The Silk Road and its impact on globalization.

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In the novel, *Life Along the Silk Road*, the merchant Nanaivandak traveled the Silk Road toward China, due to his love for mountainous terrain and his zeal for trade. For twenty years, he encountered armies who often did not harass or persecute merchants or travelers of the lands. Nanaivandak made frequent stops to Chang'an where he yielded considerably from his stash of musk, silverware, and gems. There he was confronted with peoples from all over speaking in different tongues, bargaining for the gems, spices, and other goods sold. Distinguishing features such as his wardrobe and excess facial hair separated him from the Turks, Chinese, and Tibetans present there. In the later years of the Silk Road it was increasingly uncommon for China to welcome foreigners, but Nanaivandak was lucky enough to live in an era of relative peace.[1]

Doudou Diene, the writer of the Foreword in the book *The Silk Roads: Highways of culture and commerce*, wrote “… The fabled Silk Roads, far from being mere trade routes, were also cultural highways that had played a pivotal role in linking the East and West…”[2] Furthermore, Whitfield describes the Silk Road as, “The movement and exchange across Central Asia… of all the other tangible and intangible cultural baggage that travels with people (religions, technologies, medicine, fashions, food)…”[3] Buddhism and Islam were exchanged across different Empires while the trade of many different materials and goods led the countries to start connecting. Different inventions, information, and languages traversed from the East and West. The Silk Road generated forms of globalization because it aided in the exchange of cultures, goods, and ideas.

Diffusion of religion and cultures across the Silk Road highly supported globalization. Christianity from the West, Islam from the Middle East, and Buddhism from the East soon intermingled along the Silk Road. Buddhism, just like Islam, a few centuries later spread mainly along trade routes.[4] Trade created possibilities for the expansion of religion. Buddhism was practically the first religion that was well established throughout two regions of Central Asia—Tukharistan/Afghanistan and
Transoxiana/Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The religion of Buddhism was spread by missionaries from India, who traveled to China and practiced and preached their messages about Buddhism. From India, Buddhism first went to Bengal and then Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka became strongly Buddhist and followed the Theravada model. Large statues of Buddha even lined the Silk Road. It was here that many of the early teachings were finally written down. Buddhist monks also traveled alongside of traders, missionaries, and travelers to help spread their religion. Buddhism existed on the Tibetan plateau briefly before they too converted to Islam; however, Buddhism survived mainly on the eastern edges of the Silk Road—Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and Korea—and continues its decline in its birth place on the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, a religious transformation began and Islam was starting to overcome Buddhism. Central Asia gradually became a largely Islamic region with Transoxiana being Islam’s center in the east. This change in Central Asia led it to become an important center for communications; this connected it with more cultures, countries, and traditions. [5] The Islamic religion had made other people convert by force; not as pleasantly as Buddhists. During the Mongolian Empire, the expansion of Islam was prominent. Islam was brought to the coastal cities of India by the Arab traders, and the Turks brought it to the north.[6] The spread of Islam toward the east was accomplished by a combination of conquest, missionary effort led by Sufis, and the gradual Muslim commercial takeover of the Silk Road. The Arab conquests of the Sogdian empire resulted in the conversion of many people. Unlike the previous two religions, Christianity dominated on the European edge of the world and until the Ottoman conquest in Constantinople. Axum has also kept its Christianity alive.[7] According to Foltz, Eastern Christianity and Manicheanism were the big losers on the Silk Road. This, he attributes to their isolation once the Mongolian Empire disintegrated.[8] Christians often bribed individuals or hired mercenaries to convert the people during this time; however, during the time of the crusades, much more forceful tactics were expressed. Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity today are among the world’s most populous religions. They are all found throughout the globe and without the help of the Silk Road, the initial diffusion of religions would have not been possible.

