Background: The Silk Road

The Heavenly Horses are coming
Across the pastureless wilds
A thousand legs at a stretch
Following the eastern road.

— Poem by Han Emperor Wu-Ti, circa 140 BC. He wrote as he waited for the arrival of new horses on the Silk Road.

When you sit down to a bowl of spaghetti at home or a math problem in school, you probably aren’t thinking about history. Yet it is a fact that noodles from China and a number system from Persia and India first made their way into the European world along ancient trade routes called the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was actually a series of roads and routes that together made up a huge trade network. It stretched from China to Rome with many side branches leading to the north and the south. The Silk Road began as far back as 4,000 years ago and got its name from the luxurious, brightly colored cloth that was China’s biggest export. The Silk Road owes an important part of its success to the domestication of the camel — an animal that could carry heavy loads over long distances and required little water while doing so. Camels were the fuel-efficient mini vans of the ancient world.

As is true with international trade today, politics made business on the Silk Road difficult, and often dangerous. Caravans had to travel through many kingdoms and city-states that fought each other. When conflict broke out, trade was interrupted. Between about 200 BCE and 250 CE, the growth of four stable empires helped ease this problem and keep the Silk Road humming. The empires were the Han, the Kushan, the Parthian, and the Roman.

From 202 BCE to 220 CE, the Han dynasty ruled over China. The Han were especially eager to trade silk for magnificent horses from Ferghana in Central Asia. To protect this trade, the Han cracked down on bandits who preyed on Silk Road travelers.

Starting in 50 CE, another Asian empire took shape and began profiting from the Silk Road. This was the Kushan Empire, which stretched from western China into northern India. The Kushans established themselves as a kind of toll booth that collected taxes on goods moving back and forth between China and points west.

Beyond Kush was the powerful empire of Parthia, which covered much of modern-day Iran and Iraq. The Parthians became skilled middlemen, buying up goods flowing into their country and reselling them at a higher price to traders who carried them further along the Silk Road.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire had come to dominate the west, eventually controlling much of the land that rimmed the Mediterranean Sea. As the empire got richer, Romans demanded more and more luxury goods, especially that wonderful Chinese fabric, silk.

In time these four empires collapsed, but for hundreds of years, the Silk Road continued on without them. Then, around 1400 CE, exploration and new sea routes brought an end to much of the overland trade.

In its heyday, tens of thousands of traders traveled the Silk Road. Now it’s your turn. Using the voice of the person you chose in the Hook Exercise, record what you learn about trade and the spread of ideas on the Silk Road. The documents that follow will provide material for the five journal entries you will write. Be creative, but be factual, too.

It is just past dawn on a brisk, early spring day in Chang’an, China. After days of preparation, your caravan is fully assembled and ready to head west. Rolled bolts of silk are strapped tightly to camel backs. The dust builds as these humped beasts struggle to their feet. Dogs bark. Children race. Your caravan leader, speaking Chinese with a thick Sogdian accent, barks out, “We go!” You touch the journal tucked into your tunic. You are off.
Background: Silk was at the very heart of the Silk Road. Silkworm caterpillars fed on mulberry leaves for about five weeks. The caterpillars would then spin their cocoons. After, the cocoons were placed in hot water, which softened them and made it possible to unravel the filaments. Five to seven filaments were then joined to make a thread. Later, the threads were woven into silk cloth.

Goods and ideas spread across the Silk Road for centuries. This process of sharing is called "cultural diffusion" by historians. Below are a few examples of goods and ideas that moved by way of the Silk Roads:

- **From China:** silk, iron, bronze, ceramics, orange trees, paper, gunpowder, Confucianism
- **From Central Asia:** Ferghana horses
- **From Africa:** ivory, rhinoceros horn
- **From India:** spices, Buddhism
- **From Europe:** music, glassware
The interior of a cave shrine at Dunhuang.


... [The cave] walls were carpeted with hundreds of miniature Buddhas.... In several shrines the ceiling teemed with Hindu angels and lotus flowers.

...[Rolls of manuscripts] revealed a multicultural world, which had barely been suspected ... inventories, wills, legal deeds, private letters. Chinese ballads and poems came to light..., even a funeral address for a dead donkey.... And beside the mass of Chinese prayers are documents in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uighur, Sogdian, Khotanese, Turki in a mélange of scripts: a letter in Judeo-Persian, a Parthian fragment in Manichean script, a Turkic tantric tract in the Uighur alphabet.

**Background:** In the early 300s CE, a Buddhist monk saw a vision of many Buddhas shining on the cliffs near Dunhuang ("dun-wong"). Inspired by this vision, the monk began to dig out caves in the cliffs to use as shrines. Buddhist monks continued this practice for about 700 years, during which time about 500 caves were dug. The monks placed clay statues of Buddhist deities in most of the caves and painted many of the walls with Buddhist images. These honeycombed caves came to be called the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. For travelers heading west, the oasis town of Dunhuang ("dun-wong") was a place to rest and resupply before braving the western Gobi and the Taklimakan deserts. Soon after the fall of the Han Dynasty, Buddhist monks began to dig caves just ten miles outside of Dunhuang. In many of the caves, they built Buddhist shrines. Over the centuries, these caves also became storage vaults for many items brought to Dunhuang by Silk Road travelers.
... you have to cross a plain of sand, extending for more than 100 leagues [about 300 miles]. You see nothing in any direction but the sky and the sands, without the slightest trace of road; and travelers find nothing to guide them but the bones of men and beasts and the droppings of camels. During the passage of this wilderness you hear sounds, sometimes of singing, sometimes of wailing; and it has often happened that travelers going aside to see what these sounds might be have strayed from their course and been entirely lost; for they were voices of spirits and goblins.


Background: Situated between the Tian Shan Mountains to the north and the Kunlun Mountains to the south, the Taklimakan Desert covers about 125,000 square miles. Most of this area consists of small hills and shifting sand dunes. Currently, the Taklimakan Desert is located in northwestern China. Today, as then, the temperature in the Taklimakan Desert reaches over 100° F and rainfall is minimal. Since water is in such short supply, caravans sometimes preferred to travel during the winter. Because the oases were spaced further apart, the southern route of the Silk Road was more difficult to travel than the northern route, but the southern route was less populated with bandits. As a result, travelers often decided to take the southern route.
The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored here. The soil is rich and productive and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford a thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful. Horses are bred there. The inhabitants' skill in the arts and trades exceeds that of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate and the people brave and energetic.

Background: After crossing the Gobi and Taklimakan deserts, travelers on the Silk Road's northern route had to traverse the rugged Pamir Mountains in Central Asia before arriving at this bustling city. Today, Marakanda is called Samarkand, a city in Uzbekistan.

Many of the markets of Marakanda sold rugs, which were made by crafts people in the surrounding areas. For example, some of the rugs came from the city of Khotan. These vividly colored rugs combined Chinese and Central Asian designs and often featured metallic thread. The city of Samarkand (formerly Marakanda) remains a vibrant urban area in the nation of Uzbekistan. Its economy is based on cotton.