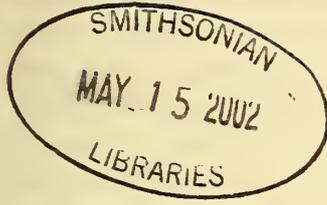


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# ANTHRONOTES

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## THE SILK ROAD

### The Making of a Global Cultural Economy

by Richard Kurin



*[Editors' Note: In the Summer of 2002 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Folklife Festival will feature over 350 artists, musicians, and scholars from 20 nations demonstrating the cultural traditions and stories of the Silk Road, a network of ancient trade routes. The Smithsonian is working closely with famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Road Project as well as with researchers and educators to produce the Folklife Silk Road Festival Program. For those who have not witnessed the silk paper-making of Western China, the silk-weaving of Uzbekistan, the Benares silk sari-making from India, the sounds of silk-stringed Japanese instruments, or the silk carpet-making of Turkmen masters, this is an opportunity to glimpse first-hand the purveyors of important long-lived traditions. Visitors will have an exciting opportunity to meet people from the cultures of the region as artists and musicians share skills and knowledge, connect cultures, and build trust along a contemporary, transnational form of the modern Silk Road. See [www.si.edu/folklife](http://www.si.edu/folklife), or [www.silkroadproject.org](http://www.silkroadproject.org)]*

#### Significance of the Silk Road

The Silk Road spanned the Asian continent and represented a form of global economy when the known world was smaller but more difficult to traverse than nowadays. The network of trading routes known as the Silk Road stretched from China to Japan in the East and to Turkey and Italy in the West, encompassing Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and the other lands of Central Asia, and linking the ancient Mediterranean world to the empires of China. For thousands of years, highly valued silk, cotton, wool, glass, jade, lapis lazuli, metals, salt, spices, tea, herbal medicines, fruits, flowers, horses, and musical instruments moved back and forth along various portions of the Silk Road. Each item has a history, many connected to contemporary life. Consider, for example, stringed-musical instruments. In Central Asia, *faqīrs* or Muslim mystics still play a one-stringed

instrument called quite simply the “*ektār*.” “*Tār*” means string, and the “e” or “one” string is taken metaphorically to refer to one God. In Iran there is the *dutār* (literally “two strings”) and in India, the multi-stringed *sitār*. The terminology is linguistically related to the Greek term “cithara,” the Arabic term “qitara,” and our English term “zither,” all referring to stringed instruments. A short lute with four pairs of strings developed in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain and was called the *guitara*. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had been transformed into a six-stringed instrument with other modifications and came to America as the guitar, the key instrument of folk and country music, and in electrified form, of rock ‘n’ roll.

The Silk Road provides us with a symbol for complex cultural exchange. For contemporary cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the Silk Road answers the question: What happens when strangers meet? Historically along the Silk Road when strangers met

ANTHRONOTES RECEIVES SAA AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

in bazaars, courts, oases, and *caravanserais* (caravan rest houses), they shared and exchanged their goods and ideas. They traded the finest goods produced by their respective native master artisans and created new things—instruments, songs, food, clothing, and philosophies. The historical Silk Road teaches us a lesson—the importance of connecting different peoples and cultures together as a way of encouraging human creativity. “Now, more than ever,” Yo-Yo Ma observes, “we cannot afford not to know the thoughts, the habits, the ways of life of other people.” The famed musician has illustrated this lesson by forming a Silk Road Ensemble including artists from Central Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, the United States and Europe. The Ensemble uses a variety of musical instruments from Europe and Asia to bridge different musical languages and cultures. “Our goal is to make innovation and tradition sit down together,” explains Yo-Yo Ma.

The Silk Road Project includes concerts around the world, commissions of new musical pieces, educational events, and publications. The project will continue through the summer of 2002, with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the Mall, and beyond.

