

THE CHINESE WORLD

THE SILK ROADS IN ANCIENT HISTORY

The great landmass of Afro-Eurasia has always had some sort of internal communication, be it through human migrations, technological transfer or luxury trade.

By the second millennium BCE some routes were already established and used on a regular basis, mostly prompted by the demand for goods connected with ritual. **For instance, the brilliant deep blue stripes in Tutankhamen's headdress** were made of lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, while the translucent pieces of jade in China's Shang tombs came from the creeks of the Taklamakan desert.

But by the end of the second millennium BCE, the proliferation of horses on the steppes and the domestication of camels and dromedaries in the Near East and central Asia, allowed much more substantial loads to be moved about.

Even so, it is important to keep in mind that the east-west routes that crossed the continent were always fed by the minor routes used for exchanges between the northern nomads and the southern sedentary communities. Eurasian traffic increased dramatically with the formation of the first great nomad empire on the Mongolian steppes, the Xiongnu empire in the second century BCE.

Their rise to power displaced other nomads and originated a great wave of migrations in Central Asia. It also provoked a strong military reaction in China. But making war was very expensive, and moreover, the Confucians, who were already a driving force in Han China, looked on military actions with a critical eye.

The other way to counter Xiongnu attacks was to bribe them. The Han started a policy of offering large-scale gifts and sent to the xiongnu hundreds of thousands of silk rolls, and lots of princesses, some genuine, some not.

This flow of large scale gifts would become recurrent in further dynasties and would last until the Mongol conquest. Silk was important as a status symbol, as well as being a pleasant and light fabric to wear, both summer and winter. But what really drove silk from one end of the Eurasian continent to the other was something more prosaic.

Silk rolls that in China were used as a reward for civil and military officials were produced in standard measures. And the fixed height and length of these rolls gave them a stable exchange value.

Silk became the basic currency of the Silk Road. The Han became aware of the silk spreading along the central Asian routes in the first century BCE. They made this discovery when they sent an expedition headed by Zhang Qian, in search of a tribe that had been violently defeated and displaced by the Xiongnu.

Zhang Qian was sent to ask this tribe to join forces with the Chinese to fight against the Xiongnu. But on his way north, Zhang Qian fell into the hands of the Xiongnu, and was held prisoner by them for a whole decade.

When he finally escaped, he nonetheless stuck to his imperial orders and went on with his search for the fellow enemies of the Xiongnu.

He finally found the remnants of that tribe in Bactria, in today's Afghanistan. They never did agree to help fight the Xiongnu, and Zhang Qian departed empty handed.

However, although he returned to Chang'an without allies, he did take with him a piece of highly valuable information. He now knew that west of the Pamirs, in the Ferghana valley; the best horses in the world were grazing, and that down in Bactria the peaceful enemies of the Xiongnu were draped in Chinese silks and ate bamboo sprouts, a delicacy that came from far-off Sichuan.

Zhang Qian gave the astounded Chinese emperor the first news to be had in China about the so-called "Western Regions", Sogdiana, Ferghana, Bactriana, Mesopotamia, the Parthian empire and India. He opened Chinese eyes to the possibility of exploiting the valuable Chinese commodities that were circulating throughout Eurasia.

Zhang Qian's report changed the history of Eurasia and pushed the Han westward. To secure China's access to central Asia, the emperor Han Wudi had defensive towers and walls erected along the Gansu corridor as far as the edge of the Taklamakan desert.

By the first century, silk was overflowing Central Asia and had already arrived in the Parthian empire in Persia. By 49 BC, Julius Caesar, in the far west of Eurasia, celebrated his triumph in Rome surrounded by multicolored silk banners. But the silk route did not only carry silk; along it went pepper from India and spices from southeast Asia, that were highly prized either as food condiments or as medical remedies.

Han caravans now crossed the Pamir and Han soldiers took control of the Gansu corridor and of the southern route bordering the Taklamakan desert, where they entered in direct contact with central Asian routes.

The contacts between the Han and the Hellenistic kingdoms of central Asia are clearly depicted in the tapestries of the southern route of the Taklamakan, which are woven with classical figures and centaurs.