

System of Trade and Exchange: The Silk Roads

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For this assignment, I read the article *Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History* by David Christian. This article discusses Silk Roads through history as an ecological, cultural, and trade-tied route that stretched from China, through India, into the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.¹ It defines the Silk Roads as “the long and middle-distance land routes by which goods, ideas, and people were exchanged between major regions of Afro-Eurasia”.² These trade routes carried mostly luxury products, but they also were a system of cultural, religious, and linguistic transfer.³ This article argues that these trade routes played a large role in creating unity in Afro-Eurasia.⁴ This article is significant because it explains how the silk roads formed, it creates one theory of these trade routes where the study had previously been fragmented, and it demonstrates how these routes transported more than material goods.

This article opens by discussing trans-ecological trade, trade between two groups of people that live in different environments. According to Christian, Silk Roads exist as an extension of natural trade between pastoral and agrarian societies.⁵ Pastoral societies often relied on trade with agrarian societies for things such as grain that had to be farmed.⁶ Because of this need, trade between these societies was very common at ecological frontiers, where the earth shifted from being good for farming, to being good for animals.⁷ This connection is significant because it demonstrates that the Silk Roads were organically created off of existing trade patterns. As these trade routes were strengthened and expanded, there was increased unity between groups as they relied on a greater number of people for survival, and thus interacted with a larger group as well.

¹ Robert W. Strayer, Eric W. Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Fourth Edition. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 278

² David Christian. “Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring, 2000): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078816>

³ Strayer and Nelson, *Ways of the World*, 279

⁴ Christian. “Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History,” 2

⁵ Ibid, 7

⁶ Ibid, 7

⁷ Ibid, 7

The article then moves on to discuss trans-civilizational trade, trade between two different groups of people, typically with different cultures. As more pastoralist societies domesticated horses the areas that they moved between increased, causing them to spread their ideas, technologies, goods, and languages further.⁸ In the pastoralist Steppes, there was a large amount of hegemony between different groups of people.⁹ This increased movement helped fuse the culture, language, knowledge, and technology of different groups.¹⁰ This exchange increased unity as they shared not only material objects but also parts of their culture. These trade routes provided isolated societies with contact, thus propelling development, cultural exchange, and access to goods and culture from lands far away.

This paper is structured as a cumulation of several historians and theories. Christian combines these suggestions to create one overarching historical theory of the Silk Roads. Christian in particular discusses two groups of historians. The first are Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills.¹¹ These two historians argued that the world was interconnected, in one world system.¹² Christian then finds several pieces of evidence from the Silk Roads to back up this theory, including the Oxus civilization. This was a civilization that was a center of a trading system that stretched across Afro-Eurasia and was the hub of cultural exchange.¹³ This one cosmopolitan city showed that along with promoting trade, there was also mixing and a homogenizing of cultures. This could be caused by the increased mixing of people, their culture, and their languages. The second academic frequently mentioned is Marshall Hodgson. Hodgson argues that history can only be understood as a connection between different groups of people as

⁸ Ibid, 10

⁹ Ibid, 14

¹⁰ Ibid, 12

¹¹ Ibid, 1

¹² Ibid, 2

¹³ Ibid, 14

they all had an impact on each other.¹⁴ He particularly notes that modernity was something that was created through a system of exchanges.¹⁵ Through looking at the Silk Roads as a system of connections, which produce modernity, the Silk Roads can better be understood as impactful beyond economic means. Through this system of increased exchange culture and technology were transferred between regions and civilizations. Both of these historians noted that the Silk Roads were a crucial part of both the continent and the formation of modernity. Christian is able to take their theories and further discuss what this would mean for the Silk Roads and the connections between people at the time.

In connecting this article to other readings in the unit one thing becomes clear, Silk Roads were far more important than just trade. One of the most important things that they transported in addition to material goods was religion, particularly Islam and Buddhism.¹⁶ Tukharistan and Sogdiana, the most important nodes on the silk route, were also the homeland for Central Asian Buddhists.¹⁷ As people passed through these cities, they would have been surrounded by people of a different culture and religion. Sogdians even helped bring Buddhism to China, translating important texts for them to read.¹⁸ Culture and religion were only able to spread as long as they had people to bring it. Through people passing through for trading reasons, they are able to pick up culture and thus spread it further. There is great importance in the culture, religion, and language of cities that people passed through on the Silk Roads. Since the roads were not walked by one person, they would likely have visited the same places often, made friends, and been required to learn about the city in order to deal with its inhabitants for business reasons.¹⁹ This

¹⁴ Ibid, 2

¹⁵ Ibid, 26

¹⁶ Xinru Liu, "A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2011): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23011678>

¹⁷ Liu, "A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam," 56

¹⁸ Ibid, 58

¹⁹ Strayer and Nelson, *Ways of the World*, 284

meant that they would learn about the culture of a city or region and then take this knowledge back to their home. This allowed for culture, language, and religion to spread across the continent. Through having further cultural spread, and mixing, the continent became more homogenous and unified.

This article by Christian is both enlightening and significant. This article demonstrates how the silk roads, through both trans-ecological and trans-cultural trade were naturally forming and were a method of transferring more than goods. These roads were influential in transporting language, culture, and religion. This article is significant for the study of Silk Roads because it aims to create one overarching theory of them. Previously, the study of these roads had been divided up by different historical scholars. They each studied their own region, and communication was difficult because of language barriers.²⁰ There was also a divide between historians, who study literate societies, and archeologists, who study illiterate ones.²¹ By having such a fragmented study, it is difficult to create one overarching theory for these routes. Through looking at several historians and a variety of evidence Christian is able to create one theory for the creation and impact of these routes. This singular theory allows for beginners to study and understand the Silk Roads without reading many documents or learning several languages. Studying the Silk Road is important because it explains both what civilization was like at the time, but also why we have arrived where we are today. The Silk Roads shaped the lives of people as they would have been exposed to things from distant lands. Today, we can see the impact of Silk Roads in the connections between languages, culture, and where different religions are practiced. As such, they shape the lives of people even today, and it is important to understand why, and how they created such a large impact.

²⁰ Christian. "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History," 4

²¹ Ibid, 4

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