### Where Was The Silk Road?

The Silk Road was actually a network of thousands of miles of land and sea trade routes traversing regions of Asia, connecting markets and centers of cultural production in China, India, Central Asia, Iran, and the Middle East, and extending to those in Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia and Africa. Specifically, the roads were those taken by caravans and extended out from the old city of Chang’an, which was the capital of China until 1215, when Genghis Khan established a new capital in Beijing. Chang’an (also called Xi’an since the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was the world’s largest city in the year 1000 A.D. Silk Road routes beginning in Chang’an extended to the Buddhist center of Dunhuang, diverging both to the north and to the south of the Taklamakan Desert, running through the Central Asian market towns of Kashgar, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, crossing the Persian plateau into Baghdad, and ending at the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the Levantine towns of Antioch and Tyre and in the Anatolian ports such as Constantinople (Istanbul). Extending from these roads were many terrestrial and maritime extensions, eastward from China to Korea and across the East China Sea to Japan and its old capital, Nara. Routes turned



northward from China to Mongolia, southward from China into Burma and then into what is now Bengal, southward from Central Asia through Afghanistan, the Buddhist site of Bamiyan, the mountain passes into Kashmir, Pakistan, and India; and northward from the Persian plateau through the Caucasus mountain regions of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Silk routes also ran alternatively southward along the Persian Gulf, north to Basra, and west into the Arabian Peninsula, then north through Turkey to Istanbul, and across the Mediterranean into the Balkans, or to Venice. From these points, the network extended still further, to the coastal towns of South India and along the East coast of Africa past Zanzibar and across North Africa and the Mediterranean to Morocco and Spain, and north through the Balkans to Romania and Western Europe.

The Silk Road developed because the goods traded were quite valuable and useful, worth the trouble of transporting them great distances. Roads were generally in disrepair. Caravans had to brave bleak deserts, high mountains, extreme heat and cold. They had to face bandits and raiders, imprisonment, starvation, and other forms of deprivation. Those going by sea braved the uncertainties of weather, poorly constructed ships, and pirates. Yet luxury goods traveled in both directions along the Silk Road, and included silk, spices, tea, precious metals, fine artwork and crafts—goods that were in demand and commanded high prices and often courtly rewards. While many items were traded along the Silk Road, it was silk that had an exceedingly long history and was among the most valuable of goods traded.

### Silk Production

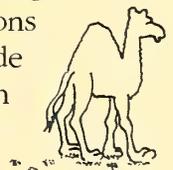
Silk cultivation and production is such an extraordinary process that it is easy to see why its earliest invention is unknown, and its discovery eluded many who sought to learn its secrets. Silk is made from the secretions of certain kinds of worms. These secretions dry into a filament that forms a cocoon. The origins of silk making as well as the methods for unraveling the cocoons and reeling the



*Silkworms and cocoons shown in a specially woven frame used by sericulturalists in India. photo © Jean-Luc Ray, the Aga Khan Foundation. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.*

silk filament are shrouded in legend and mystery. In the Yangzi Valley in South China, 6000-7000 year-old silk cloth fragments and a cup carved with a silkworm design suggest that silk was cultivated from the time of the first Chinese farming villages. Dated fragments of silk fabric have been found in the southern coastal region (Zhejiang Province) from 3000 B.C. (5000 years ago), and a silkworm cocoon found in the Yellow River valley of North China from ca. 2500 B.C.

There are several types of silkworms in Asia. One of the native Chinese varieties has the scientific name *Bombyx mori*. It is a blind, flightless moth that lays about 400 eggs in four to six days and then dies. The eggs must be kept at a warm temperature. The worms or caterpillars hatch and feast on chopped up leaves of the white mulberry tree 24 hours a day for about five weeks, growing about 10,000 times their original weight. When large enough, in three to four days, the worms produce, through their glands, a liquid gel that dries into a thread-like filament, wraps around itself, and forms a cocoon. The amazing feature of the *Bombyx mori* is that its filament, generally between 600-1200 yards long, can be unwrapped. If seen in cross-section, its filament is round (others are flat) and very strong. To “unwind” the filament, the cocoons are boiled. This kills the pupae inside and dissolves the gum resin or seracin that holds the cocoon together. The



cocoons may then be soaked in warm water and unwound, or be dried for storage, sale, and shipment. To make silk, the cocoon filament is unwrapped by hand and then wrapped onto reels. Several filaments are combined to form a silk thread. An ounce of eggs produces worms requiring a ton of leaves to eat, resulting in 30,000 cocoons producing about 12 pounds of raw silk. The silk threads may then be woven together, often with other yarn, and dyed to make all sorts of products. The Chinese traditionally incubated the eggs during the spring, timing their hatching as the mulberry trees were coming to leaf. Typically, silk production was women's work, intensive, difficult, and time consuming.

