

Legacy of the Silk Road

Zeju Zhao

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign 61820, IL, United States

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: From the opening of trade routes by the Han Dynasty in 130 BC to the Ottoman Empire cutting off trade with the West in 1453 AD “(Silk Road, National Geographic Society). However, the Silk Road was not formed overnight, its starting point can be traced back to one of the most famous emperors in Chinese history - Emperor Wu of Han. Emperor Wu of Han is known for his tough and effective strategy of resisting the Xiongnu, as well as his historical measures of combining Confucianism with the institutionalization of imperial power. The multiple political and economic policies of Emperor Wu of Han sparked a backlash due to their blatant violation of Confucian beliefs. However, the apparent contradiction of a Confucian government representing an authoritarian monarch in pursuing Legalist goals has become the standard structure of Chinese imperial government for two thousand years “(Robert Eno, 2010). The impact of these political changes even surpassed his own dynasty and the existence period of the Silk Road itself.

Keywords: Political background; History and culture; Development

Online publication: August 26, 2025

1. Background of the Silk Road

When we are trying to understand a certain period of history, it is crucial to first figure out its political background. During the long existence of the Silk Road, China witnessed many major events and political changes, “from when the Han dynasty of China opened trade in 130 B.C.E. until 1453 C.E., when the Ottoman Empire closed off trade with the West.” (“Silk Road.” National Geographic Society). The Silk Road did not come into existence overnight, however, it started due to Emperor Wu, one of the most famous emperors throughout Chinese history. He is famous for his tough and effective strategies on defending from the Xiongnu, and also his historical action of combining Confucianism and routinization of imperial power. At the time, the Xiongnu were a tribal union of nomadic peoples who inhabited the eastern Eurasian countries such as China and other central Asian Countries. In the year 138 BC, Zhang Qian, a diplomat, officially started his journey to explore the West by the order of Wu-di. The main political goal was to find a group of people called DaYueZhi (大月氏), who were people that had a common enemy in the Xiongnu. However because Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu for 10 years on his first expedition, when he finally escaped, “He did finally find the Yuezhi in the borderland of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan, but they were content in their new home and refused an alliance with the Han against the Xiongnu” (Chakra, 2023)^[1]. Even though Zhang did not successfully gain allies for China as a result, the maps and the variety of knowledge about the Xiongnu and other Central Asian countries he inadvertently obtained provided the Han Dynasty with a more intimate understanding of what the world outside its kingdom looked like. Things

such as details on the military and locations of these countries in the West became a stepping stone that helped China maneuver politically and militarily in the coming era. Thus, began the real expansion of

Chinese interests into the West. Emperor Wu “determined that China would pursue an aggressive policy to subjugate the various kingdoms that lay along the route of Chang’s travels.” (Robert Eno, 2010)^[2]. Military power increased for China as they took over smaller kingdoms around during this political maneuver by the Han Dynasty. With the Silk Roads bringing in many people from other countries, China with its tribute system, “created commercial, diplomatic, and security ties between imperial China and smaller, surrounding polities” (Blaydes and Paik, 2020)^[3]. The tribute system was the practice of offering a tribute to the Emperor as a form of respect. This strengthened the immediate power of the Chinese empire by making travelers give goods and wealth directly. Emperor Wu also created a change in the government as a whole by implementing a blend of Confucianism and Legalism in order to further his pursuits. In order to justify his pursuits of Western Expansion and keeping it well funded, many of his policies were aimed at securing funding for the government so that he could continue his projects. The officials that he put into positions were on his side to establish his control and “after the Empress Dou died in 135, Wu-di acted swiftly” (Robert Eno, 2010)^[2]. Several of Emperor Wu’s political and economic policies would cause backlash for the blatant violation of Confucianism beliefs, “nevertheless, the apparent contradiction of a Confucian government pursuing Legalist goals on behalf of an autocrat became the standard structure of imperial Chinese governments for two thousand years” (Robert Eno, 2010)^[2]. These political changes would last even beyond his own dynasty and the Silk Road’s lifespan itself.

2. The development process of the Silk Road

Economy is a central part of any form of civilization and the Western expansion and Silk Road sparked several changes to China’s economic infrastructure. Prior to Emperor Wu, China had a period of financial stability, however, due to Wu’s outward ambitions things had to change in order to maintain funding.

“Wen-di had abolished the tax on production, retaining only poll, property, and labor taxes. Under Jing-di, the tax on production had been restored, but at the low rate of three percent. In order to finance his military expeditions, Wu-di raised the rate of the poll tax and instituted a series of new taxes, including a sales tax, a tax on vehicles, and new areas of property tax” (Robert Eno, 2010)^[2].

Emperor Jing and Wen had no need to spend money and resources on expanding westward during their reign and therefore saved up wealth that Wu ended up spending through quickly. With the Silk Road, Emperor Wu’s continued ambition of expanding West, and the necessary military formations in order to defend China from the invasion of the Xiongnu, several economic policy changes were made, such as government coinage, introduction of new taxes, and salt and iron monopoly. “From the late Warring States period on, salt and iron had become the most profitable manufacturing industries in China” (Robert Eno, 2010)^[2]. Due to the boom in these two industries, Emperor Wu’s calculated moves allowed for his government to maintain control and obtain a massive profit. Aside from the policy changes made by Emperor Wu, the Silk Road itself influenced the rise and fall of many cities and financial stability in regions. “During this time, trade linking the Middle East and China was economically significant, with implications for the growth and development of major urban centers” (Blaydes and Paik, 2020)^[3]. With the Western expansion, demand for Chinese silks, spices, and other products increased, causing a massive export of many of the items in return for exotic items from other countries and regions as well.

