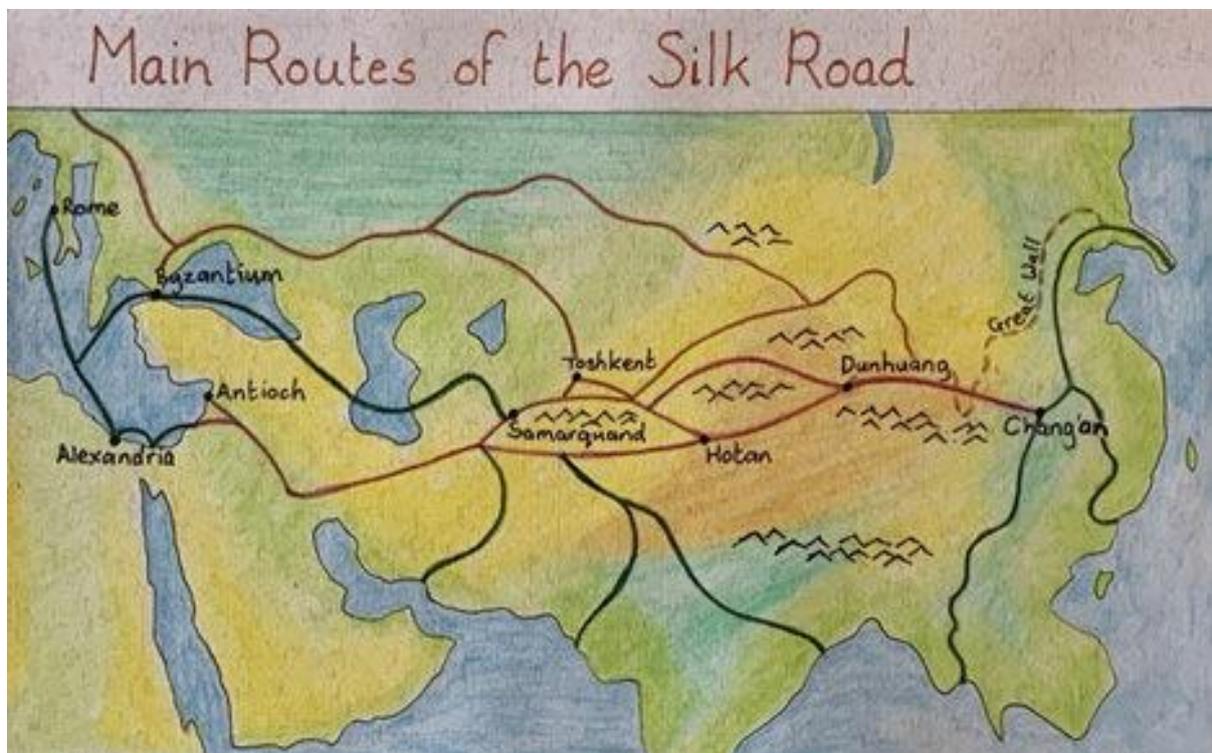


Thread of Time - A History of Silk by Clive Garner

Part 2: DEVELOPMENT OF THE SILK ROAD

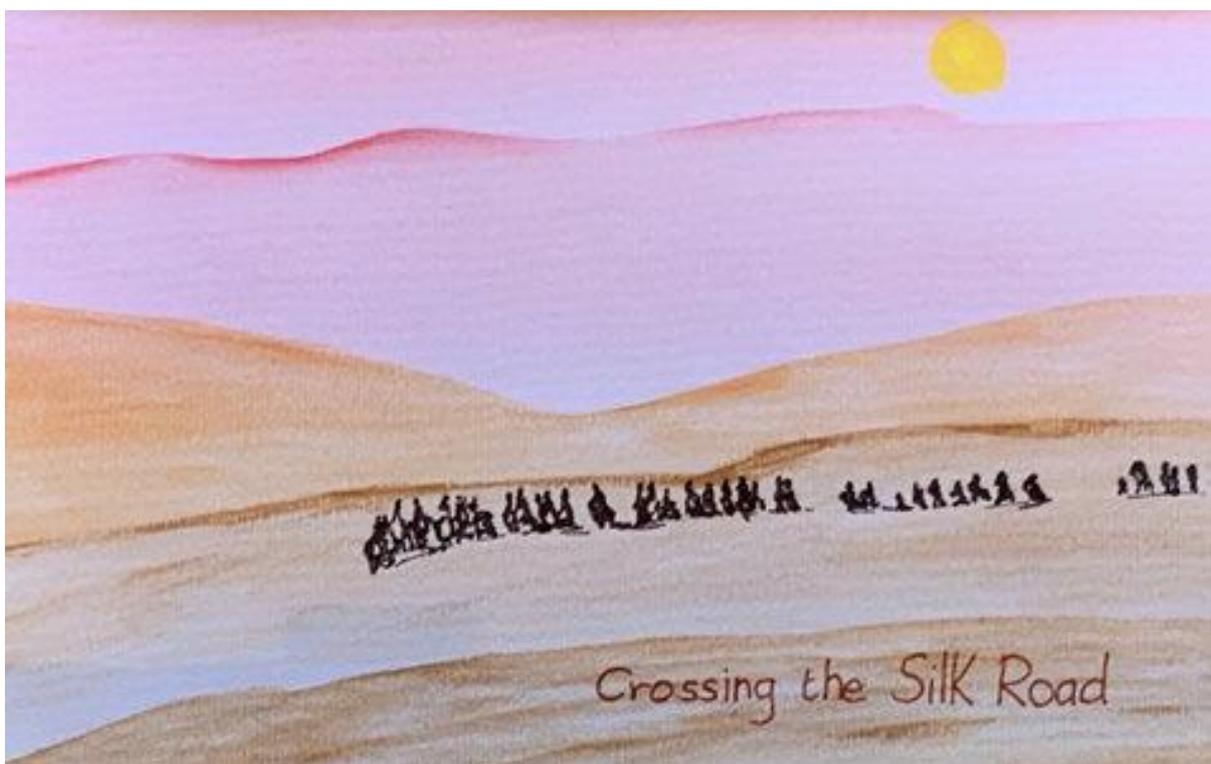
For nearly 2000 years after the discovery of silk, China continued to develop unaffected by outsiders. A complex society was maintained with the ruler holding absolute authority within a rigid class structure. In practice, a group of courtiers acted as advisers but the final word rested with the emperor. All aspects of society were carefully managed thus ensuring self sufficiency. Consequently, there was no need for foreign trade. It wasn't until the time of the Zhou Dynasty, which lasted from 1046-256BC that things began to change. It was a period of conflict as the surrounding tribes were either controlled, eliminated or taken over. It is also when the first known trade with the Ancient Greeks took place, during the 5th century BC. Troubles continued and by 329BC a force had gathered on the western borders of China that threatened an invasion the Zhou would not have been able to stop.



