

## *Silk Road: A History*

### *Course Outline*

**Week 1 Landscapes.** The network of trade routes that became known as the Silk Road linked the plains of China with the eastern edges of Europe. This unit explores the challenging landscapes (vast deserts and daunting mountain ranges) the Silk Road crossed.

**Week 2 The Journey Begins.** From about 9,500 BCE, crops such as wheat and barley were cultivated around the eastern Mediterranean. Farming spread from Iran and areas east of the Caspian Sea to Inner Asia. This unit examines early contacts between China and Central Asian cultures, the development of road networks in ancient Persia, and the influence of the campaigns of Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE).

**Week 3 Silk & Horses.** History of silk production and silk's key role in the evolution of the Silk Road. Long before the advent of the Silk Road, nomadic horse breeders used routes across the steppes north of the Caspian Sea to trade with other cultures. The trade in horses became a crucial part of the development of the Silk Road.

**Week 4 Buddhism.** Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) was born in India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. As a young man, the Buddha rejected his wealth and privilege and began wandering in search of freedom and truth. His community of followers rapidly expanded and Buddhism spread throughout India. Buddhist beliefs gradually extended east along the Silk Road to China.

**Week 5 Dynasties.** Early ruling dynasties of China arose along the Yellow River. Following the downfall of the Shang dynasty (ruled from c.1600-1100 BCE) a range of kingdoms came together to form a single state with a distinctive political core – the concept of the wise ruler. At its peak the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) ruled an empire that stretched from China to the Pamir Mountains far to the west. The Han opened the Silk Road to trade with the West.

**Week 6 Byzantium/Constantinople.** Han rulers sent envoys to Central Asia, where they visited places such as Afghanistan and northern Persia. Sogdian merchants spread Buddhist beliefs along the Silk Road. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE powerful Sasanian rulers controlled Persia. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE Persia was at war with the Byzantines. This unit includes a consideration of the importance of the Byzantine Empire to the development of the Silk Road.

**Week 7 Christianity and Islam.** Bubonic plague brought death and economic decline to many civilizations, including the Byzantine Empire, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Christian beliefs had spread along the Silk Road to areas of Asia by the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As Persian and Byzantine armies clashed in the Middle East in 610 CE, a trader named Muhammad began to receive revelations from God near Mecca, in the southern Arabian Peninsula.

**Week 8 Sea Traders.** Navigation across the northern part of the Indian Ocean probably began by around 5,000 BCE. Around the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, a great expansion of international trade took place, driven by demand for luxury goods from ancient Rome. Trade from India to Rome became increasingly important. Ships also sailed from India to Southeast Asia and further East, to trade in spices, precious gems and other exotic goods.

**Week 9 Genghis Khan.** Genghis Khan was born in 1162 CE. In 1186 CE, he was elected Khan (tribal leader) of the Mongols. By 1206 he had united feuding tribes into an entity known as the Mongols. Genghis Khan died in 1227. His sons subjugated the Steppes and advanced deep into the territory now known as Europe.

**Week 10 Marco Polo.** Born in Venice, Marco Polo (1254-1324) learned his mercantile trade from his father and uncle. In 1271, he accompanied them on a journey to Asia. The Polos returned to Venice in 1295, bringing gemstones and other treasures from the East. An account of Marco's journey, known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, became widely known throughout Europe.

**Week 11 The Great Game.** The "Great Game" was a political and diplomatic rivalry between the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British and Russian empires over control of Central Asia. Russia feared British economic and military advances in Central Asia. Britain was determined to protect its "jewel in the crown," India, from perceived Russian threats. Mutual distrust resulted in constant risks of war between the two empires.

**Week 12 Treasure Hunters.** In time, Silk Road trade declined and the route's oases and settlements disappeared below drifting sands and were forgotten for a millennium. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, tales of lost, treasure-filled desert cities spread. Soon, explorers vied to find and carry away priceless artifacts long hidden beneath the sands.

**Week 13 The New Silk Road.** China's Belt and Road initiative, launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, is one of the world's most ambitious and far-reaching building projects. Originally designed to link East Asia and Europe through material infrastructure, the project has expanded to Africa, South America and other countries, substantially increasing China's economic and political influence.