3. Economic transformation and development

After the first journey, Zhang soon started his second journey to the West under the order of the emperor. This time, he was well prepared with gold silks, and other classical Chinese goods, that he would exchange and trade with the kingdoms and

empires he planned to visit, resulting in very positive communication with these kingdoms. Especially on this second trip, not only the economic impact, but the cultural impact as well was immeasurable. Thanks to Zhang's efforts it "opened the way for exchanges of envoys between these Central Asian states and the Han, and led to the introduction into China of a superior breed of horses and new plants, such as grapes and alfalfa" (Britannica, 2018)^[4]. Some of the kingdoms sent their representatives to follow Zhang when he returned back to Han. Some countries even sent their prince to China to either be a hostage or study there as a show of loyalty, bringing in an influx of foreigners. Another cultural change brought on by the Silk Roads was the introduction of ideas, philosophies, scientific discoveries, and religion. "Chinese records reveal that during the Han dynasty, when Buddhists first started coming to China, some of the earliest arrivals were not from India, the Buddhist homeland, but from Sogdian" (Liu, 2011)^[5]. Buddhism would go on to be one of the largest recognized religions in China today, but was introduced in the Han dynasty from visiting travelers. Art, dance, and other cultural aspects were exchanged through the travelers that came to trade as well and would have lasting impacts that are even visible today, with artists even depicting people from other cultures. "Chinese artisans began turning out large numbers of figurines representing them, and today, one can see these Tang dynasty tricolor figurines displayed in museums all over the world" (Liu, 2011)^[5]. With the rise of exchanging goods as well, the techniques that were used to create the goods started to exchange as well, resulting in countries being able to create what they couldn't before, even changing what goods certain societies produced. "With the production's advent, techniques had been transmitted in the new areas... The long term of the silk trade relationship had pushed some societies to change, Romans consumed silk but gold drained, Parthian got money, Chinese silk got promotion, etc" (Wang and Zhao, 2011)^[6]. As to be expected when cultures cross borders and intermingle, the eclectic mix of cultures in Central East Asia left their mark on the region between the largest empires and created a unique blend of many different cultures in the area. "Meanwhile, Indian, Chinese, Persian, and Greek cultural elements continued to arrive and flourish in the region, thereby contributing to a unique and robust Central Asian culture" (Liu, 2011)^[5]. The Silk Road's contribution to globalization and cultural exposure is so great that even the art within a culture has depictions of foreigners as a statement of just how often other cultures came across each other due to the Silk Road.

4. Summary

All in all, through various perspectives on the Silk Road's historical narrative, the influence on ancient and modern China, as well as Central Asia and Europe, can be visible in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. The Silk Road was not only a trade route, it was a living artery of commerce, ideas, and innovation, flowing through the influence of various civilizations. Politically, it provided a stage for communications between different countries and military strategies, exemplified by Emperor Wu's ambitious expansions and Zhang Qian's explorations. Economically, it pushed the policy reforms in China, resulted in the growth of cities and provided a symbiotic trade network spanning continents. Culturally, it allowed for a unique exchange of philosophies, arts, and religion, planting the seeds of Buddhism in China and encouraging a melting pot of diverse traditions that enriched the fabric of societies along its path. The Silk Road gave a huge contribution to shaping the structure of history for so many different cultures. From the Han dynasty's entanglements with the Xiongnu to the economic policies of Emperor Wu, and the introduction of exotic goods and ideas to China, the Silk Road was a force of change, promoting resilience and adaptability in political governance, economic practices, and cultural expression^[7]. Even today, the echoes of the Silk Road's influence are visible, reminding us that the history of this grand conduit is not only a record of past exchanges, but a story that continues to inform the present and inspire the future. In our modern interconnected world we are still influenced by the changes that the Silk Road facilitated so long ago.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Chakra H, 2023, “Zhang Qian, the Greatest Explorer in Ancient China.” About History. about-history.com/zhang-qian-the-greatest-explorer-in-ancient-china/.
- [2] Eno R, 2010, “4.5 THE REIGN OF WU-DI, 141-87.” Indiana University, 1–14.
- [3] Blaydes, Lisa, Christopher P, 2020, Trade and Political Fragmentation on the Silk Roads: The Economic Effects of Historical Exchange between China and the Muslim East, American Journal of Political Science.
- [4] The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2018, “Zhang Qian.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/biography/Zhang-Qian.
- [5] Liu X R, 2011, “A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam.” JSTOR, University of Hawai’i Press, www.jstor.org/stable/23011678?read-now=1.
- [6] Wang X Y, Zhao J S, 2011, “The cultural exchange between Sino-Western: Silk trade in Han Dynasty.” Asian Culture and History, 4(1), <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v4n1p13>.
- [7] “The Silk Road.” National Geographic, education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/silk-road/. Accessed 10 Nov. 20

Publisher’s note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.