Silk has long been considered a special type of cloth; it keeps one cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It is good at holding color dyes and drapes the body particularly well. It is very strong, resistant to rot and to fire. Early in Chinese history, silk was used for clothing the Emperor, but its use eventually extended widely throughout the society. Silk proved to have other valuable uses—for making fishing lines, paper, and musical instrument strings.

### **Naming The Silk Road**

The term "Silk Road" in modern usage grows out of the fascination with cultural diffusion, particularly in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and England. The term was first used by the German geologist, traveler and economic historian, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. In a paper published in 1877, he coined the term "*Seidenstrassen*" or "Silk Roads" in referring to the Central Asian land bridge between China and Europe. Richthofen conceived of Central Asia as a subcontinent—a region that not only connected distant civilizations, but also provided a source of cultural creativity in its own right.

Richthofen's formulation paralleled those of others who were discovering and articulating a variety of trade, migration, and cultural diffusion routes connecting Asia and Europe. European scholarly explorations of the region and debates over its connections to other lands and civilizations were

lively, coinciding with important empirical findings in linguistics, archaeology and biology.

### **Three Silk Road Periods**

The Silk Roads were used continuously for millennia, promoting the exchange of goods but also culture including poetry, literature, art and music. Conventionally historians refer to three particularly intensified periods of exchange.

The first period (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) involved trade between the ancient Chinese Han Dynasty and Central Asia, extending all the way to Rome and Egypt.

The second period (618 A.D. to 907 A.D.) involved trade between China during the Tang Dynasty and Central Asia, Byzantium, the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the Sassanian Persian empire, and India, coinciding with the spread of Buddhism and later the expansion of Islam as well as Nestorian Christianity into Central Asia.

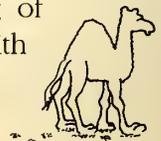
The third period (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) involved trade between China, Central Asia, Persia, India, and early modern Europe, enabled by Mongol control of most of the Silk Roads.

Some add a pre-Silk Road period during which silks from China and India made their way to ancient Greece and perhaps Egypt. For example, near the Valley of the Kings in Egypt a female mummy was buried with silk in 1070 B.C. Others add a modern Silk Road period beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the "Great Game"—competition between Britain and Russia for influence over Central Asia—and extending through today.

### ***From Han China to Rome***

Under the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), silk became a great trade item, used for royal gifts and tribute. It also became a generalized medium of exchange, like gold or money. Civil servants were paid in silk. Chinese farmers paid their taxes in silk.

The Chinese traded silk widely, but closely guarded the method of silk production from outsiders. Sericulture (the raising of silkworms) traveled eastward, first with



Chinese immigrants to Korea in about 200 B.C. and then to Japan in the third century A.D.

By the first century B.C., silk had traveled to Egypt and Rome, though the Romans did not know how it was made. Coinciding with the development of ruling elites and the beginnings of empire, silk became associated with wealth and power—Julius Caesar entered Rome in triumph under silk canopies. Regarded as “delicate” material, silk was associated with female apparel; in 14 B.C. the Roman Senate forbade males from wearing it, to no avail. Over the next three centuries, silk imports increased, especially with the *Pax Romana* of the early Emperors that opened up trade routes in Asia Minor and the Middle East. Roman glass made its way back to China, as did asbestos, amber and red coral. The Romans spent increasing wealth on silk, leading to a drain of precious metals. Several warned of its deleterious consequences. Yet silk became a medium of exchange and tribute, and when in 408 A.D. Alaric the Visigoth besieged Rome, he demanded and received as ransom five thousand pounds of gold and four thousand tunics of silk.

