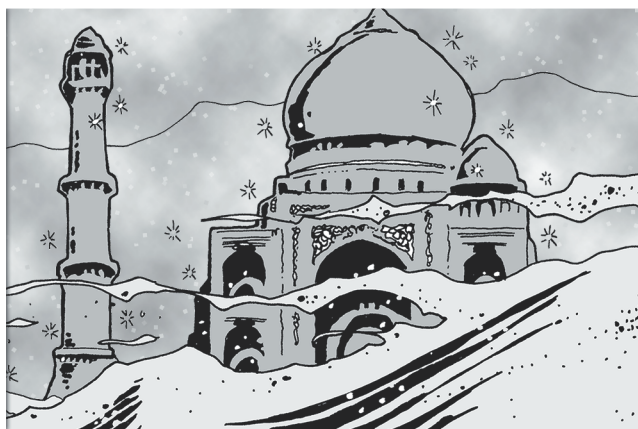


GURPS®

Fourth Edition

Hot Spots:™

THE SILK ROAD™



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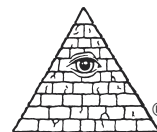
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*Who is willing to accept our commission to go to the Western
Heaven to visit the Buddha and fetch the scriptures?*

– Journey to the West, Chapter 12

INTRODUCTION

When archaeologists recently excavated fifth century A.D. tombs in southern Japan, they discovered a number of glass objects – dishes and layered gold-and-glass beads. They are of Mediterranean origin, predating the appearance of blown-glass manufacture in Asia. But those pieces of glass are not unique in the distance they traveled. Half a world away, in Helgo, Sweden, a sixth-century bronze Buddha figurine from northern India was found in a Viking burial, while in the treasury of the Basilica of St. Servatius in Maastricht, a piece of Chinese silk believed to date to the Tang dynasty lines a reliquary. How did these tiny but precious artifacts make their way across thousands of miles from where they were made, across countless physical and cultural barriers?

The answer lies in a storied collection of trade routes. As early as the second century B.C., nations on either end of the Eurasian land mass traded with one another. They traded

indirectly, with goods making a long series of relays over mountains, through deserts, and passing between countless hands across several different civilizations on their way to their final destination. The paths these goods followed have come to be called the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was a transcontinental highway, supporting traffic in both goods and ideas. It encompassed, at various times, the furthest northeastern extent of classical Greek civilization, the easternmost extent of the Islamic caliphate, and the westernmost extent of Chinese authority. It provided a crossroads for the Old World, where people and goods of every conceivable origin and character might sit side by side.

For all that, the Silk Road wasn't a paved road, a well-blazed trail, or even a single path. It was a collection of shifting routes connecting important landmarks: desert oases, camps for travelers, mountain passes, narrow stretches of easily traveled land bracketed by more forbidding terrain, and religious monuments providing points of reference and places to stay along the trail. The position of those landmarks and conditions between them imposed a certain logic on the journey, but there were still many dividing and recombining paths one could follow, should any route be blocked.

This supplement deals with the traditional Central Asian core of the Silk Road, a desert area in modern western China just north of Tibet, and its important adjacent territories. This region links most major Old World civilizations either directly or a step or two removed. Though trade along the route began at the end of the second century B.C., and it continued to carry some traffic at least into the 14th century A.D., this volume focuses on the period from the second century A.D. (when the Silk Road acquired an existence separate from the direct Chinese control which initiated that phase of its use) to the 10th century (when the collapse of the Tang dynasty marked the beginning of a long decline). This period encompasses a sort of golden age of the Silk Road, when it saw its greatest dominance of East-West trade, most active cultural exchanges, and greatest possibilities for adventure.

ABOUT GURPS

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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

RECOMMENDED WORKS

While this work stands essentially alone, it covers territories touching on those discussed in **GURPS Arabian Nights**, **GURPS China**, **GURPS Crusades**, and **GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.** A number of crossovers with other works are discussed in Chapter 6.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby received degrees in anthropology and archaeology before becoming a computer programmer. He currently works for an international healthcare corporation and has been known to return from the East bearing a cargo of silk and spices. He lives with his wife who is a goddess of mercy, a son who is full of filial piety, and several dogs who get lost easily.

CHAPTER ONE

GEOGRAPHY

Hui Su went by each camel in turn, tugging on straps and checking knots and buckles to make sure everything was secure. He knew nothing about packing animals, really, but he felt he had to make a show of it so the servants didn't get any ideas. Or perhaps he wanted to spend just a little more time in the shade of the poplar trees before heading off into the desert for . . . well, the gods alone knew how long, and they certainly weren't telling him.

"The camels are eager to be on their way," Hui Ang suggested. "They rejoice in the sand, don't you think?" His sister had always had a peculiar way of looking at things. Her otherworldly manner led naturally to ordination as a Buddhist nun, and she retained a knack since childhood of dragging others along with her on her strange paths of thought.

"But what about the mountains?"

"Surely they wish to see the mountains. Few camels can say they've climbed such slopes."

Hui Su sighed. They'd already been months on the road, and they'd really only just started. India was *still* a year away, and it was his duty to protect his sister there and back. Now it was time to say farewell to Mogao and leave China behind.

Although silk reached the West by many routes over land and sea in Classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Silk Road, strictly defined, means a series of Central Asian land routes between China on one side and India and the Middle East (and, by extension, Europe) on the other. This covers a stretch of territory which encompasses several feeder routes on the eastern frontier of Persia and the northern frontier of India. Routes narrow to a few alternative paths passing north of Tibet, stretching east to the Chinese interior. These regions are unfamiliar to most Westerners and have gone through many names over the centuries, so some orientation is in order.

SEIDENSTRAÙE

"Silk Road" – or, to some scholars, "Silk Roads," to emphasize that there were multiple routes – is like "Dark Ages" or "Byzantine Empire" – it was never used by anyone directly involved in it. The name, "Seidenstraße" in the original German, was coined in 1877 by the geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of that *other* Baron von Richthofen) to refer to the Central Asian core of the silk route rather than, as many later scholars have used it, all of the routes by which goods traveled between China and the

West, encompassing multiple land and sea routes stretching entirely across the Old World. This work, however, sticks fairly close to von Richthofen's original use.

While the Silk Road was in use, it's likely that too few people had occasion to think of the entire route by which exotic goods traveled between East and West to bother labeling it. The closest it came to having a name is that when referring to the part of the Silk Road under their control, the Chinese spoke of the "Western Regions."

LANDS OF THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road can be divided into three sections: the frontiers of Western and Muslim civilization to the west, the frontiers of China to the east, and the rough, mountainous lands of Central Asia in between. For an overview map of Central Asia, see p. 6. For detailed maps, see pp. 10-12, with maps focusing on the Tarim Basin on pp. 13-15.

THE EASTERN APPROACHES

The eastern approaches to the Silk Road start in an imperial capital in the midst of fertile plains and become progressively less hospitable from there. Classically, the Silk Road begins in the city of Chang'An (modern Xi'An), about 300 miles southeast of the geographical center of modern China. From there, the Silk Road leads north and west.

