of the chair reveals, the treasure of culture that was exchanged along the way cannot always be separated from commodities.

One of the main cultural treasures exchanged was religion. Today, much of the region of the Tarim basin is sometimes called East Turkestan or Uyghurstan, and is populated with Chinese colonists and Uyghur, people of Turkish descent, and the area is administered by China. The religion is Islam. (38)

However, in the Silk Road trading days of the early centuries of the first millennium, “many of its towns were Indo-European in character and Buddhist in religion. ...The towns along the route were isolated and vulnerable, despite the garrisons of various armies, and even when under the nominal control of one power or another, they acted as semi-autonomous city-states. They were also cosmopolitan. Many languages were heard and many different peoples seen in their market places – Africans, Semites, Turks, Indians, Chinese, Tibetans and Mongolians. And

these people practiced a variety of religions: Manicheism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Nestorian Christianity, shamanism and, above all, Buddhism.” (39)

We now return to the westernmost Chinese city on the Silk Road route, Dunhuang.

“Most Buddhist monks came to China from India and Central Asia by way of the Silk Road. ...Dunhuang became the ideal place for these foreign monks to learn the Chinese language and culture before entering central China. Foreign monks and their Chinese disciples formed the earliest Buddhist communities at Dunhuang in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. Many Buddhist sutras [canonical texts] were translated at Dunhuang and then distributed into central China. ...Enormous economic and human resources were used to produce Buddhist sutras and to build places of worship, including thousands of cave temples. By the 5th century, Dunhuang had become an important center of Buddhism on the Silk Road. (40)

“...the Mogao Caves, which are located ...25 kilometers away from the city, consist of 492 caves with 25,000 square meters wall paintings and more than 3,000 painted sculptures. These well preserved caves span a period of one thousand years, from the 4th to the 14th century, and visually represent with vivid detail the culture of medieval China. The discovery in 1900 of a secret library cave, which was sealed around the mid-11th century and remained untouched for nine hundred years, has further made Dunhuang an extremely important site for the studies of medieval Chinese civilization.” (41)

The collection in this “secret library cave” was revealed to the modern western world by a Hungarian-British archeologist, Sir Aurel Stein, who traveled and documented central Asia for the Archeological Survey of India. In 1907, Stein found what he had heard rumored about - a Buddhist cave complex outside the city of Dunhuang. (42)

“Stein found nearly thirty thousand documents, ranging from fragments of second-century BC woodslips with only a few faint words remaining, to beautifully preserved seventy-foot-long scrolls on paper, complete with the original silk tie and roller made by seventh century artisans. Among them were Manichean prayers and letters from a Sogdian merchant ...contracts for loan of items such as a donkey, a cooking pot and grain for sowing; ... poems; educational primers; legal suits; medical prescriptions; almanacs; bawdy tales; Chinese imperial decrees; and much more.” (43)

These documents made possible one of the most interesting modern books about the Silk Road, written by Susan Whitfield, who heads the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library. In *Life Along the Silk Road*, Whitfield utilizes the manuscripts to create scholarship-based portraits of characters who lived and/or traveled along Silk Road routes in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries AD.

### ***Lessons of The Silk Road***

These kinds of findings and research about The Silk Road have inspired many to use The Silk Road as a metaphor for the world today. These people encourage us to find a deeper meaning in The Silk Road’s exchange of commodities and culture. To be sure there were hardships and

ugliness, wars and hatred, deceit and darkness throughout history, including the history of The Silk Road. But some groups today are focusing on using the brighter lessons of The Silk Road as a metaphor for peace and understanding. They encourage us to value how lives were enriched with the influx of spiritual, artistic, academic and social customs traded between the many peoples along the routes of The Silk Road.

