

THE CHINESE WORLD

THE BUDDHIST IMPACT ON THE SILK ROAD

What we now call the Silk Road is in fact a network of trade routes which runs on either side of the great deserts and mountains of central Asia. Journeys were relatively short – a couple of weeks, one month – and linked points a few hundred kilometers apart. The Bactrian camels walked 15 km per day and the caravans relied on small-scale trade with the mountain nomads and on the string of oases that sprung at the feet of the great Eurasian mountains.

At the beginning of the Common Era the traffic between India and China was well established through the Kushan Empire in the Hindu Kush. It was to this empire, well connected with Rome, Persia, China and India that Buddhist missionaries arrived. And with them came a new aesthetic, Hellenistic in form and Buddhist in depth, the art of Gandhara, an artistic explosion of unmatched originality.

The Buddhist monks walked with the caravans and headed to China through the Pamirs, the Taklamakan oases and the Gansu corridor, spreading their monastic institutions and excavating Buddhist caves all along the trail. The most famous of these, the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, just at the edge of the Taklamakan desert, were first opened in the year 366 and would grow ceaselessly for the next thousand years. Nowadays, the caves of a Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang consist of five hundred cave temples that stretch for 25 kilometers, with plastered walls filled with sculptures and paintings. The monasteries were not only religious centers, they were also powerful agricultural enterprises. The monks also founded hospitals, tended bridges and provided shelter for the pilgrims. Their relics attracted major donations from the pilgrims. They took monetary deposits from the pilgrims and then lent them the necessary funds for their journey.

After the end of the Han Empire, the small and unstable kingdoms that now covered the fragmented Chinese territories would foster Buddhism as a legitimizing force. By the end of the fourth century the northern Wei had made Buddhism a state religion and opened the magnificent caves of Yungang and Longmen near their capitals. By the late fifth century thousands of Buddhist temples and tens of thousands of monks and nuns were spread all across China. Buddhism also triggered a huge investment of energy in the translation of the enormous Indian Buddhist corpus.

New terms introduced new concepts to China that were difficult to translate. And this fostered long pilgrimages to the great Buddhist centers of India. There were hundreds of these but only a few left a written record. In the 4th century Faxian traveled on his own through central Asia and India; his return journey on a merchant ship is the first indication of the maritime routes that were already connecting India, Southeast Asia and China.

But the king of pilgrims will forever be Xuanzang. His travels will leave a permanent imprint on the historical memory of the Chinese people and will inspire one of the most famous novels in the Chinese world, *The Travels of the Monkey King*. He brought from India to China such a great quantity of relics and Buddhist texts that his luggage had to be loaded on twenty-two horses.

The definitive implantation of Buddhism in China went hand in hand with the regular contact there was with intellectual, economic and religious circles in India.

But as far as trade was concerned, the driving force of the Silk Road were the Sogdians. Coming from the mercantile independent cities of what is today Uzbekistan, these Persian-speaking people controlled the routes that connected China and Byzantium. What held them together was not a common faith but the trade connections of their financial empire. They wrapped the Justinian court and the Byzantine church in silks, bringing prestigious Byzantine coins to China in exchange.

Another group, the Nestorians, also played an important role in the Silk Road. The Nestorians were a group of Christian heretics, with their origins in Constantinople and with an important number of adherents in merchant circles. When Nestorianism was banned first in Byzantium and then in Persia the Nestorians joined the caravans, where they were highly prized for their medical knowledge. In time their churches will be found all along the trails of the Silk Road. This stele, erected in 781, documents the arrival in China of the first Nestorian missionaries a hundred and fifty years before, and the rights bestowed to them by the Tang emperor to preach Christianity in China.

The text explicitly acknowledges that the missionaries came from Da Qin, the name given by the Chinese to Europe or Byzantium.

Another important religious and merchant group to be found along the Silk Road were the Manicheans, who adhered to a very refined and original religion, that mingled Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. They also had monasteries scattered all along the eastern Silk Road.

The backbone of the Silk Road was now the Taklamakan northern route that linked the Pamirs with the Gansu corridor, the vital artery of central Asian trade with China. The heyday of the Silk Road came with the Tang dynasty, a highly cosmopolitan dynasty, and the world's largest empire at that time.

At that moment, Chinese cultural influence spread over the whole East Asia, being specially strong in Japan and Korea.

The Tang capital, Chang'an, was one of the world's great global crossroads where merchants met and all types of religious groups were to be found. Being half Turkish themselves, the Tang kept in constant touch with the steppe, and a fashion for all things central Asian spread in the Tang capital, arousing a huge demand for central Asian goods.

Chang'an became the main terminal of the Silk Road; the lively trade with the western regions was under strict trade supervision and could only take place in special market quarters.

Foreigners with prominent noses became common sight in the Tang capital, Chang'an, which by then was a great global crossroads. They reached China after exhausting journeys, with their camels loaded with goods, and with them came the central Asian music, that became extremely fashionable in Tang China.

The close relations of the Tang with the northern Turkish nomads meant that Tang women enjoyed unprecedented freedom of movement. Never before, or since, were women so visible and so active in Chinese society.

The expansion of Islam, which put an end to Sassanid Persia and even threatened the Tang Empire, did not dismantle the network of trade routes. In a couple of decades the caravans will again be on the move and the tales of the Thousand and One Nights will leave an everlasting memory of their endeavors.

Furthermore, the Muslims proved to be as lavish consumers of silk textiles as Buddhist were; the Kaaba has been covered by a black silk velvet cloth since the time of the Abbasid Caliphate. But the glorious days of the silk roads were coming to an end. After the Tang, China entered a new Period of Disunity.

The next dynasty, the Song, achieved astonishing economic growth but its extraordinary commercial development was mainly oriented towards the sea. With the Mongols the Silk Road enjoyed its last glory days. Chinggis Khan conquered half of Asia to control its traffic and the so-called Pax Mongolica allowed unprecedented travel throughout Eurasia.

But they caused devastation in central Asia. At the same time the progress of ship building and navigation technology turned international trade definitively to the high seas.