Northwestern China is characterized by steppes and the Gobi Desert. This is poor terrain for large cities, but not bad for horse-riding nomads. The approaches to the Central Asian highlands are bound on the north and south by forbidding terrain – the Qilian Shan to the south and the Gobi Desert to the north – defining a natural corridor for east-west travel, called the Hexi Corridor. This strip could be as narrow as a few tens of miles wide for much of its length. As much as possible, the Chinese extended the Great Wall to protect the corridor, and they maintained garrison towns built on oases to control the passage. These garrisons monitored the Great Wall and the territory farther west beyond the wall's end. The trip from the border to the fertile eastern half of China was still 700 or 800 miles of lightly populated country often vulnerable to raids.

THE HIGHLANDS

The highlands of Central Asia are outlined by a series of mountain ranges which form a sort of curving three-pronged fork with the points facing east. The Pamir and Hindu Kush ranges form the base of the fork in a region overlapping modern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with the Hindu Kush curving off to the southwest into Afghanistan. From this base, the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayas form the southern prong of the fork, a formidable natural barrier to the Indian subcontinent. The Kunlun Mountains form the middle prong. The Tibetan Plateau (a cold, dry plain larger than Alaska and Texas combined) lies between these prongs.

The Tien Shan forms the northern prong. The Kunlun and the Tien Shan surround the Tarim Basin, which exists as the central link in the Silk Road. The Tarim Basin is both lower and smaller than the Tibetan plateau (about a third as large). It is also exceptionally dry; most of the Tarim Basin is taken up by the formidable Taklamakan Desert, a region of tall, shifting sand dunes. The desert is, depending on whom one asks, either a neighbor or an extension of the adjacent Gobi Desert to the east. The name translates roughly as “the place of no return.” Runoff from the mountains feeds a few rivers around the edge and cutting across the center (which dry up seasonally) and Lop Nor (a small area of salty lakes and marsh at its eastern end).

THE WESTERN APPROACHES

Once past the Central Asian highlands, Silk Road routes fan out in several directions. To the west, most paths lead through a region important for two overlapping territories: Bactria and Sogdiana, which is sometimes called Transoxiana. The first two names are derived from local names in the ancestors of modern Farsi and Pashto, while the third is derived from Latin, meaning “beyond the Oxus River.” This region is west of the Pamir Mountains and north of the Hindu Kush, encompassing what is now Northern Afghanistan and neighboring parts of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. This is where the great mountain ranges of Central Asia descend toward the plains of Western Asia, extending to the Caspian Sea. Classically, Bactria is the southeastern corner of this region. Near its sources in the mountains, the Oxus cuts Bactria in half, flowing from southeast to northwest and on to the Aral Sea. Sogdiana occupies the lands north and east of the Oxus, putting it immediately adjacent to or overlapping Bactria. To the south and west of the highlands, various mountains and rivers stand between the highlands and India, but not as an insurmountable barrier. Several passes cut through the mountains into Tibet and the Indus River valley.

[Samarkand] is 20 li or so in circuit. It is completely enclosed by rugged land and very populous. The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored up here.

– Xuanzang, Record of the Western Regions

PRONUNCIATION

Chinese names require special attention to pronounce them correctly. Chinese contains a number of consonants which aren't used in English. More precisely, perhaps, they exist but are not heard as distinct sounds by native English speakers unfamiliar with other languages, and standard systems of transliteration, such as the Pinyin system used in this supplement, can only approximate them. Though most letters represent, or are at least close to, their English-language sounds, there are several notable exceptions. For example, in Chinese words used in this volume, both p and b may sound, to the Western ear, like the same letter, but the former is aspirated (spoken with a strong puff of air, as is frequently the case at the beginning of a word in English) while the latter is not (without a puff of air, as in the middle of a word). Very roughly speaking, when two letters can be used for the same consonant, the one closer to the letter which usually would be used in English is aspirated while the other isn't. Here are several consonants which might be pronounced in ways unexpected to a native English speaker:

D: Pronounced “t.” The city of Dunhuang, the last Chinese city travelers would pass through on their way west, is pronounced “Tun-huang.”

G: Pronounced “k.” Guanyin, a Chinese mythological figure, is pronounced “Kuan-yin.”

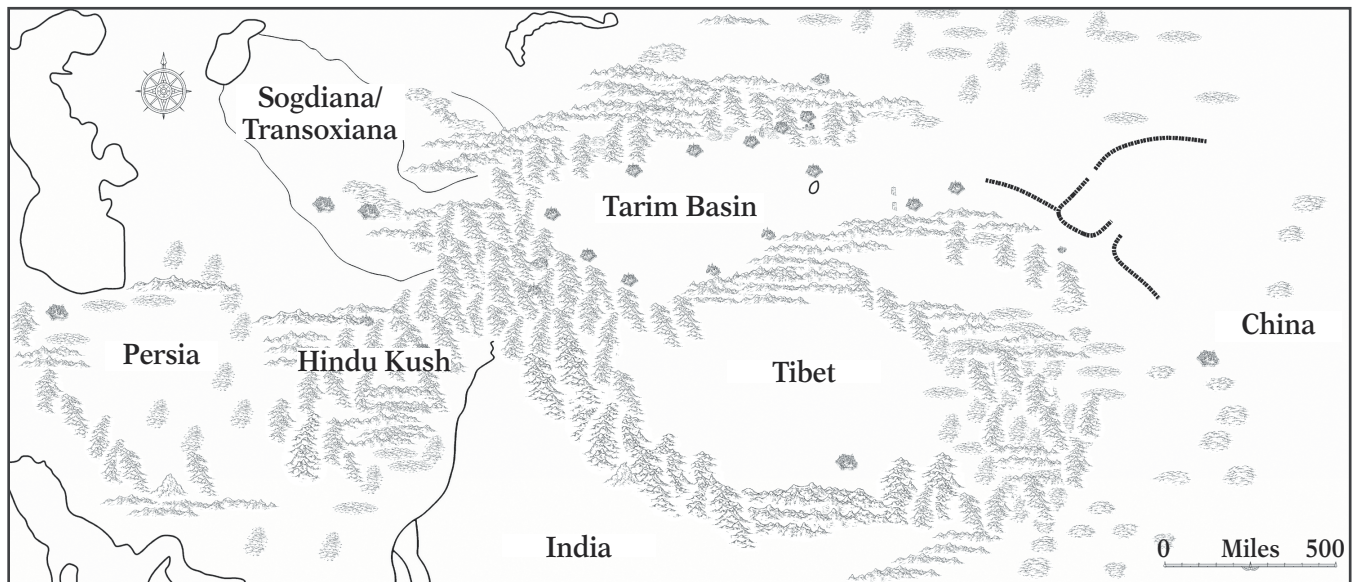
J and Q: Pronounced like “ch.” Qin, the name of an early Chinese imperial dynasty, is pronounced “Chin.”

X: Pronounced like “sh.” The Hexi Corridor, an important feeder route from the Chinese heartland to Central Asia, is pronounced “Hay-she.”

Z: Pronounced like “ts.” Xuanzang, a notable traveler on the Silk Road, is pronounced “Shuan-tsang.”

Finally, “Uighur,” an ethnic group which occupied an important part of the Silk Road (and is sometimes spelled Uyghur), is pronounced “WE-gur.”

Beyond that lie the ultimate markets. The western reaches of the Silk Road are reasonably well-occupied. Indeed, Persia, Mesopotamia, and the Eastern Mediterranean are hotbeds of civilization. Still, they aren't necessarily easy routes. Much of the Near East south and east of Anatolia – including most of Syria, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Levant – is desert punctuated with mountain ranges. Persia is bordered on its north and west by mountains and large parts of its interior are desert or near-desert, and those deserts extend, with some interruptions, into India. And the closer travelers get to Central Asia, the more mountainous the land becomes.



MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA, OVERVIEW

For a larger, detailed set of maps of this area and of the Tarim Basin, see pp. 10-15.

CLIMATE AND LAND USE

The vast majority of the Silk Road, from Kabul in Afghanistan to Dunhuang at China's classical western border, sees extremes of temperature through the course of the year, with hot summers and cold winters. Average summer highs are over 90°F along most of the route and over 100°F in parts of the Tarim Basin. Average winter lows range from 19°F in Kabul to -10°F in Kashgar, a city at the western end of the Tarim Basin. Extremes of temperature through the course of the day are common in desert areas, with a difference in daytime highs and nighttime lows of 40°F or more being unremarkable.

In addition to extremes of temperature, the route is very dry. Kabul and Samarkand average about an inch of precipitation per month, while Kashgar and Dunhuang are lucky to get an inch of rain per *year*. Ironically, though, flash flooding can be an issue on some parts of the Silk Road, notably in the Tarim Basin. The high mountain elevations get much more precipitation than the desert floor, and the rocky, vegetation-poor soil does little to hold moisture. Runoff down their slopes during the rainy early spring can send large quantities of water to the lower elevations in a very short period.

Though much of the Silk Road is desert, it's not all desert of the same qualities. The Taklamakan is one of the largest sand deserts in the world and contains among the tallest sand dunes found anywhere, up to 1,700' high. Adjacent regions, however, may be gravel desert or dotted with scrubby vegetation. Many areas on the eastern approaches to the Taklamakan are cluttered with *yardangs*. These are hills and other rocky outcrops carved into bizarre shapes by weathering resulting from millennia of blowing sand and dust. Small variations in microclimate and hardness of rock can result in towers, horizontal ridges and deep grooves, and other variations in shape. Such shapes may be suggestive of other objects (giants, animals, cities, etc.), acquire local names, and become landmarks.

They are generally longer in the direction of prevailing winds than they are wide.

One other peculiar phenomenon of the Taklamakan is its "singing sands." In certain spots around the desert, notably around Dunhuang, the downhill flow of sand caused by the wind or people moving along the ridge of a dune produces a sort of droning hum. This can become quite loud at times, passing 100 decibels. A local might compare the sound to deep horns, groaning, or throat singing (p. 37), but to the modern ear, it might sound more like the drone of an airplane or other large engine. One could be forgiven for suspecting a supernatural presence.

Where it can be found, vegetation is largely tough and low growing, with small, water-conserving leaves; even grasses are sparse in many areas. Many plants in the Afghan regions are spiny or filled with pungent essential oils. Although this makes them unpleasant to travel through, they have culinary and medicinal uses. Plants in the Tarim Basin can tolerate a great deal of salt. Among the most common are tamarisk trees (an evergreen, not to be confused with the fruit-producing tamarind). These trees are used for lumber, fuel, and thatching. However, areas immediately around rivers have a larger quantity of more diverse greenery, and moderate altitudes, particularly on the western side, may have large stands of trees, notably poplar (which can grow very deep root systems and is therefore relatively drought-resistant) and willow.

Despite the lack of rainfall, many places along the main routes see significant amounts of agriculture. Water is captured during the brief rainy seasons and directed into natural and artificial aquifers. Deep wells allow farmers to irrigate enough fields to support significant towns and cities along the route. Many locations are also notable producers of fruits and nuts. Away from the main routes, the land can be quite desolate.

Animals of the region are likewise generally adapted for hot, dry conditions; mostly active at night; and often with long ears or other features which allow efficient heat control. Nevertheless, with little water and vegetation, animal life is sparse. Most wildlife is small: wild gerbils, the jerboa (a hopping rodent resembling a cross between a rabbit and a kangaroo), insectivorous bats, and a species of hedgehog. Central Asia is also home to a great many birds, including a wide variety of hawks and eagles which are revered by many steppe nomads. Among the largest wild animals are varieties of deer and gazelle and a species of wild donkey. Camels are of the Bactrian (two-humped) variety; while camels have long been domesticated, some still exist in the wild. Naturally, a few predators live here as well: foxes, wolves, and even some tigers. There are a few species of venomous snakes, which prey primarily on rodents. Their venom is unpleasant, causing pain and disorientation for several hours, but is rarely deadly. The edges of the region are home to such notable animals as Pashmina goats, from the mountains of northern India, which produce exceptionally fine wool, and the Asian cheetah, with a range on the eastern end of the Persian sphere of influence. (Stats for many of these animals can be found on p. B455-460. Wild camels and donkeys can be treated as their domesticated counterparts on p. B459, but have the Wild Animal meta-trait instead of Domestic Animal.)

TRAVEL CONDITIONS

Most of the terrain of the Silk Road is absurdly poor for travel; the route survived by virtue of other routes being even worse. A few significant areas are of Average terrain (see p. B351), notably along the Hexi Corridor and in more favorable areas of the Tarim Basin. However, much of it is predominantly Bad (for example, most of the Tarim Basin and large stretches of routes through the mountains). The steep dunes of the Taklamakan Desert are Bad or Very Bad, as are any mountain passes in winter and the marshes around Lop Nor in summer. The most traveled routes are often long, winding paths cobbled together from small patches of Average terrain, dropping to Bad here and there.

The land is also not particularly good to live off of. The route is largely desert, so travelers need a lot of water (five quarts per day in warmer weather; see p. B426), and heat stroke and sunburn are very real dangers (p. B434). Most regions require either Mountain or Desert specialties of Survival skill. The route primarily has Poor environmental quality (see *GURPS Low Tech Companion 3: Daily Life and Economics*, p. 4), sometimes dropping to Very Poor or even Desolate in the Taklamakan and other deserts. Individual oases are, thankfully, at least Typical and often Good.

Significant parts of the Silk Road, like the Hexi Corridor and the major passes, are sufficiently constrained or

well-marked that skill rolls for navigation are unnecessary. However, desert regions are often trackless, or have tracks which are quickly blown over with sand. In those conditions, travelers should roll daily against Navigation or, where applicable, Area Knowledge. In inhabited areas, visitors can ask a local for directions; make a reaction roll. On a Good or better reaction, make a roll against the native's Area Knowledge and, on a success, give the travelers +2 to Navigation. On a Neutral or Poor reaction, the native gives uselessly vague directions or pretends not to understand, for no bonus. On a Bad or Very Bad reaction, the native *lies*, giving -4 to Navigation. Make one roll for the *highest* score in the group.

Failure means getting lost; travelers make half a day's progress in one correct cardinal direction but also a half day's progress in another wrong direction (for example, they may follow a generally westerly course as they intend, but go northwest rather than southwest). *Critical* failure means a day traveling in the wrong direction. Every day following that, roll against Navigation, Area Knowledge, or Tracking, or against IQ for someone with Eidetic Memory to figure out the correct direction again.

