

# Life Along the Silk Road

## Class

10<sup>th</sup> Grade History

## Standards

History Standards 7.8.3, 7.2.1, 7.2.2, 7.2.3, 7.2.4

## Organizing Questions

1. What impact did exchange of goods and ideas along the Silk Road have on Asia, Africa, and Europe?
2. What role did major cities like Venice, Dunhuang, and Xi'an play in sustaining the Silk Road?
3. How did the Silk Road affect individuals?
4. How did individuals affect the Silk Road?

## Introduction

This lesson will help students understand who traveled along the Silk Road and for what reasons. Students will analyze primary and secondary documents about some of these ancient travelers. The main objective of the lesson is that students understand why the Silk Road was so important to trade. The class will also learn about the cultural effects of the Silk Road travel and trade, such as the spread of ideas and belief systems like Buddhism and Islam.

## Objectives

1. Students will learn about the countries involved in the Silk Road and how each country contributed to global trade.
2. Students will study the effects that the transmission of religious and philosophical ideas has on cultures.
3. Students will analyze and create a map of the Silk Road, identifying major cities like Venice, Dunhuang, and Xi'an.
4. Students will appreciate the importance of commerce along the Silk Road.

## Materials

1. Textbook
2. Excerpts from primary and secondary documents of people who traveled along the Silk Road like Xuan Zang and Marco Polo (attached, but teachers can supplement with their own preferred documents), 1 packet per student
3. Silk Road Map from textbook (attached), 1 per student
4. Blank Silk road maps (attached), 1 per student

## Equipment

1. Laptop
2. Screen
3. Projector
4. Internet access

## Teacher Preparation

1. Familiarize yourself with excerpts from the book *The Silk Road* by ???
2. Find relevant quotes from Marco Polo, Genghis Khan, and others who traveled the Silk Road
3. Print and make copies of lesson packets / documents
4. Become familiar with geography of the Silk Road
5. Read the textbook ahead of time (Ch. 17)
6. Set-up the projector
7. Ensure that you have reliable Internet access

## Time

Two 88-minute class periods and 2-4 hours for homework.