Similarly, trading along the Silk Road significantly influenced globalizing around the world. Silk, the material that gave the east-west trade route its name, is evidence of globalization because it was seen in Rome during a time where only China could have produced it.[9] Chinese silk had also reached the Mediterranean during the second century BC, and being the first significant commodity to be exported from east to west, silk gave its name to the route.[10] There was a high demand for exotic and prestigious items for uses of adornment, decoration, and consumption in the Mediterranean, Basin, India, and China. Traders such as Nanaivandak made extreme wealth during this time selling these desired items. [11] From consumption came the need for spices such as cinnamon, pepper, ginger, cardamom, cloves, and nutmeg. This “spice trade” led to the first serious involvement of Europeans in Southeast Asia, and it also began the formation of colonial empires; this was mainly due to the fact that cloves were only found in China. Trading of spices, particularly cloves, created the growth of numerous states on the routes from the Indies to the Mediterranean.[12] Also, nearly all vegetables and crops like sugar and rice were traded amongst several countries. For adornment, the people wanted perfumes, precious stones, pearls, silks and
muslin, horses, tortoise shell, ivory, rhinoceros horn, dyes, unguents, and one of the most important was jade.[13] Jade's true value came with its toughness and durability. This beautiful gem was highly praised in China. Jade was in high demand because of its special affinity for women and because of the lack of supply in the West. Secondly, Jade was especially desired because “diving for Jade would have been a perverse way of committing suicide.” Trading was the underlying force transpired on the Silk Road connecting the East and West.[14]

Lastly, the sharing of ideas and knowledge led globalization to thrive. Music was a common expression shared amongst many. By the later part of the sixth century, Central Asian musicians and dancers traveled on either horseback or camels to China, and subsequently music and dancing became the most famous in China. A man from northwestern Asia was able to modify the Indian digits and transform them into Arabic numerals. This man also invented algorisms and algebra; he then spread these inventions across Asia and many countries. Several books were written about new findings which were spread across the world and globalized the nations with innovative mathematical, astronomical, musical, and scientific studies. One important invention by the Chinese was paper and their knowledge about its manufacturing processes in which spread first from China to Central Asia then to Baghdad, and eventually all over the globe.[15] The diffusion of advances in science, technology, economy, art, and literature continued throughout Asia.[16] The invention of porcelain and its technology for the means of production of it in China created a large demand across Eurasia. Although the ease of travel across the Silk Road aided in the spread of expertise, it also transmitted the plague and other diseases resulting in the death of millions. However; vaccinations were soon generated and shared between countries.[17] According to Whitfield, “Afro-Eurasia remained a connected world where the lives of ordinary people were touched, even if in small ways, by the culture, technologies, and goods from distant lands.”[18]

Through the use of trading, expanding cultures, and sharing innovative ideas, the world was able to globalize. Trading consisted of crops like rice, spices such as cinnamon, pepper, and cloves, pottery, horses, and valuables such as jade, silk, pearls, and precious stones. Mainly three different religions were practiced in Afro-Eurasia during the time of the traveling's along the Silk Road. These religions were Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Buddhism began as the overarching, core religion in Central Asia, but was soon left behind in some areas that it had spread to. This is due to the fact that Islam launched. Shortly after, Islam took over almost all parts of the eastern world, but converters were not as nice when getting others to join; they forced them. Christianity begun quickly after that, although it did not thrive in as many places, but at least they bribed and persuaded people to join into Christianity. Several inventions were shared between countries. Some of these inventions were algorisms, algebra, medical advancements, and paper. Music was also shared among people. Central Asian musicians and dancers traveled to China and shared their types of dances and music with the Chinese. Just like the merchant Nanaivandak, other travelers on the Silk Road assisted the world in globalization through the expansion and sharing of goods, cultures, and ideas around the world.


Books


Journals


Primary Source

Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Venice, 1300.


Illustrations:

[Spread of Buddhism on the Silk Road](#)

[Silk Road Routes](#)

[Common Goods Traded](#)