Sandstorms

The most spectacular danger along most of the route is sandstorms. Most only last two or three hours, but particularly bad ones can last a day or two. At the very least, these storms are noisy and blinding, disorienting travelers and frightening animals. Making progress during a sandstorm is essentially impossible. With no possible points of reference and no way to see obstacles, anyone trying to move ends up going in a random direction and is likely to trip and fall frequently. It's also very easy for a traveler to become separated from his companions and lost in the desert. After the storm is over, changes to the landscape may necessitate a roll against Navigation to figure out the correct course to take.

Keeping animals from running off requires rolls against Animal Handling. This is mostly a problem with animals other than camels, who are usually smart enough to settle down and wait for things to blow over; experienced merchants use huddling camels as shelter from the worst of the wind. Drivers who try to keep their animals in line run the risk of being pulled away from their caravan and, again, becoming lost.

Particularly bad sandstorms are said to be violent enough to cause minor injuries. Blowing sand does 1d-4(0.5) damage per hour (minimum 0), and anyone with exposed eyes must roll against HT or be blinded for 1d hours. Exceptionally severe sandstorms can even cause suffocation (p. B436), typically among people with already-compromised respiratory systems. But rather than direct infliction of damage, the main danger of sandstorms is in keeping travelers from making progress, leading to a quick death in the hot desert.

ROUTES

The Silk Road can be thought of a bit like a river with its source in China, flowing across Central Asia to a broad delta of outlets spreading from northern India to the Mediterranean. However, travelers can't simply get up and go in the right general direction, letting a general flow of traffic

carry them along. Rather, they have to choose between a variety of routes taking them through more or less dangerous territory at different times of year, hitting certain well-established points along the way.

Most imperial Chinese silk is produced in eastern and central China. It makes its way up the Hexi Corridor to one of a small number of fortress towns at the end of the Great Wall in modern Gansu province, notably Dunhuang. The main routes at this point go through mountain passes not far west of the Great Wall and across the Tarim Basin. Or rather, *around* the Tarim Basin. Instead of cutting straight across the Taklamakan Desert, they skirt the northern or southern edge of the stark area in a relay from one oasis town to the next. Though shorter and safer than steppe routes to the north of the Tien Shan, this is still difficult and dangerous.

At the best of times, towns are well-garrisoned with Chinese troops (mostly local soldiers armed and paid in part at Chinese expense and operating under Chinese authority), providing a stable and safe environment throughout. Frequently, though, the oasis towns are at least semi-independent and might be involved in wars with one another or

suffering from organized bandit attacks, leading to more unsafe roads. In addition, travelers have to deal with uncertain water supplies, extreme temperatures, sandstorms, and difficult terrain, including steep slopes, rocky ground, and salt marshes (see *Travel Conditions*, p. 7). The few rivers around the Tarim Basin aren't used for more than local transportation. They are frequently dry or at least too low to be navigable over long distances in the summer and blocked with chunks of dangerous ice in the winter.

Though some points along the southern way allow access to the Tibetan plateau and indirectly to India, most of the trans-Tarim routes eventually end up at Kashgar, where the Kunlun, Tien Shan, and Pamirs meet. From there, caravans have another decision to make, this one a choice of mountain passes. From Kashgar, one might go southwest into Bactria or northwest toward northern Sogdiana. Regardless, both of these routes typically bend thereafter in a more westerly direction toward Samarkand and

Bukhara. However, one might also head south, going into the mountains from Kashgar or even as far east as Khotan, and brave a series of high passes to Gilgit (in modern northern Pakistan) and from there to Kashmir and the rest of India via the Indus River.

At this point, routes become less definite. Once past the Central Asian highlands, goods sent west from Kashgar can be diffused across the rest of the continent and into Europe. Alternatively, they can journey south through Kabul and the Khyber Pass or even to the shores of the Indian Ocean and then back east into India. Goods bound for farther west go across Persia and Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast for shipping into Europe, or sometimes north from Persia to Scandinavia along the Russian rivers which the Vikings use as their major trade routes. These routes also involve considerable travel through deserts and over mountains, but rarely as difficult as the passage through the Central Asian highlands. Still, depending on the conditions of the time, caravans might make for the coasts and send goods by sea options.

ALTERNATE ROUTES

Even before the Silk Road really began, there were alternatives to it. The sea was a possibility, but it was limited by factors such as navigational technology, piracy and warfare, and proximity to sources of desirable goods. Seaborne trade between the Roman world and India, mostly through intermediaries, was low in volume but nevertheless well-established by the time the silk trade was developing between China and the Kushan Empire in Bactria. Shipping went from western India up the Persian Gulf or even the Arabian Sea, bypassing potential troubles in Persia or Mesopotamia. A number of towns including Petra, Palmyra, and Dura-Europos became wealthy as important stops along the line, and the Romans maintained a thriving port at the otherwise desolate site of Berenike on the east coast of Egypt, handling trade with Southern India. However, sea routes to the east of India were much more roundabout and no less risky, so for a few centuries, the land routes had significant utility.

There were alternative land passages as well. The easiest physically was usually also one of the least attractive. Instead of heading through the Tarim Basin, a caravan could go far to the north, along the corridor between the Tien Shan and the Altai Mountains of Mongolia. This route might hug the northern edge of the Tien Shan or cut more or less straight across the wide-open steppes of north-central Asia to the Volga or Don River. Though this avoided some very rough terrain, it was a much longer journey and, moreover, far beyond the reach of civilization. That route had few towns where one might find safety and supplies, and there was an ample supply of nomads who would like nothing better than a rich caravan to raid. Turks carried some trade along this course by the sixth century, but it never had the stability of the Tarim Basin route until the rise of the Mongols.

TRAVEL ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Few people ever see all or even most of the Silk Road, and many of them are lonely travelers. Though a few large diplomatic expeditions involve hundreds of people along with scores of pack animals traversing immense distances, and similarly sized military units are a semi-regular feature of the landscape, most traffic is relatively short-range travel. A merchant might journey between important market towns, or perhaps across the Tarim Basin or the Hexi Corridor, but almost

never the whole length of the route. Many dealers based in Dunhuang, for example, never go farther west than Khotan. Merchants and pilgrims usually travel in small groups. A typical caravan includes fewer than 10 people, plus two or three pack animals per person. And since the Tarim Basin is entirely unpaved, transport is certainly on foot or by animals, not wagons.

Travel across various parts of the Silk Road is seasonal. Passes through the mountains, particularly the high Kunlun and Pamir ranges, are blocked with ice and snow during the winter, restricting travel over the mountains to warmer months. However, spring flooding, the heat and dryness of the deserts in summer, and dangerously marshy terrain around Lop Nor encourage travel across the Tarim Basin during the cooler months. Someone proposing to trek the whole length of the route might have to wait weeks or months to go from one stage of the journey to the next.

Travel through the mountains can be extremely precarious. Some passes, even when clear of snow and ice, are exceptionally narrow. Paths can be wide enough only to let people and nimble animals through in single file. Moreover, many tracks follow the sides of steep mountains, giving travelers a solid wall on one side but a sheer drop on the other. Very narrow passages and gaps created by erosion and small landslides are amended with platforms, called *rafiks*, made from whatever materials are convenient to hand, from masonry slabs to branches and brush (rope suspension bridges would be useful, but are unknown in the Old World at this time). These are liable to damage over time, frequently need repair, and may be even more rickety than they appear.

