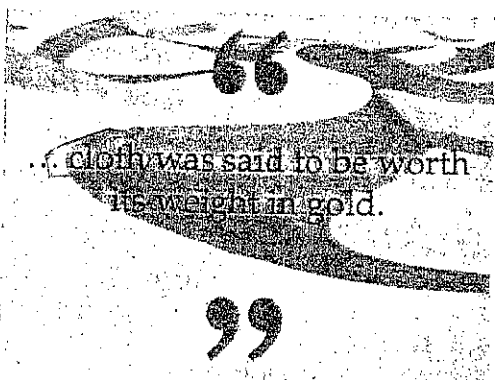


THE HISTORY OF THE SILK ROAD

We know from the writings of Ptolemy, a Greek geographer, that there were several ancient trade routes that stretched from the Mediterranean world to the Far East. The Silk Road, between China and the West, was the most heavily traveled of these ancient trails.

Emperor Han Wu Di (140-87 B.C.) wanted to establish friendly relations with the rulers of the lands west of China. He sent Zhang Qian, one of his government aides, on a mission to carry, along with his message of good will, gifts of the finest of Chinese silk. Soon silk came to be in wide demand by other peoples from as far west as Rome. Consequently, the Silk Road—silk being the most common and valuable trade item—had begun. It is thought that the first Silk Road caravan left from China to the West in 106 B.C.

Silk became extremely important in the Chinese economy. Bolts of the cloth were used as money. By the second century B.C., Chinese silk was being exported all across Europe and Asia. Across deserts and mountains caravans of camels and yaks traveled 4,000 miles to the Mediterranean, where it was then shipped westward.



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Romans first saw silk when the Parthians waved banners of the strange material in the air to celebrate their victory in battle over the Roman legions in 53 B.C. Silk then became all the rage with the wealthy Romans, and they paid huge sums for the cloth. In fact, the cloth was said to be worth its weight in gold!

The Chinese heavily guarded the making of silk and forbade the export of silkworm eggs or mulberry seeds on threat of death. By A.D. 550, however, eggs had been smuggled out of China. The silk industry had begun in Constantinople. Chinese silk, however, was still considered superior, and the caravans continued along what became known as the Silk Road. Linking China with India and the Mediterranean, this road became the highway of wealth for the Chinese, the Arabs, and the Europeans.

The route The Silk Road began in two cities: Loyang and Changan. Traders from all around the Far East came to trade in these cities. Traders would join a caravan in the East with their goods and ride along until they found a likely place in which to make a profitable trade. Afterward, they might continue westward or simply join an eastbound caravan, stopping at some other city and making another trade. Each time products changed hands the price increased. Travel was somewhat like today's train rides where you could get off one train at a station and board another.

Caravans would leave China through the Great Wall at Jiayuguan Pass. Here painted in reds, greens, and yellows was the Jade Gate, which once stood as a brilliant symbol of Ming grandeur. Caravans would move along mountain trails through deep valleys and across hundreds of miles of hot, dry deserts. They would travel across deserts at night because of the scorching heat, always fearful that legendary desert demons would come after sunset. Blinding sandstorms forced men and animals to their feet for days at a time, and in the mountains altitude sickness and snow blindness were severe problems for many. They would also face bandits, and the rulers of lands they passed through demanded payment for safe passage. To provide some measure of protection, caravan leaders would hire soldiers as escorts. These expensive protectors were not always that effective. Diseases also swept the caravans. Roman writers told of great epidemics that were brought to the Roman world, although specific information about the diseases was

not recorded. At best it was a difficult trip. The traders would, however, be rewarded with the great markets of the west. Some would travel to Kashgar, Bukhara, and Semaarkand. Others would travel farther on to the great markets of Antioch, Syria, and Lebanon as well as Baghdad in Persia (Iran).

Others also used the Silk Road. Large caravans of sometimes up to 1,000 camels attracted people who wanted to travel for many different reasons. Government officials traveled in order to conduct the business of the emperor. Acrobats, pilgrims, and adventurers as well as laborers sent west by the government would also travel by caravan. It might be a mix of hundreds of people, some hauling goods in carts pulled by oxen, some on camels, horses, donkeys, or even on foot. The two-humped Bactrian camels were preferred because they could carry 400-500 pounds of cargo and keep up a faster pace than the single-humped camel.