Alexander the Great had established a base in the Fergana Valley of Neb (modern Tajikistan) near the Chinese border. Undoubtedly, Alexander's plan was to build up his forces at his new base and then launch an invasion of China. He had been phenomenally successful in his career thus far and there appeared nothing to stop him. His brilliance as

a military strategist, the loyalty of his troops and sheer good fortune led to him never losing a battle and in six years crushing the Persian Empire. His drive forward came to rest when he was 27 years old and at the height of his powers he established Alexandria Eschate. However, just six years later, in 323BC Alexander the Great died from a fever, the exact causes of which are unclear. At the time of his death, Alexander's empire covered an area of about two million square miles and was criss-crossed with trade routes. This existing network must have ultimately contributed to the success of The Silk Road once the Chinese realised the advantages of international trade.

Although the threat of invasion from the west subsided, a new threat emerged from the north. A group of Mongolian nomadic tribes known as The Xiongnu, became a constant nuisance to the Qin Dynasty between 221 and 206BC. Raiding parties frequently attacked border towns and villages gaining footholds in Chinese territory and stretching the resources of the defending army. The Xiongnu were excellent horsemen who could easily out manoeuvre the smaller Chinese chariots. The capital was moved to Chang-an, modern day Xian, the home of The Terracotta Warriors. A start was made on building The Great Wall but the instability did not diminish the growing international trade. It was during this period that foreign trade reached Rome completing the extensive network of trade routes. Merchants would set out from the capital, Ch'ang-an, a city with a population of 2,000,000, in large convoys and make their way through often difficult and sometimes hostile terrain carrying their valuable cargoes.



No one travelled alone - it just wasn't safe. Bandits were a frequent threat. Treacherous desert sands, snow capped mountains and unpredictable weather were some of the natural hazards to be faced. In towns the merchants passed through, locals demanded tolls to ensure safe passage. Consequently, few people travelled the whole route and trading posts were established along the way. The routes got longer as the merchants travelled further into foreign lands until they eventually reached the Mediterranean Sea a distance of 8,000km (5,000miles). Ultimately, the routes collectively became known as the "Silk Road". As the name suggests, silk was the most important of the traded commodities. It was a unique product that China gave, or to be more accurate, sold to the world.

In 206 BC, the Han Dynasty began and was to become one of China's longest, lasting until 220AD. It was also a time of great innovation. Among the many inventions were the compass, the wheelbarrow, paper, the stern post rudder and the seismograph. There were also significant advances made in medicine, music and astronomy. The Great Wall was extended to provide greater security from the increasing attacks of the Xionghu. Eventually, during the reign of Emperor Wu (141-87BC), a determined effort was made to solve the problem of the Xionghu. Large battle horses were imported from the Ferghana Valley and Chinese troops were trained in their use. In 71BC the Xionghu tribes were finally defeated. With its borders once again secure and the advantages of foreign trade realised the Han dynasty looked west and saw a wealth of opportunities. China held an array of luxury goods with which to tempt westerners including precious stones, perfumes, exotic plants and of course, silk.

By the beginning of the first century of the common era, China had well and truly entered the world of international trade. With secure borders, a stable system of government, supply routes in place and commodities to trade, particularly silk, China was ready for the economic boom that was about to occur.