Though regular travelers such as soldiers and merchants would learn the route by going along it with guides, they would have ample landmarks along the way to keep them on track. There are many distinctive landforms and religious monuments to mark the way. Despite these aids, the Silk Road contains many patches where it's best to stay on well-trodden paths. The Taklamakan Desert is known for shifting sand dunes and any given part of it may look very different one year than it did in a previous one; getting lost is a death sentence.

One of the things that makes the Taklamakan dangerous for lost wayfarers is banditry, a chronic problem along the route though not necessarily a serious one for well-prepared and well-disciplined travelers. The wide-open spaces and distant authorities of the Tarim Basin mean that desperate local residents might lie in wait for unwary individuals – no one will notice one less Sogdian merchant or Chinese monk. However, most of the time, there is safety in numbers. Brigands prefer to vastly outnumber their prey and pick them off at no risk to themselves, so most reports of bandit attacks involve people alone or in pairs, whose bodies are found later by other travelers. A group large enough to look like it can hurt a party of bandits, even if the thieves could ultimately win, is usually safe. Of course, in desperate times or during war, when armies feel entitled to take whatever they can get their hands on, all bets are off.

During good times and in well-supported areas, common routes might be outlined by a series of *caravanserais*, large enclosures where travelers can stop for the night in shelter and possibly with the hope of replenishing provisions. The simplest are just a walled courtyard, probably with a well or cistern, possibly unoccupied by anyone other than passing travelers. Ideally, though, they are combined inns, stables, and warehouses, with resident caretakers and local tradesmen providing services to passers-by. Where they exist, they are staged a reasonable day's travel apart, 10 to 12 miles. However, they can easily be abandoned

in poor economic times or in response to war and banditry, and poor travel conditions can force travelers to take alternate routes which bypass the caravanserais. (For a sample, fictional caravanserais, including a map and suggested residents, see "Return to Ein Arris" in *Pyramid* #3/52: *Low-Tech II*.)

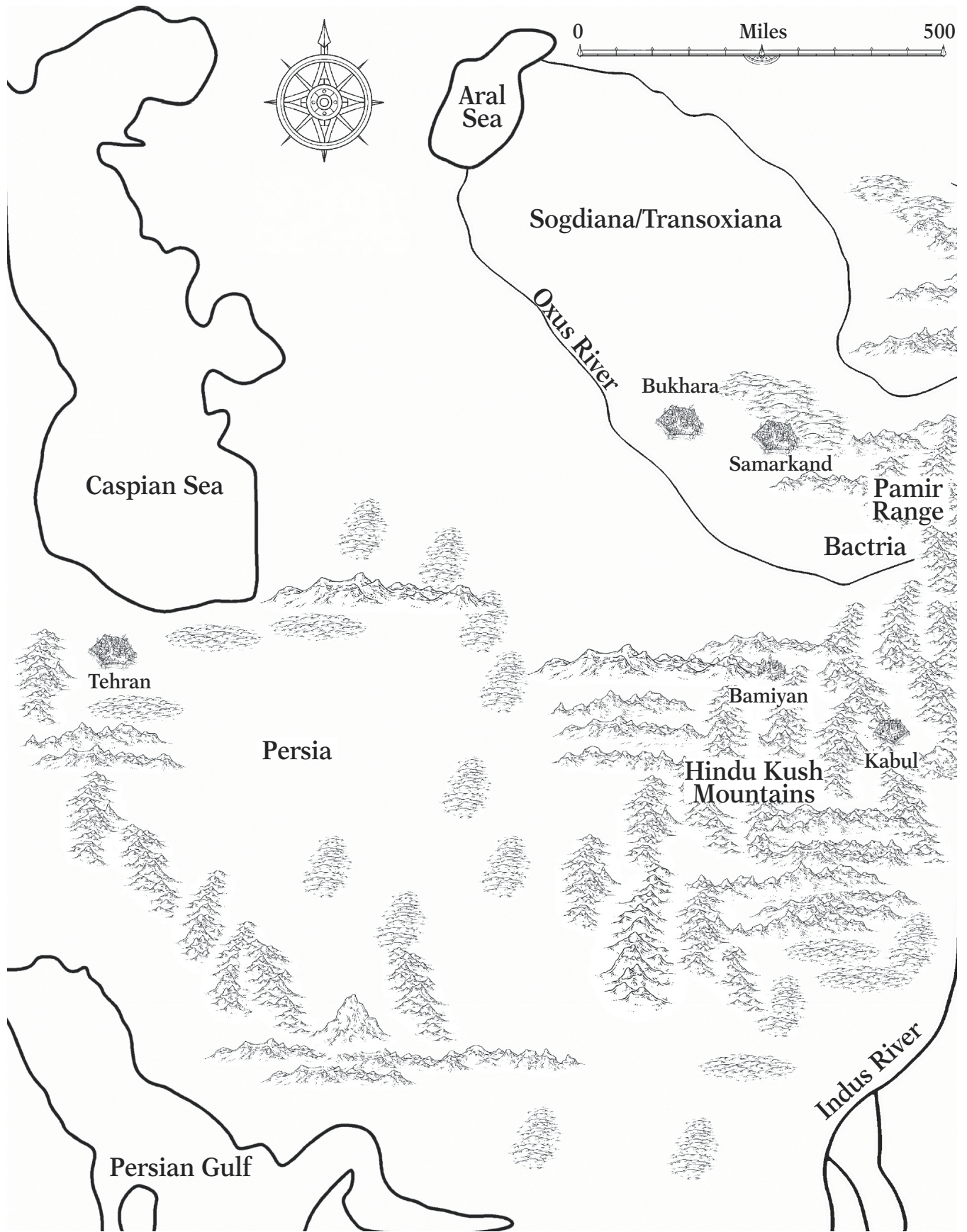
At least during the Tang dynasty, the Chinese maintained a system of stops along major travel routes, but only for official use. They developed an extension of their imperial postal system into the western territories. This system provided a network of stations where government messengers and other official travelers could stay the night and get fresh horses. Along the Silk Road, there were major depots at Kucha, Yanqi, Turfan, and Beiting (a town almost due north of Turfan, just on the other side of the Tien Shan Mountains). These depots are responsible for purchasing hundreds of horses every year locally or from government farms farther east. However, only messengers, diplomats (including visiting foreign diplomats, who are likely accompanied by official guides and minders), and similar travelers with imperial permission could use these facilities.

Unofficial wayfarers journeying through territory under Chinese authority, including just about all merchants and pilgrims, have to carry a sort of passport called a *guosuo*. The *guosuo* contains a description of the traveling party, any animals they are traveling with, and their planned itinerary. This document must be presented to local officials at each new town along the way. Deviations do not necessarily result in punishment; a traveler might, after all, buy or sell animals along the way or modify his route. In this case, officials can issue an amended *guosuo*; indeed, it is common practice to discard an old *guosuo* and issue a new one at each official stop along the way. However, if the issuing official is suspicious of the traveler or in search of bribes, an amended *guosuo* might be issued only after delays and investigations or a little silver changes hands.

At the beginning of the period in question here, the Silk Road is TL2 from end to end. However, during the sixth century, people with TL3 skills and equipment begin to appear, particularly from out of China. Heavier native industries (for example, architecture and civil engineering) may be limited to TL2 capacity, but this is essentially an economic limitation rather than an intellectual one.