### ***Tang Silk Road: Connecting Cultures***

Silk continued to be popular in the Mediterranean even as Rome declined. In Byzantium, the eastern successor of the Roman state, silk purchases accounted for a large drain on the treasury. How silk making came to the “West” is unclear though legend has it that silk worms were smuggled out of China by two Nestorian monks and brought to Constantinople (Istanbul). Under Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, Constantinople became a center of silk production, its cloth used throughout Europe for religious vestments and aristocratic dress. The Persians too acquired the knowledge of silk production.

A second Silk Road developed under the Tang dynasty in China (618 to 907 A.D.). Though Central Asians had learned silk cultivation, Chinese silks were still in demand given their exceptional quality. The Tang rulers, like their Han ancestors, needed horses for their military. The best horses were in the “West,” held by nomads of the steppes

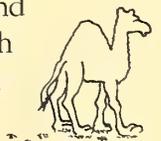
and the people of the Ferghana, in what is now Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Tang traded silk for horses, 40 bolts for each pony in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The growth of silk as a trade item both stimulated and characterized other types of exchanges during this era. Caravans and ships carried silk, but also gemstones, precious metals, and other goods. Not only did materials move, but also designs and motifs as well as techniques for weaving and embroidering silk. Chinese silk weaving was influenced by Central Asian, Persian Sassanian and Indian patterns and styles. For example, Chinese weavers adapted the Assyrian tree of life, beaded roundels, and bearded horsemen on winged horses from the Sassanians, and the use of gold wrapped thread, the conch shell, lotus, and endless knot designs from the Indians. During the Tang dynasty, cultural exchange based upon silk reached its apex.

Cultural exchange went beyond silks. Curative herbs, ideas of astronomy, and even religion moved along the Silk Road network. Arabs traveled to India and China; Chinese traveled to Central Asia, India, and Persia. Buddhism itself was carried along these roads from India to Tibet and into China. Islam was carried by Sufi teachers and by armies, moving across the continent from Western Asia into Persia and Central Asia and into China and India. Martial arts, sacred arts like calligraphy, tile making, and painting also traversed these roads. The Tang capital city of Chang’an became a cosmopolitan city, peopled with traders from all along the Silk Road, as well as monks, missionaries, and emissaries from across the continent.

### ***Mongol Silk Road (Marco Polo)***

The transcontinental exchange diminished in the later Middle Ages, and in Europe knowledge of the East receded in memory, as did the connection of European history to its own ancient Greek and Roman roots. The Christian Crusades to the Middle East and the Holy Land, from 1096 to the mid-1200s, brought many Europeans and Muslims into contact, and the Moorish influence in Spain rekindled European interest in Asia. The Moors brought



silk production to Spain and Sicily in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Through Arab scholars, Europeans gained access to Indian and Chinese advances in medicine, chemistry, and mathematics, and also access to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that had survived in Arabic translations and commentaries. The availability of this knowledge helped fuel the Renaissance in Europe, with the growth of trade and cities, guilds, arts, and scholarship. Mediterranean city-states, like Venice, Genoa, and Barcelona, prospered creatively and commercially.

One Venetian, Marco Polo, traveled across Asia by land and sea over a period of 24 years beginning in 1271. The tales of his travels spurred broad European interest. He told of the Mongols who under Genghis Khan and his successor Kublai Khan had taken over China and expanded their dominion across Asia, into Central Asia, India, Persia, and Asia Minor. Marco Polo narrated fantastic tales of the lands he had visited, the great sites he had seen, and the vast treasures of Asia. He was one of several European travelers of the time; others included emissaries of the Pope seeking alliances with the Mongols.

The 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterized by considerable political, commercial, and religious competition between kingdoms, markets, and sects across Eurasia. The Mongols, whose empire extended from the Pacific to the Black Sea, were, through a mixture of hegemony and brutality, able to assure a measure of peace within their domains, a *Pax Mongolica*. They were also quite tolerant of diversity in the arts and religion. Their ancient Mongolian capital, Qaraqorum, hosted 12 Buddhist temples, two mosques and one church. Kublai Khan hosted European, Chinese, Persian, and Arab astronomers and established an Institute of Muslim Astronomy. He also established an Imperial Academy of Medicine, including Indian, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Chinese physicians. European, Persian, Chinese, Arab, Armenian, and Russian traders and missionaries traveled the Silk Road, and in 1335 a Mongol mission to the Pope at Avignon reflected increased trade and cultural contacts.