People who lived along the way also benefited from the caravan travel by providing services for travelers and by exchanging ideas. In fact, goods and ideas were exchanged all along the Silk Road route; the merchants at the oasis centers became very rich. Glassware, purple dye,

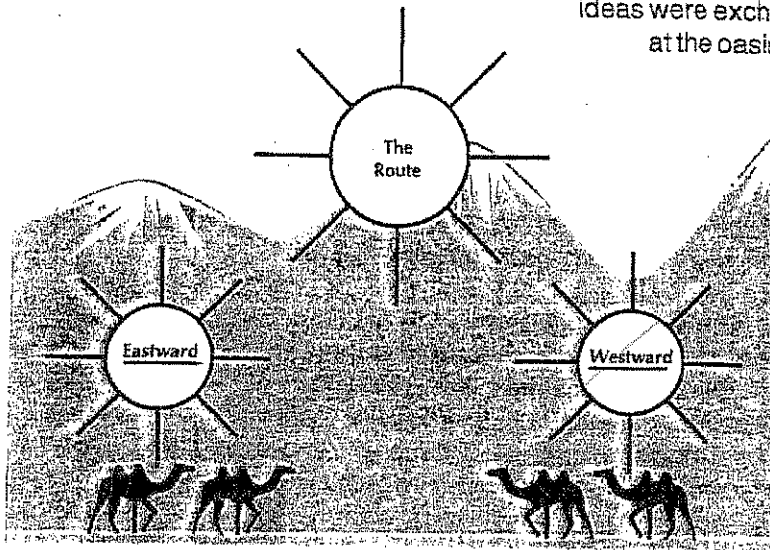
incense, and woolens, grapes, alfalfa, cucumbers, figs, sesame, coriander, walnut trees, horses, green and white jade, ivory, coral, and gold moved eastward along the Silk Road. From the east came oranges, peaches, pears, roses, and other now-popular flowers, as well as cinnamon bark, rhubarb, furs, and bronze weapons.

However, the Silk Road route increasingly became more dangerous and consequently less profitable as a land route. Later, during the period of Mongol rule, it again became a major trade route because the Mongols provided protection from bandits, as well as control of all travel. This period between the

12th and the 13th centuries was when Marco Polo and his family traveled. After that time, China turned inward and virtually closed its doors to trade and travel.

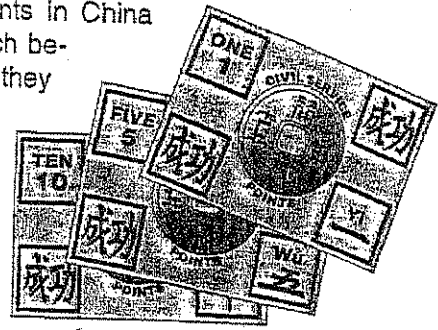
Paper money Silk Road caravan trade was probably the reason behind the invention of paper money. As caravans transported goods over more and more territory, Chinese copper cash became increasingly heavy and burdensome. At first merchants deposited this cash for safekeeping with Buddhist monks in monasteries along the trade routes. This practice also became a problem. Because all the copper cash began to disappear from circulation in outlying areas, governors began to prohibit trade to save their supplies of copper. In order to keep trade open, merchants devised a kind of certificate of deposit which would guarantee that a depositor had that amount in his "bank account." These certificates became very popular because they were lightweight and were accepted by merchants for trade purposes. Since everyone trusted their value, trade could be carried on freely along the caravan routes. In fact, the system worked so well that even the imperial court got involved in issuing its own certificates of deposit which then became the first paper money. (Today we use certificates of deposit and call them *our* money. The U.S. government at one time kept gold rather than copper to back up the promise that the paper money had value. Today, the U.S. government merely promises to pay without precious metal back up.)

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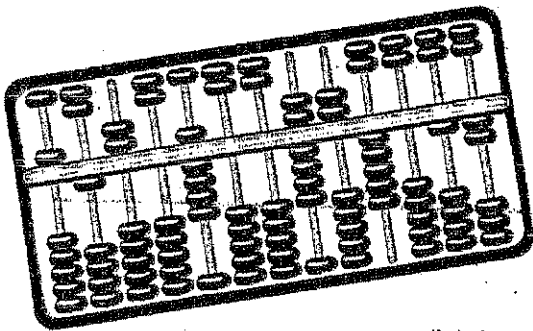
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Flying money During the 800s, tea merchants in China developed a new financial exchange note which became loosely known as “flying money.” When they delivered an order of tea to market, they received a note verifying, in essence, that actual money was owed to them. As a result, they could then exchange the note for things they needed at home, less the tax they would have to pay to the government. By the end of the century money changers (somewhat like bankers today) were using these flying money certificates of deposit instead of the old heavy coins that were awkward to carry in large quantities. These certificates were thus the forerunners of the various kinds of bank notes we use today.