Adventure Seed: Dem Bones

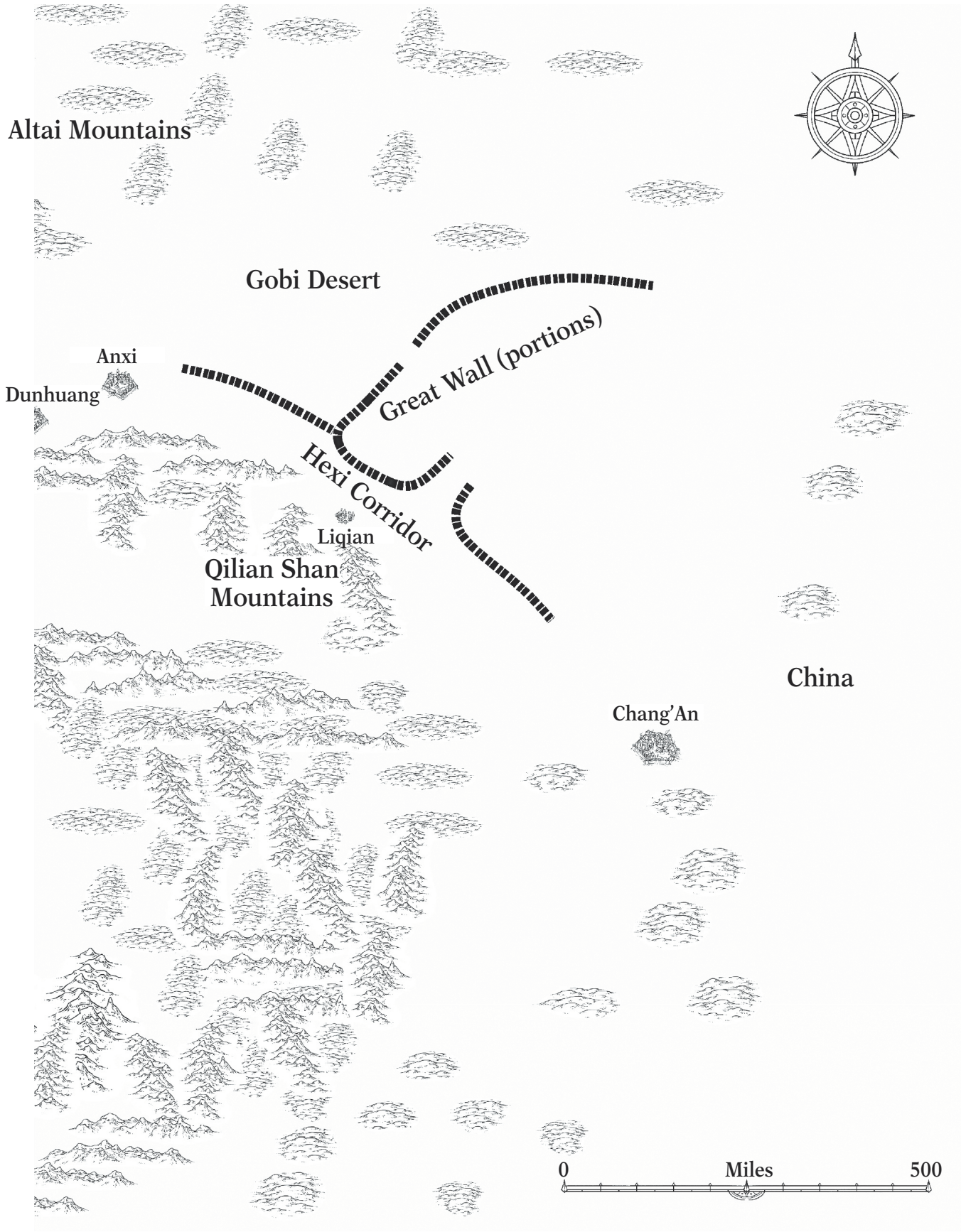
Today, the deserts of Central Asia are booming regions for oil drilling, but they provide another fossil resource: dinosaur remains. The relics of a number of notable dinosaurs have been discovered there, including *Velociraptor*. This could give the otherwise utterly barren Taklamakan a natural resource which specialized customers might want to exploit. Alchemists and other mystics would be willing to spend impressive sums on "dragon bones." Adventurers might be hired to guide, guard, and excavate for such people. Naturally, they might worry that where there are bones, there might be live ones. And what if those fossils of mundane dinosaurs, taken for dragon bones, really *are* dragon bones? A Silk Road campaign could take a sharp turn into the territory of **GURPS Big Lizzie**, **GURPS Lands Out of Time**, and even **GURPS Dragons**.



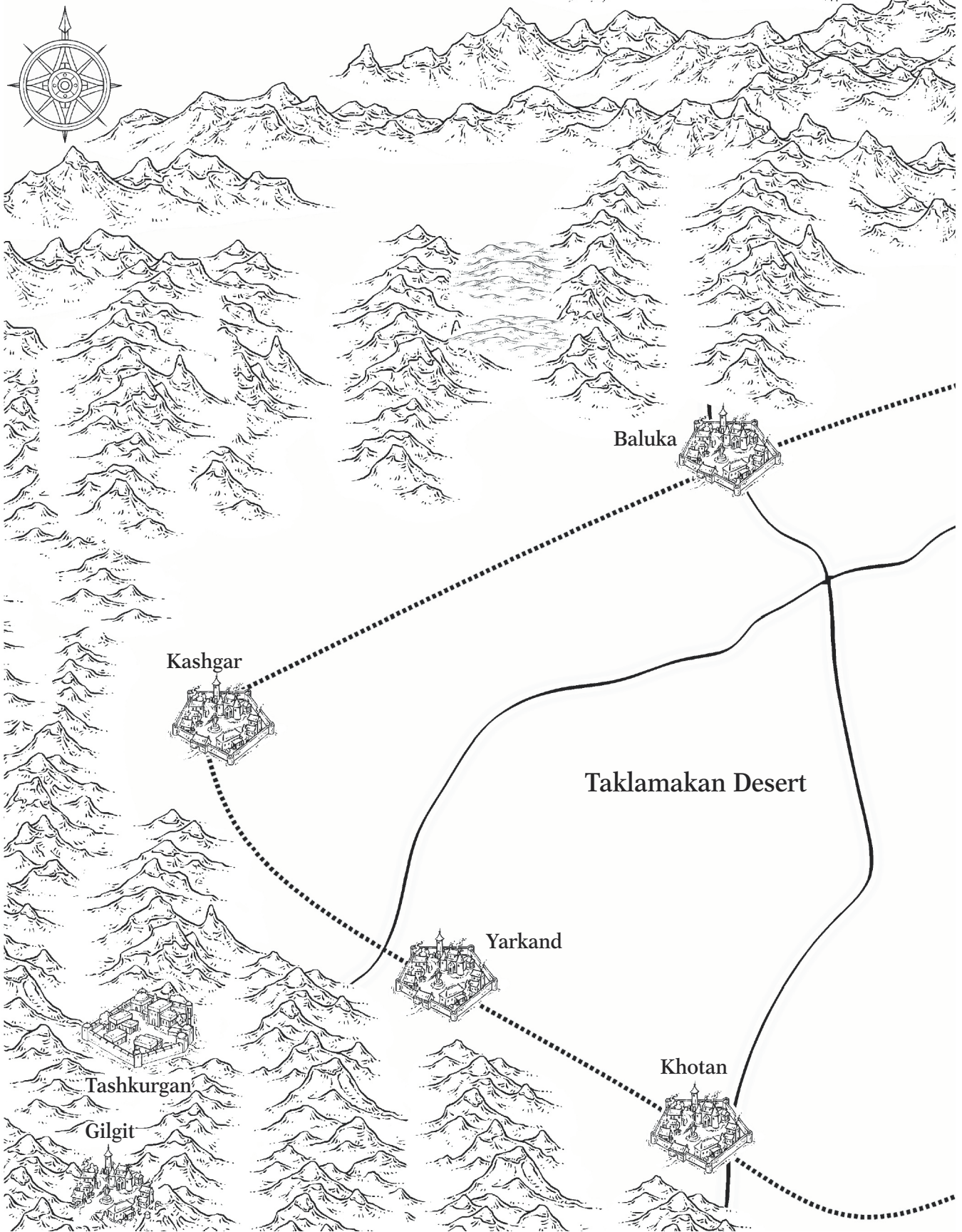
MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA, WEST



MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA, MIDDLE

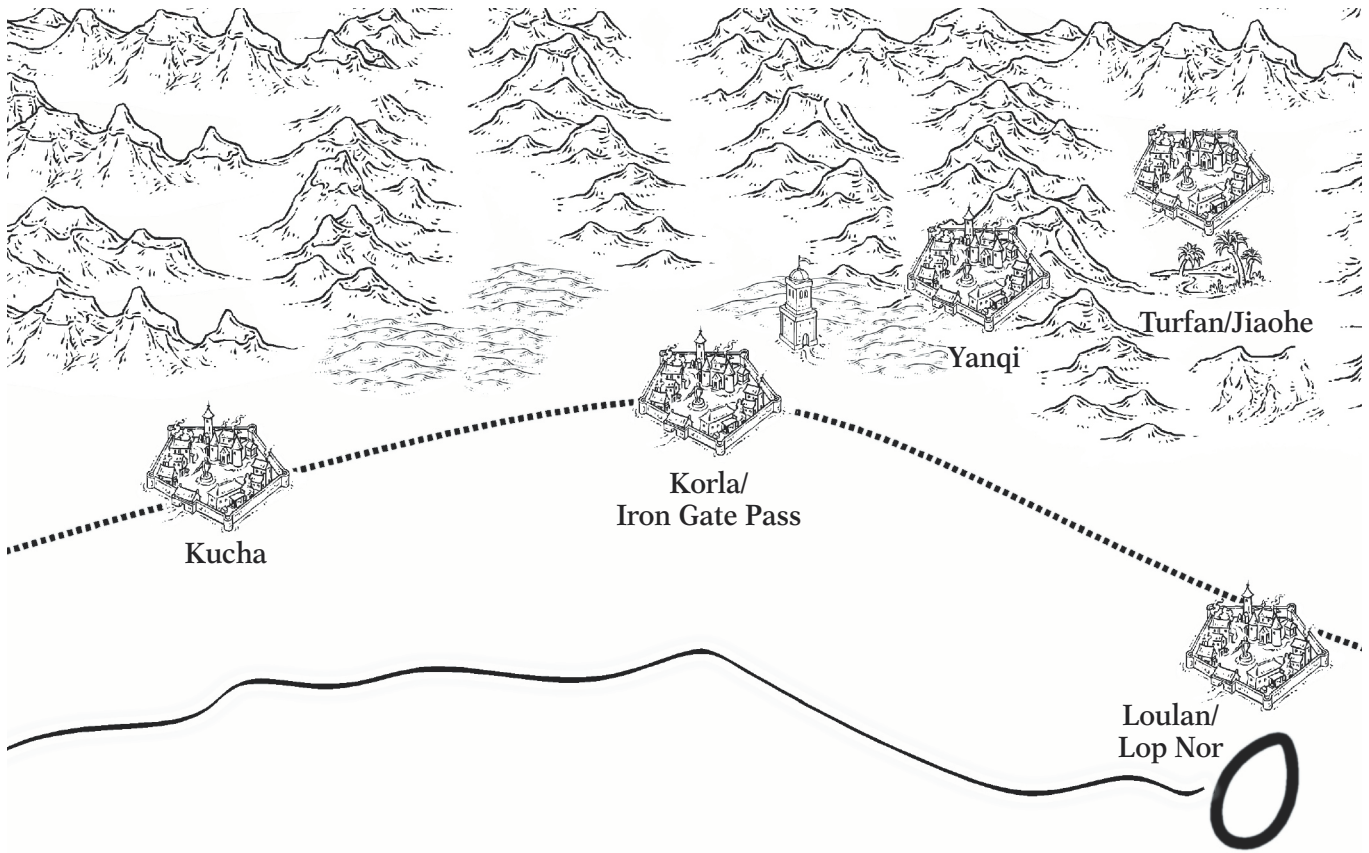


MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA, EAST

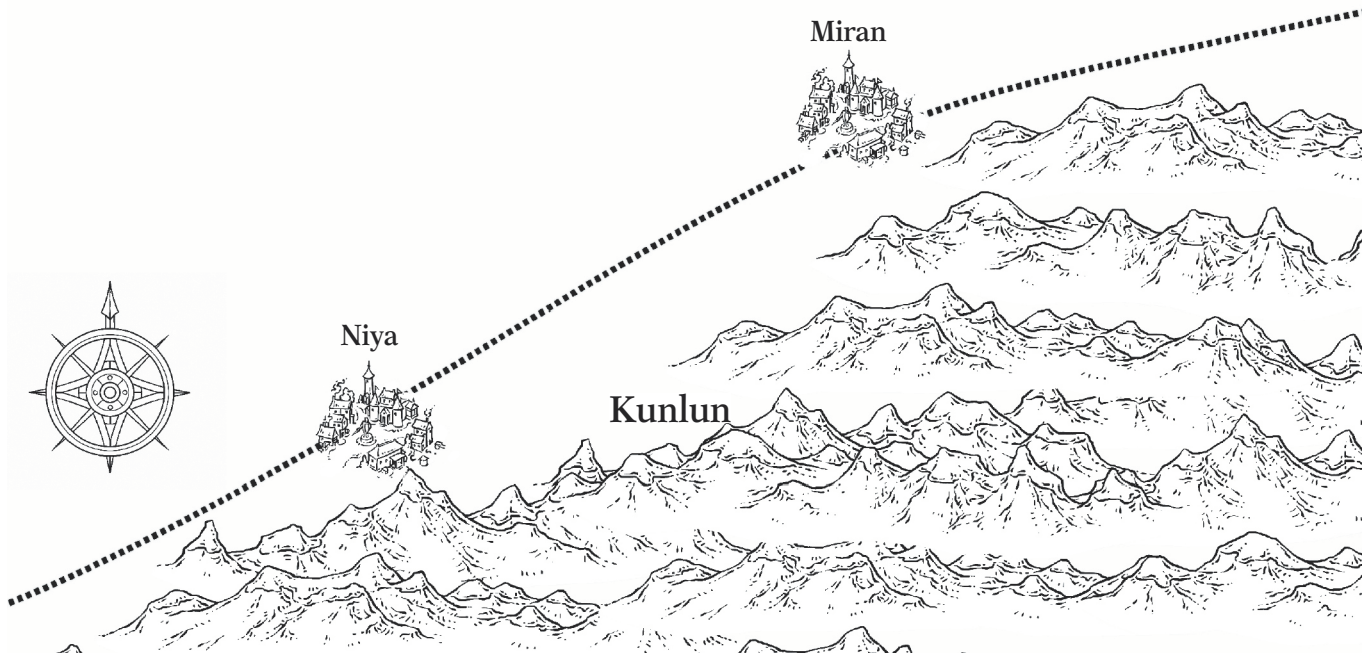


MAP OF THE TARIM BASIN, WEST

For key and scale, see p. 15.