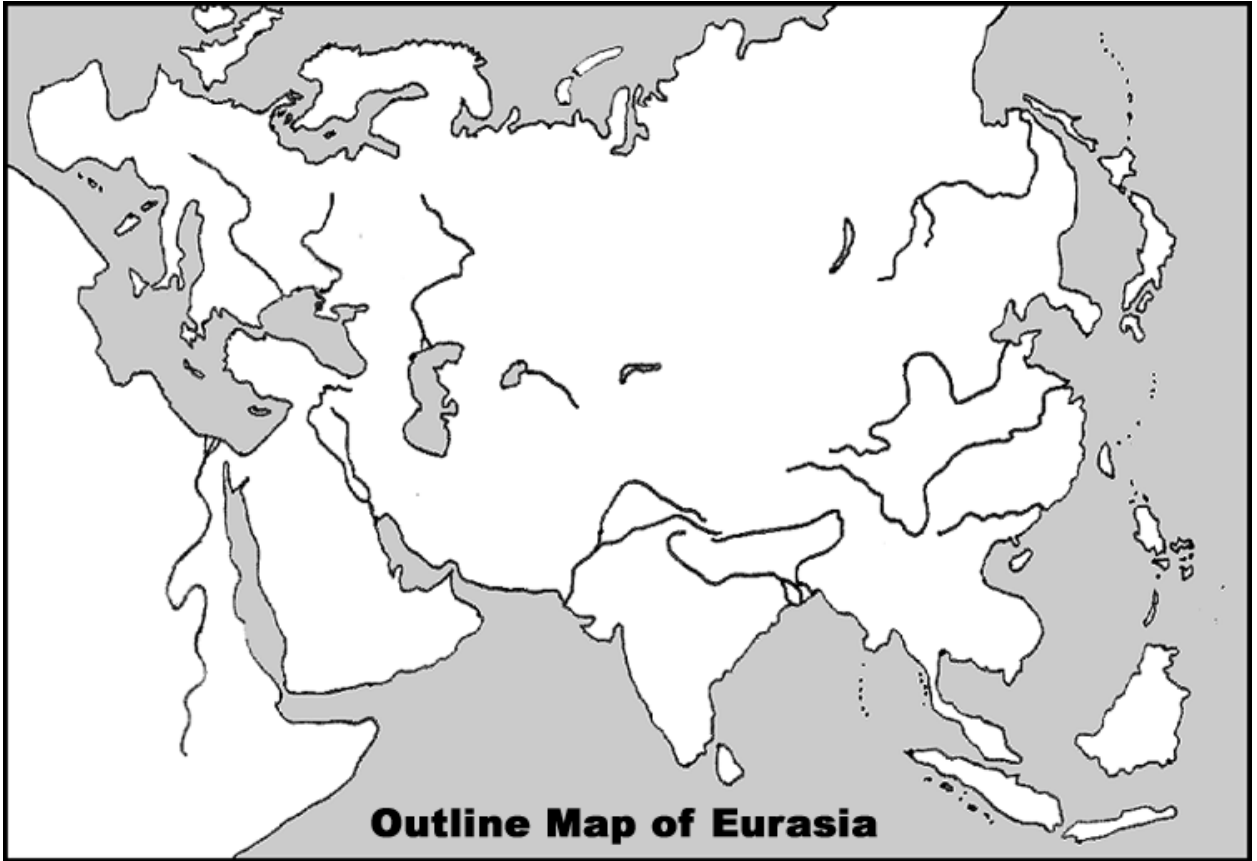
## Procedures

1. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4
2. Assign a Silk Road key figure or nation for each group to analyze. Choose from among the following:
  - a. Xuan Zang (Buddhist priest, translated the sutra, studied in the Big Goose Pagoda in Xi'an)
  - b. Marco Polo (Italian merchant, stopped at the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang)
  - c. The Mongol Empire (Genghis Khan, 1162-1227) and the Yuan Dynasty (Kublai Khan)
  - d. Seg Lhaton (Tibetan soldier stationed Kucha 30 miles West of Dunhuang)
3. Hand out blank maps to all of the students. In each group, instruct them to draw:
  - a. Xuan Zang's trip from Xi'an to India and back
  - b. Marco Polo's trip from Venice to Dado (Beijing)
  - c. The extent of the Mongol and Yuan empire under Genghis and Kublai Khan
  - d. The locations of major events on Xuan Zang and Marco Polo's journeys along the Silk Road
4. After the map exercise, invite each group to present their Silk Road key figure or nation to the rest of the class. Presentations must include:
  - a. The person / group's identity
  - b. How the Silk Road affected the person / group
  - c. How the person / group affected the culture and / or communities along the Silk Road (i.e. commerce or religion)
5. Lead a class discussion on Xuan Zang and the introduction of Buddhism to China along the Silk Road. Use this opportunity to introduce the Mogao and Yulin Buddhist Grottoes at Dunhuang and explain how their development reflects the particular of cultural and commercial exchange along the Silk Road, including the experiences of

the people that they studied for their presentations (i.e. Marco Polo and his brief stay at the Mogao Grottoes).

### **Assessment**

1. Essay--Students will write 2-3 paragraphs on their understanding of the effects of the Silk Road based on their reading and class work. Writing prompt: How did the Silk Road contribute to the development of commerce and religion?
2. Quiz—For homework on the first day, have the students study the maps that they made in class. At the beginning of the following class, give the students a quiz on the key borders, travel paths, and locations that they marked on their maps.



**Outline Map of Eurasia**

## Xuan Zang

An influential Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Xuanzang not only brought Indian sutra to China, but also brought Chinese culture to the West and contributed to the spread of other cultures throughout the world.

Xuanzang's family was very poor and his parents died early, so he became a monk at thirteen years old. In the following years, he studied sutras earnestly, went to many places to call on Buddhist masters and gradually became accomplished in religious works. However, he found there was much divergence in Buddhist theories and it was difficult to get one authoritative and credible theory, so he decided to go to India to further his study of Buddhism.

In the early years of the Tang Dynasty, most regions of the Silk Road were under the control of the Turks (a minority in ancient China), so the government prohibited people from going to the Western Regions. Xuanzang departed stealthily from Chang'an (the present Xian), traveled along the Hexi Corridor and reached Liangzhou (Wuwei in Gansu Province). He escaped the toll-gates at the frontier and arrived in Guazhou (now Anxi in Gansu Province) near the Yumenguan Pass that was at the western end of the Great Wall. Under the help of a Tartar, he went out of Yumenguan Pass, traversed deserts for a few days, passed through Yiwu (Hami) and reached Gaochang (Turpan). The King of Gaochang respected Xuanzang very much. He sent Xuanzang 25 people and 30 horses. Then Xuanzang continued his westbound journey by crossing the snow-covered Pamir Plateau and passing Qiuci (Kuche), Suiye (in Kirghizia), Tashkent and Samarkand. After four years of painstaking travel, he finally reached India.

In an ancient temple called the Nalanda Temple, Xuanzang studied India's sutras for five years under the guidance of the Master Jie Xian. Afterwards, he traveled across India to exchange ideas with other religious leaders and to give sermons. In 645 AD, he returned to Chang'an with more than 600 sutras. The Tang Emperor Taizong (Li Shimin) gave him a right royal welcome. In the rest of his life, he committed himself to translating the sutras he brought back in Big Wild Goose Pagoda.

*Pilgrim to the West in the Tang Dynasty*: a book Xuanzang and Bian Ji compiled. It recorded geography, people, customs, history, religions, languages and cultures of about 140 countries, which provided precious data for studying history and geography. It is another big travelogue after *Records of the Buddhist Kingdoms* written by Fa Xian, a respectable monk in Jin Dynasty (265-420). In *Pilgrim to the West in the Tang Dynasty*, besides the descriptions of many Buddhist sites such as Bamiyan's Buddha and Nalanda Temple, dozens of Buddhist legends were also recorded. Due to its comprehensive and vivid content, it was translated into English, Germany, French and Japanese and widely spread. It is the precious document for the research of China and the world cultural exchange, Buddhism history and national history. In archaeological excavation, experts referred to the clues provided in the book and successfully discovered the sites of many famous temples such as Nalanda Temple, Rajagaha and Sarnath Temple, which fully shows that a great deal of information was accurately placed on record.

