

## 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.