While silk was still a highly valued Chinese export, it was not the primary commodity of this

“third” Silk Road. Silk production was known in the Arab world and had spread to southern Europe. Silk weavers, relocated from Constantinople to northern Italy, energized the development of silk tapestry as Renaissance art. Europeans wanted pearls and precious gems, spices, precious metals and medicines, ceramics, carpets, other fabrics, and lacquerware. All kingdoms needed horses, weapons, and armaments.

Commercial trade and competition was of great importance by the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the growth of European cities, guilds, and royal states. The trade in silk and other goods helped fuel the commercial transformation of western Europe. French King Charles VII and the Dukes of Burgundy participated strongly in the silk and luxuries trade. Markets were established in Bruges, Amsterdam, and Lyon. But trading overland with China, Persia, and India was neither the most reliable nor most economical means for European rulers to acquire silk and other luxury goods.

With the decline of Mongol power and the rise of the Ottomons, control over trade routes was vital. Indeed, the motivation behind Portuguese explorations of a sea route to India and East Asia was to assure safer and cheaper passage of trade goods than could be secured by depending upon land caravans subject to exorbitant protection fees or raiding by bandits. The Ottoman Empire, which held sway over much of Central Asia, controlled the land routes and prevented direct European trade with the East. Indeed, it was the search for a sea route to the East that led Columbus westward to the “New World.” After Vasco de Gama found the sea route to India, other European explorers opened up direct shipping links with China. Overland contact between Western Europe and Central Asia decreased dramatically.



Afghan nomads make their annual trek from lower Badakhsan Province to the rich grazing lands of Shiwa Valley for the summer. Photo ©Ali Naemi, The Aga Khan Foundation.



### Silk Road Stories

Just as there was not one Silk Road, nor one historical period or product, there also is not one story that conveys the essence of the Silk Road. Scholars working on the Silk Road have found a variety of stories to tell.

J. Mark Kenoyer, an archaeologist at the University of Wisconsin, digs every year in Harappa, the ancient Indus Valley site. He has found sea shells, lapis lazuli, carnelian and other beads that indicate contact with other major urban centers in Arabia, Mesopotamia, Baluchistan, Central Asia, and possibly even China. For him, the Silk Road reaches way back, to somewhere around 2500 to 3000 B.C. The same land and sea routes that may have carried ancient silk also carried beads as trade items. Following the beads is a way of ascertaining cultural contact and of understanding the growth of various centers of civilization.

The global stretch of the Silk Road is well illustrated by the story of porcelain. Many Americans keep their “china” in cabinets attesting to its value. But how many think of it as Chinese? Chinese porcelain made its way around the world. Yankee clipper ships brought it to New England. Europeans imitated it and still do, as with Delftware from The Netherlands. Calling fine ceramics “china” is something Americans share with Turks. Indiana University folklorist Henry Glassie has done extensive studies of porcelain and “*çini*” in Turkey. One type, the ubiquitous blue and white-ware, originated in Jingdezhen, China. Jiangdezhen was an important center of ceramics manufacture; it was located in south China just north of Guangdong (Canton). Under the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), some 700 artisans turned the rich kaolin clay into vases, plates and other types of ceramics for the Emperor. (The blue color, however, came from cobalt mined in Persia.) When the first Mongols invaded China in 1126 A.D., the Song rulers fled their northern capital and went south to Hangzhou in Jiangxi Province; the royal potters fled to nearby Jiangdezhen.

Under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the fine blue and white porcelain was traded along the



### From Japan to Jersey

European rulers wanted to control their own silk trade through its direct production. The Italian silk industry was emulated by the French, centered in Lyon in the 1500s. The English developed their own silk industry, tried silk cultivation in Ireland, and even in the New World. King James I was a silk enthusiast. Mulberry trees and silkworms went with settlers to Jamestown, Virginia in the early 1600s. Refugee French Huguenot artisans were encouraged to inhabit the new colony. Silk cultivation was successful but only for a time, and was followed with other attempts later in Georgia, among the 19<sup>th</sup> century Harmonists in Pennsylvania and even the Shakers in Kentucky. Still, imported silks showed the long reach of an international trade. Silk kerchiefs were imported from India and worn by cowboys in the American West who called them bandannas, a variant of the Bengali term *bandhānī* (binding).