One such group is the Silkroad Foundation, a non-profit organization, established in 1996 in the San Francisco Bay area to promote the study and preservation of cultures and art on Inner Asia and the Silk Road. Its primary goal “is to establish and maintain vital links to the Silk Road communities here in the United States and abroad in order to educate and inform people about the latest Inner Asia and Silk Road research and discoveries. The Silkroad Foundation wants to provide the bridge for cultural exchange and appreciation between Eastern and Western cultures, and facilitate and enhance educational opportunities for the community.” (44)

A more prominent international organization is The Silk Road Project, founded and inspired by world-renown cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Ma was born in 1955 to Chinese parents living in Paris. He began to study the cello with his father at age four and soon came with his family to New York, where he spent most of his formative years. Later, his principal teacher was Leonard Rose at the Juilliard School. He sought out a traditional liberal arts education to expand upon his conservatory training, graduating from Harvard University in 1976. (45)

Yo-Yo Ma founded The Silk Road Project as a nonprofit organization in 1998. According to its website, [www.silkroadproject.org](http://www.silkroadproject.org), its mission and vision are:

“Inspired by the cultural traditions of the historical Silk Road, the Silk Road Project is a catalyst, promoting innovation and learning through the arts. Our vision is to connect the world’s neighborhoods by bringing together artists and audiences around the globe.” (46)

Several quotations by Yo-Yo Ma and others on the Silk Road Project website explain why they are committed to this mission and what they have seen accomplished already. From Yo-Yo Ma: “I think that in today's world no one grows up listening to one music. Part of being alive in this world is knowing who you are and how you fit in the rest of the world. I’m certainly interested in what the rest of the world thinks and feels and how they want to express themselves in sound.” (47)

From Laura Freid, the Silk Road Project’s Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director: “Given the contemporary global, political, and commercial environment post-September 11, 2001, the motivating concepts of multicultural learning, artistic exchange and international collaborations that inspire Silk Road Project are even more compelling today than they were at the Project’s inception in 1998.” (48)

And again, from Yo-Yo Ma: “Every time I open a newspaper, I am reminded that we live in a world where we can no longer afford not to know our neighbors.” (49)

One of the most visible programs of the Silk Road Project is its Silk Road Ensemble, a collective of approximately 60 internationally renowned musicians, composers, arrangers, visual artists and storytellers from more than 20 countries including Iran, India, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, Korea, China and the United States – with familiar instruments and ancient ones that most western audiences have never heard. The ensemble has performed in locations ranging from concert halls to stadiums to museum galleries throughout the world, including Millennium Park in Chicago, Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts, Shanghai Stadium in China, and the Royal Albert Hall in London. (50)

“Under Yo-Yo Ma’s artistic direction, the Silk Road Project presents performances by the Silk Road Ensemble, leads workshops for students, and develops new musical and multimedia works. The Silk Road Project has been involved in commissioning and performing more than 60 new musical works from composers and arrangers from around the world.” (51) In fact, it was the Silk Road Project that commissioned that chamber orchestra arrangement of the opera based on the story of Layli and Madjnun. (52)

Partnering with leading cultural and educational institutions, the Silk Road Project holds residencies in museums and universities and develops educational resources for elementary- and secondary-school students. (53)

For instance, “Silk Road Encounters” is a multi-media education kit complete with text, lesson plans and photographs. It is found on the Silk Road Project website, available free to schools and families who want to use it to enhance learning through the rich culture of the Silk Road.

Aimed at upper elementary through high school aged students, the curriculum is fun and interactive. For instance, students can examine ancient Buddhist cave murals and they learn how to build and play a straw-sheng, a reed instrument that works “by blowing and inhaling, like a harmonica.” (54)

## **Conclusion**

Learning about the Silk Road is a fun adventure. It captures the imagination, and beckons people to experience journeys – not just in their mind, but even in real life. There are countless web sites offering travel packages along the Silk Road routes. Many of these tours are based from China, but for the really adventurous, Advantour.com has several options for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Entrepreneurs in these countries are well aware of the appeal of the Silk Road’s legendary existence. For instance, in Bishtek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, The Silk Road Lodge was built in 2000 – a double occupancy room is about \$150.00 American per night. (55)

Travelers who go today are bound to still experience the exchange of commodities and culture along the routes of the Silk Road. Whether or not you take on such an adventure, there are still lessons to be learned. Sandra E. Ulsh, the President of the Ford Motor Company Fund, explains it this way: “Forged by tradesmen and travelers alike, the Silk Road is a powerful testament to the rich experiences gained from exploring new ideas and journeying through unfamiliar terrain.” (56)



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