

Geography and the Silk Road

Rebecca Woodward Wendelken
Methodist University

Combatting Geographical History

As a Central Asianist I am acutely aware of the vital importance of geography to history.¹ Geographic illiteracy comes up repeatedly in academic discussions, and in a recent article Jerome Dobson decried Americans' lack of geographic knowledge.² I include geography in my history courses because, as I am fond of saying, "It does me little good to talk about a place if you don't know where they keep it." Still, a large number of my freshman survey students cannot find their home state on a line map of the US, many cannot identify the major continents, and most do not care. Geography for them is unnecessary. They do not need to know how deep or wide a river is—they cross it on a bridge. Today mountains hardly slow our forward progress. There are roads over them and tunnels through them, and where there are neither we can fly over or around them. This does not mean that geography has lost its meaning. Whether we realize it or not, geography continues to govern our everyday lives, and it is critical to the study of history. It is to space what history is to time, and it is essential to our understanding of complex interactions such as trade, warfare, migration, national borders, and so on and so on. "It tells us why people do what they do where they do it."³

Geography is especially challenging when teaching the Silk Road.⁴ The Silk Road was, for the most part, in the middle of nowhere. The names are unfamiliar and their pronunciation is daunting. With a few exceptions most of the places along the Silk Road are unlikely to make the evening news and most of it was uncharted territory for Europeans until the 19th and early 20th centuries. But the geography of the region of Inner Asia traversed by the Silk Road is critical in understanding the importance of this early example of globalization. Here are a few hints to help simplify this task.

Multiplicity of Silk Roads

First, it is important to understand that there was not one single "Silk Road." It was not an interstate highway like I-95.

Within China, sections were part of the imperial road system, but in other places it was simply a track through the wilderness. There were major routes from city to city and multiple roads that connected markets and sources of goods that were off the main track. There were also alternate routes or detours that could be taken to escape bad weather, robbers, marauding nomadic tribes, tax collectors and other hazards. It is also important to realize that the route changed over time as water sources dried

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up or became polluted by alkali or because of conflicts or changes in the control of territories. Here one can tie ecology and/or politics to an understanding of geography.

Negotiating Mountainous Regions

To study the Silk Road, students need to be aware of major geographic barriers. Mountain ranges such as the Tianshan, Pamirs, and Kunlun, are good places to start. For Silk Road merchants, these mountains presented major obstacles. An entertaining way to examine what early merchants and travelers thought about these mountains is to find out what they called them. Diaries and stories by Marco Polo and other travelers and explorers can provide these.⁵ Some are particularly

descriptive like "The Great Headache Mountains"—headaches being one of the symptoms of altitude sickness. To determine how these mountains affected travel, one could examine questions such as how high are the various mountain chains and where are/were their passes? These passes are especially important because they determine routes. If a merchant could not or did not want to cross a mountain, was there another option? Could he (and they were mostly male) go around it? What would that cost him in terms of time? This is a good place to connect geography with time and climate. What happened to a traveler who started too early in the year or too late? What were his options? What about his cargo?

Survival in the Deserts

Another obstacle faced by travelers along the Silk Road was the major deserts such as the Taklamakhan, the Kizilkum, the Karakum, and others. One of the most difficult was the Taklamakhan located in the Tarim Basin, now part of China's Xinjiang province. The Taklamakhan, in the Turkic languages spoken in the region, means "the place from which no living being returns alive." Obviously this is a bit of an exaggeration, but the Taklamakhan was so formidable that merchants chose to go around it rather than through it for the



Taklamakhan Desert.

most part. At Anxi, on the eastern side of the desert, the road diverged, skirting the

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northern and southern rims of the Taklamakhan. The two routes met again at Kashgar in the west. The harsh conditions of the routes meant that merchants traveling west had to exchange their mules, horses and wagons at Anxi for the more hardy Bactrian camel. At Kashgar, on the other side, they could trade back again, selling their camels to the eastward traveling merchants. The Taklamakhan, like other Central Asian deserts, is affected by continentality. This causes dramatic day/night and seasonal fluctuations in temperature. It can be in the high 90s during the day and near freezing at night. One could begin an inquiry into these deserts by asking questions such as how long would it take a caravan to cross the desert? What would they need in terms of supplies? Remember water is heavy! How did merchants find their way through such desolate territory? How far apart were the way stations on the routes around the desert? Who maintained them and why?

Water, a key to survival in Central Asia, could also be an obstacle. Travelers from Xian, China's capital, would have had to cross the enormous Yellow River. In some places bridges were in place, but in others, the use of boats, floats of inflated cattle skins, or even swimming the cargo



Camel caravan on the Silk Road.

carried out by the Chinese military to help support trade. Along the southern route of the Silk Road around the Tarim Basin, the route shifted over time due to a changing environment. The region around the lake Lop Nor was once a rich oasis, but gradually became alkaline. The cities in the area were abandoned and the population moved southward. Questions involving water supply could include locating the major rivers and oases along the Silk Road.

Students could determine how much water a traveler would need for a day's travel and how much he would have to carry to get from town to town. Remember he must also take water for his animals. Even camels have to drink from time to time. Which waterways created a barrier and how could they be crossed are interesting questions to raise.

Geography and Art History

Geography does not have to be limited to an examination of physical geography but can be used as an entry or connection to many other subjects. For example, geography can be connected to art history by showing images of leather and ceramic water containers used by early travelers. The famous ceramic Tang sancai camels carry water bags and there are depictions of merchants from all over Eurasia in Tang dynasty (618-907) pottery. Wall paintings at places like the Kizil Caves and Dunhuang can also be used. The movement

of art forms and techniques can be charted by marking their location and their creation date on maps. One of the most famous of these is the "pearl edged medallion," a circle containing confronted animals or animal heads, surrounded by a circle of pearls and sometimes jewels. This motif began in Persia and spread to China and Japan. Students can trace the movement of motifs and technologies along with goods, finding their sources and mapping their final destinations.

The geography of the Silk Road provides a rich field for understanding this important example of early globalization and the dangers of long-distance trade historically. With a little imagination it can also provide a platform for the exploration of other subjects including art and culture. Here I have only tried to present a few possibilities. I am sure others will be able to think of many, many more and find, as I have, what a rich resource the Silk Road provides to the classroom.

Endnotes

¹Many thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the East West Center at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa for their help and support of my studies of the Silk Road.

²Jerome E. Dobson, "Bring Back Geography!", *ArcNews* XXIX (1), Spring 2007.

³Ibid.

⁴This article was developed as part of my participation in the 2006 NEH Institute "The Silk Road: Early Globalization and Chinese Cultural Identity." It is part of a larger piece on "Mapping the Silk Road" being prepared for a forthcoming collection called *Teaching the Silk Road*.

⁵Daniel Waugh's Silk Road site has many sources in translation and is an excellent and easily accessible place to start. "Silk Road-Seattle." <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad>

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across the river were strategies that were used. In the Tarim Basin, the Tarim River was a major water supply but it did not cover the entire area. Water is always an important resource for travelers, and this is especially true in Inner Asia. Towns and cities in Inner Asia often grew up around sources of water. Where water was not locally present, especially along the northern route around the Taklamakhan, it was brought to towns and garrisons from the Tianshan Mountains by a system of bamboo pipes. This work was generally