By the mid-1800s silk weaving was industrialized with the invention of new looms and synthetic dyeing processes, allowing for mass-produced lines of silk clothing and furnishing. Raw silk was shipped from cultivation centers to design and production factories to meet the demand of the period. This extended to the United States, as raw silk was imported from Japan, dyed in the soft waters of the Passaic River, and distributed through companies headquartered in Patterson, New Jersey—dubbed America’s Silk City. Silk as a valuable traded commodity both epitomized and played a major role in the early development of what we now characterize as a global economy.

Silk Road to Turkey. The Turks found their own way of imitating and producing the porcelain. Interestingly, Chinese designs were replaced with new visual elements. Plates featured Islamic calligraphy with phrases of the Qur'an [Koran] crafted in elaborate styles. Floral arrangements of fruits, flowers, and leaves encoded images of spiritual significance. The tradition is still vital. Glassie, conducting field research in the major Turkish center, Kutahya, reports thousands of potters at work. Their art is visionary, as the resulting plates become objects of meditation and reflection.

For Ted Levin, a Dartmouth ethnomusicologist and Silk Road Project curatorial director, the Silk Road tells a tale of musical invention, diffusion, and continual transformation. Levin and his colleague Jean During of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture have studied *maqām*, a classical, learned musical tradition that spread through Islamic Azerbaijan, Persia, Transoxania, and western China, influencing the music of the Indian subcontinent. This is a tradition as complex and sophisticated as the Western classical tradition, only predating it by hundreds of years. While it continues as an art or courtly music, it also adapts to new settings. Levin has found this music in the United States among Bukharan Jewish immigrant musicians from Uzbekistan playing at community functions in New Jersey and restaurants in Queens, New York. Here, the musical tradition is possessed with a new vitality, symbolizing the identity of a people in a new home.

Similarly rich stories can be told of a variety of Silk Road commodities. Richard Kennedy, Smithsonian cultural historian and curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Silk Road program, likes the paper story. He notes how paper, first made by the Chinese, was then picked up by the Arabs and eventually brought to Europe in the 1400s, enabling the revolution in printing, one of the key innovations of the modern era. Rajeev Sethi, the Folklife Festival sceneographer, is enamored with the movement of design motifs—trees of life, supernatural winged beings, vines, and stars that traverse the Silk Road expanse.

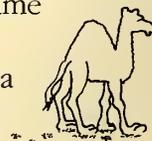


Ensemble *Sabjilar* members: Sergei Charkov, Anna Burnakova, and Slava Kuchenov. © Ted Levin 2000, *Khakasia*.

### Polo

My own favorite Silk Road story is that of polo. Scholars trace its origins to somewhere in Central Asia, around 600 B.C. There are many variations, including a rather sophisticated version played by Chinese women during the Tang dynasty. American polo is derived from the game viewed by British soldiers on the northwestern frontier of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India. There, the game known as *bushkashi* is still a raucous, physical exercise of competitive horsemanship. Two large teams play against each other. The field might be a large meadow, with an area or pit designated as the “goal.” A goat or calf carcass is the “ball.” Horsemen from one side must scoop up the carcass, ride around a pole or designated marker, reverse course, and drop it into the goal. Players use their skill as horsemen and a repertoire of hand-held armaments to either aid or attack the carcass carrier. This is a wild, rough and tumble game in which injuries are common. The social purpose may be sport, but the game teaches and encourages excellent horsemanship skills, precisely those needed to attack caravans, raid towns, and rout opposing forces. Watching the players, you can easily visualize the horsemen descending upon a Silk Road caravan loaded with luxury goods intended for far-off rulers and capitals. In recent months, Afghans celebrated their liberation from the Taliban regime with games of *Bushkashi*.

While polo also evolved as a sport in central Asia, it was Victorian



Englishmen who turned it into the game that Americans know today. We think of polo as a sophisticated game requiring upper class connections and money to maintain special “ponies” and their stables. Interestingly enough, the story continues. Today, Afghan immigrants to the U.S.A. play a form of “Macho-Polo” that combines the structure of the formal game with the attitude and style of the original. Polo is a fine example of how meanings and practices can be transformed as they move across cultures and time periods, certainly a wonderful Silk Road story.