## Marco Polo

A well-known traveler and explorer, Marco Polo headed for China along the Silk Road in the [Yuan Dynasty](#) (1271–1368). The *Travels of Marco Polo*, dictated by him, described Chinese politics, economy, and culture in detail, which greatly aroused the desire of westerners to go to China and had a great effect on the European navigation.

Marco Polo was born in a merchant family in Venice in 1254. His father and uncle often traded into the west coast of the Mediterranean Sea. On one fortuitous occasion, they went to China and met with Kublai Khan, an emperor of the Yuan Dynasty. In 1269, they returned to Venice with a letter Kublai Khan had written to Pope Clement IV. In fact, Clement IV had died the year before, and a new pope had not yet been appointed.

Young Marco Polo was very interested in listening to the stories of their travels and made up his mind to go to China.

### **The Long and Difficult Journey to China**

In 1271, when he was 17 years old his dream came true. With a letter in reply from the new Pope Gregory X, and with valuable gifts, the Polos set out eastwards from Venice on their second trip to China. They crossed over the Mediterranean and Black Sea, passed through the land of Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and reached the age-old city of Middle East – Baghdad. They headed south and eastwards to the prosperous seaport of Ormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. From there they journeyed towards north and then east, successively crossing the desolate Iran Plateau and the snow-covered Pamirs. Overcoming the trials of illness, hunger and thirst, escaping bandits and wild animals, they finally reached Xinjiang. Marco Polo was attracted by beautiful Kashgar and Hetian famed for its jade. Then they traversed Taklimakan Desert, arrived in Dunhuang and visited the Mogao Grottoes, noted for Buddhist sculptures and frescos. They continued on their journey along the Hexi Corridor and reached Shang-du in Inner Mongolia (the summer palace of Kublai Khan) in 1275 AD. Kublai Khan gave them a hospitable reception there and took them to Dadu (now Beijing)

### **17-years Service in Kublai Khan's Court**

Clever Marco Polo quickly learned Mongolian, Chinese and became familiar with the Chinese customs. Soon he became a confidant of Kublai Khan. He was appointed to high posts in the court and was sent on many special diplomatic missions to many places in China, India and some kingdoms of Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Burma and Sumatra. Astonished at the wealth of China, luxurious imperial palace and prosperous cities, he assiduously investigated the customs, geography, people and culture of all places he visited. Then he reported to Kublai Khan in detail.

17 years passed quickly and Marco Polo missed his hometown more and more.

### **Come Home and the *Travels of Marco Polo***

In 1292, Kublai Khan agreed to let Marco Polo, his father and uncle return home, after they convoyed a Mongolian princess Kokachin to marry a Persian king. In 1295, they finally reached Venice by sea via the Black Sea and Constantinople. The information about China and some Asian states they brought back, aroused great interest among the Venetians. In 1298 AD, Marco Polo joined in the war between Venice and Genoa. Unfortunately he was captured and put into a Genoese prison, where he met a writer, Rustichello da Pisa. The writer recorded the story of his travels, well-known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The book

has detailed descriptions of the wealth of China, a Japan filled with gold, and the exotic custom of Central Asia, West Asia and Southeast Asia soon made it a bestseller. Afterwards, the book became very popular in Europe and paved the way for the arrivals of countless westerners in the following centuries

### **Mongol Rule**

In 1271, the great Mongolian ruler Kublai Khan established a powerful Mongol Empire – Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) at Dadu (the present Beijing). The territory of the giant empire was the largest one in Chinese history, which stretched as far as Mongolia and Siberia in the north, South China Sea in the south, Tibet and Yunnan in the Southwest, Stanovoi Range (Outer Khingan) and Okhotsk in northeast, Xinjiang and Central Asia in the northwest. Even West Asia and Russia were under the control of this empire.

The Mongol Empire destroyed a great number of toll-gates and corruption of the Silk Road; therefore passing through the historic trade route became more convenient, easier and safer than ever before. The Mongolian emperors welcomed the travelers of the West with open arms, and appointed some foreigners high positions, for example, Kublai Khan gave Marco Polo a hospitable welcome and appointed him a high post in his court. At that time, the Mongolian emperor issued a special VIP passport known as "Golden Tablet" which entitled holders to receive food, horses and guides throughout the Khan's dominion. The holders were able to travel freely and carried out trade between East and the West directly in the realm of the Mongol Empire.

Although maritime transport had an influence on the route, many westerners, Chinese envoys and caravans traveled along this ancient trade route. However, the historically important route could not contend with expansion in the field of navigation which assisted its demise.

In history, many renowned people left their traces on the most historically important trade route, including eminent diplomats, generals and great monks. They crossed desolate deserts and the Gobi, passed murderous prairies and went over the freezing Pamirs to finish their missions or realize their beliefs.