Contributions The many advances in science and technology in China are evidence that it was far ahead of the western world. In Kaifeng a huge complex astronomical clock was built. The Chinese used water power for spinning hemp into cloth. Locks and bridges were evidence of Chinese sophistication in engineering, and ships with multiple masts and treadmill-operated paddles showed Chinese seaworthiness.

The more well-known advances that were later imported to the west included the crossbow, armor, stirrup, and the magnetic compass, which was perfected by the 10th century. The abacus, an effective calculating device, is still widely used throughout Asia. Because of effective irrigation systems, Chinese agriculture became the most productive in the world at that time. The invention of movable type resulted in the publishing of thousands of manuscripts. There were also great advances in medicine, zoology, mathematics, and history/geography.



Porcelain and silk were Chinese innovations that were highly valued, and their production techniques were closely guarded secrets. The Chinese were creating their shiny pottery as early as 1100 B.C. Porcelain was so hard that it could not be scratched with a knife, yet so delicate it sounded musical when lightly tapped. Silk, most prized by westerners, was cultivated perhaps as early as 5000 B.C. After the silkworm ate the vast amounts of mulberry leaves grown only in China, it spun a delicate cocoon of silk thread. The Chinese devised a method of unwinding the thread, dyeing it, and then weaving it into beautiful cloth.

Visitors to China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) reported the great wonders of this eastern land. Gunpowder was used for fireworks, a Chinese passion. Block printing and the wheelbarrow, the use of coal for heat, the manufacture of paper and ceramics, and the Chinese skill at cartography and calligraphy became renowned.

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), craftsmen wove carpets and rugs of great beauty. Bridges, temples, shrines, and pagodas were built. Painting thrived and ceramics boomed. Porcelain was refined and became a valuable commodity world wide.

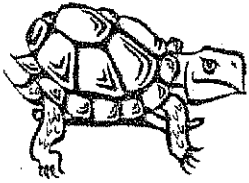
During the rule of Kublai Khan (1260-1294), many Chinese inventions traveled to the markets of Europe via the Silk Road. Gunpowder, printing, playing cards, and textiles were some. China also gained from trade. New techniques in manufacturing bronze, glass, and enamel were brought by Europeans as well as new kinds of wine and food.

SYMBOLS IN CHINESE LITERATURE

Animals



- **Dragon (*long*)** The dragon was the symbol of guardianship and strength. When the god of rain breathed, he brought clouds. It was thought that when dragons played among these clouds, chasing a pearl, they caused the rain and thunder of spring. From his claws came the jolts of lightning; from his scales came the bark of trees. In winter he buried himself in the mud at the bottom of the sea. This divine lord of waters embodies wisdom, strength, and goodness. He symbolizes the life-giving force of water. The Chinese believed that dragons inhabited every river, lake, and sea and that they lived high in the sky with the rain clouds. The Chinese dragon had the head of a camel, the horns of a stag, the fierce eyes of a demon, the neck of a snake, the scales of a fish (usually gold)—117 of which are imbued with the powers of good and 36 with the powers of evil. It also had the claws of an eagle, the pads of a tiger, the ears of a bull, the long whiskers of a cat, and the beard of the wisest of sages. It could make itself as small as a silkworm or large enough to overshadow the world. The five-clawed dragon was the symbol of the emperor, often portrayed guarding the Pearl of Wisdom. On occasion, the pearl might be lent for use by humans. Dragons brought happiness and good fortune.



- **Tortoise (*gui*)** The tortoise was considered to be a symbol of long life, kindness, and wisdom. He was seen to live in the northern quadrant of the heavens, his dome-shaped back representing the vault of the sky. His belly, the earth, moves upon the waters, and his markings correspond to the constellations.



- **Phoenix (*feng huang*)** The phoenix was the dragon's wife and helped him right the wrongs of life. It was the symbol of Yang, a magical bird that appeared in times of good fortune. Since the dragon was associated with the emperor, the phoenix became associated with the empress.
- **Tiger (*hu*)** Dignified and courageous, grand and stern, lord of all the animals, the tiger was able to frighten off demons and evil spirits. Since even household gods had no power over the tiger, it would often be seen at entrances to palaces and homes.
- **Unicorn (*qilin*)** The unicorn was a sign of good fortune. Of all the 360 creatures that lived on land, it was the leader, just as the phoenix was the leader of the birds, and the dragon was the leader of the water creatures.
- **White Crane (*xianhe*)** This bird was a symbol of happiness and literary elegance.
- **Lion** Not a native animal to China, a pair of lions (*shizi*) often stood guard outside important buildings. The male often played with a ball while the female kept a cub under her paw.
- **Butterfly (*hu die*)** The symbol of joy and summer as it flits from flower to flower gathering nectar, the butterfly is sometimes thought of as a Chinese cupid.