### **The Silk Road Today**

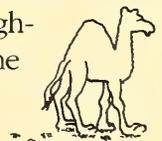
Today, the Silk Road region, particularly Central Asia, is of immense interest to political and civic leaders, religious figures, corporate entrepreneurs, and a broad international public. The Silk Road skirts the underbelly of the old Soviet Union. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Krygyzstan were part of that Russian Empire. Other states like Afghanistan and Mongolia were closely related to it. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new, often competing systems into the region. These new nations are home to ancient cultures. They face a tough question—what type of nations should they become? Should they reform the communist polity and economy they inherited? Should they embrace a Western, capitalistic democracy? Or should they develop new forms of the national state adapting Western and Soviet practices to those of local significance?

Today ideal visions collide with rancorous political factions, rebel movements, the lack of strong civic institutions, and the intransigence of old power holders to keep the region in flux. Even long established nations like China face internal challenges, both with changing political realities and ethnic minorities like Muslim Uighurs and Buddhist Tibetans seeking autonomy. The civil war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and its opponents, the Northern Alliance and various Pushtun tribes, has brought some of these conflicts into American consciousness. Hearing of Silk Road sites—Balkh, Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, the Khyber Pass—on

the nightly news has brought history into the present. The future of national stability and viability in the region is unknown.

So too is the issue of how to deal with religion in Central Asia. Should the Muslim majority states of Central Asia incorporate religious law and practice into civil practice? Should they be theocratic? How much diversity both within Islam and among other groups should they accommodate? Should they separate religion from the secular state? Parties from Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan have offered competing visions of the relationship between Islam and the state. These questions emerged dramatically in Afghanistan. When the Taliban, at the behest of al-Qaeda, blew up the Buddhist statues of Bamiyan, the whole world cringed. These statues represented a truly ancient symbol of the Silk Road. In their contemporary state, they stood for an appreciation of a commonly shared though diverse cultural heritage of humanity. These statues' destruction turned out to be an eerie prelude to the attack on the World Trade Center, a thoroughly modern symbol of a world joined in a network of commercial relations. In the aftermath of these events, Central Asians grapple with the question of the proper relationship between religion, society, and the state.

Economic uncertainty has also followed independence from the Soviet Union. Nations struggling to build their own economies must develop local markets, industries and infrastructures, while at the same time participating in an increasingly globalized world economy. Some local entrepreneurs seek to rebuild economies based upon a traditional repertoire of deeply ingrained Silk Road commercial skills. In Pakistan, for example, instead of caravans of decorated camels, beautifully painted trucks in caravan ply the Karakoram Pass, moving trade goods between that nation and China. Transnational corporations seek the development of natural resources, particularly oil, in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and western China. The Silk Road of old will literally become a high-tech pipeline—a slick road, moving the



valuable commodity of oil across the region to the rest of the world.

Some leaders such as the Aga Khan, an international humanitarian, philanthropist, and leader of the Muslim Ismaili community, see the rebirth of these societies in terms of building an infrastructure that allows for civic and economic development. He and his organization are developing new institutions—universities, hospitals, medical schools, and financial organizations. At the same time, they are encouraging a contemporary revival of traditional knowledge, architecture, and artistry embedded in Central Asian history that will allow local citizens the opportunity to flourish. Given the needs in the region, the work is of immense scope and the prognosis—healthy economies for an educated and skilled citizenry—admirable and hopeful, though far from certain today.

*Richard Kurin, Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, is a cultural anthropologist who has done much of his fieldwork in India and Pakistan.*

### For Further Reading

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### Magazines

*Calliope*. February 2002 issue is devoted to the Silk Roads. For more information, see <http://www.cobblestonepub.com/pages/callsilkroads.html> In addition, *Muse*, *Click* and *Ask*, the three magazines published by Carus Publications in conjunction with *Smithsonian* magazine, will have Silk Road topics included in their Spring issues. For more information, see <http://www.musemag.com>