Taklamakan Desert



MAP OF THE TARIM BASIN, MIDDLE

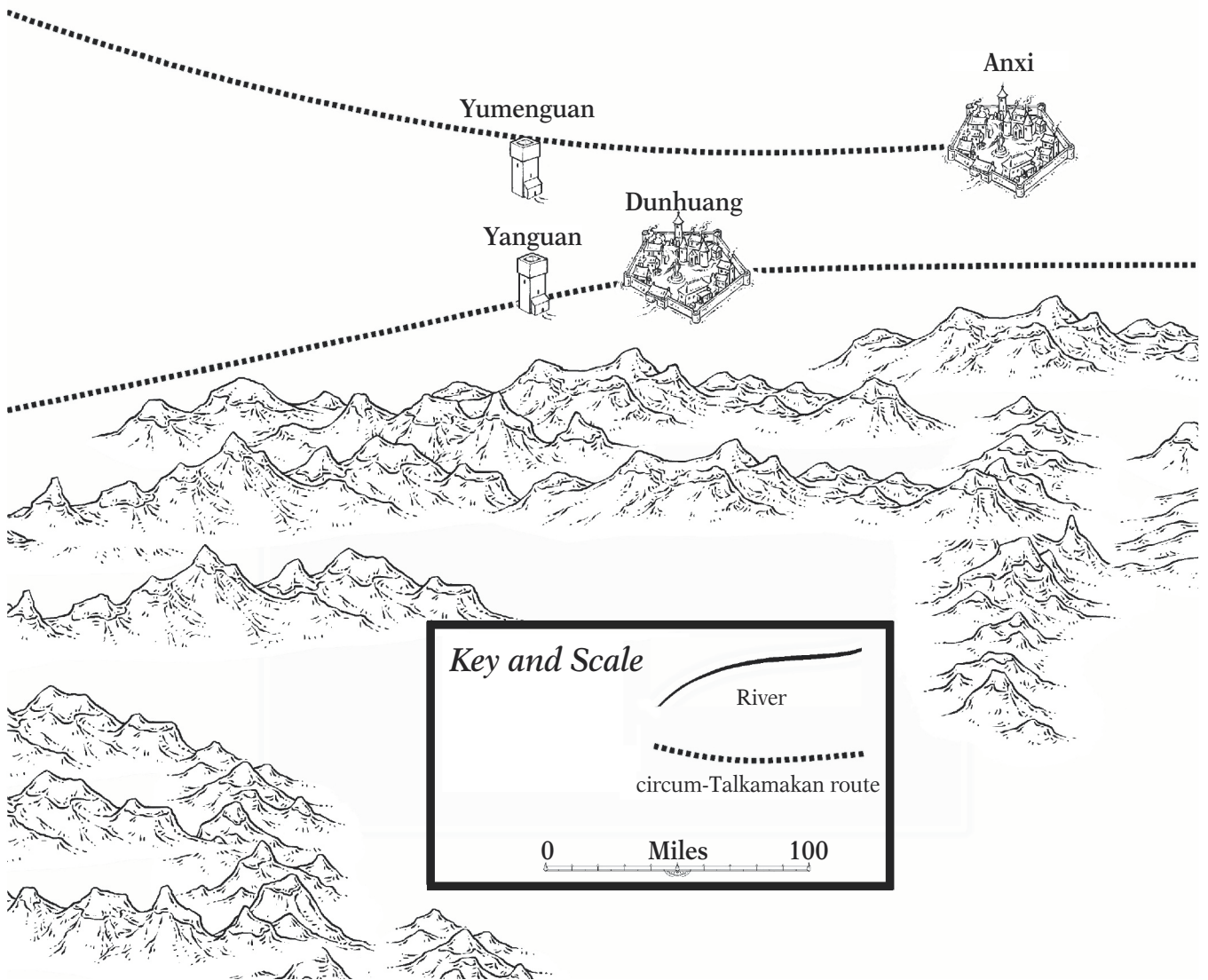
For key and scale, see p. 15.



Flaming Hills



Gobi Desert



Key and Scale

River

circum-Talkamakan route

0 Miles 100

MAP OF THE TARIM BASIN, EAST

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY

Hui Ang walked a little way from the camp as the camels were unpacked. Not too far, and certainly not out of sight or earshot; just enough to be alone with her thoughts. Her brother had been upset that the crumbling pillar just a little way farther down the plain had once been a stupa but had long since become a ruin. It showed how little people cared for religion, he complained. Ang had tried to explain to him that it didn't really matter, that all things were transitory. Indeed, all things were illusion. It hadn't helped. He didn't understand his own religion, not really, she reflected, but he was a loyal brother who tried hard.

She looked down at the sand and stones beneath her sandals and saw some peculiar shapes. Stooping, she picked out

a corroded coin, black and green with age, with the ghost of a few characters visible but not quite legible. Nearby, a broken clay plaque. There was a raised figure of a man on it, done in a western style. Was he dancing? Fighting? Someone had wanted these things long ago, and now they were discarded and their owners long gone, she reflected. Yes, this is what she would meditate on tonight.

The Silk Road started as a convenience for an expanding empire to obtain necessary military resources. During the centuries it was in use, it became a conduit for valuable goods and important ideas fought over by countless clashing empires.

A SINGLE STEP

There are indications of low-level, continent-spanning transmissions of goods going back thousands of years. Genetic evidence suggests that some early cereal grains made their way from Western Asia to China during the Neolithic via routes approximately matching what would become the Silk Road. There are also signs of a silk trade at least as far back as the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Some Egyptian mummies from that time have been found buried with long silk fibers, usually regarded as an exclusively Chinese product until well into the Middle Ages. However, silk exports from China didn't really take off until late in the third century B.C. Around that time, the first recognizable Chinese empire came together in the northeastern corner of modern China. The Qin and Han dynasties began to export large quantities of silk, providing it to nomadic neighbors from north of the Great Wall in exchange for trade goods (notably horses, which the Chinese desperately needed, and jade, which they desperately wanted) or as diplomatic bribes to buy allies and buy off raiders.

But it wasn't just exchanging with immediate neighbors that drove the long-distance silk trade. A late-second-century B.C. ambassador to the Kushan Empire (a region in West Asia east of the Aral Sea ruled by horse-riding nomads) discovered that Chinese goods such as silk and bamboo were being traded in the markets of Transoxiana. Local merchants said that they had procured these items from India. It seems likely that the Indian merchants had obtained them through a

series of overland relays from what would later become southwestern China, at that time not part of imperial China, or by an even more convoluted set of sea routes going from China around Southeast Asia.

Intrigued by this, the Chinese looked to develop potentially lucrative long-distance trade and buy high-quality Kushan horses. The empire had a demand for cavalry horses which far outstripped its ability to supply them itself, and its horses were at any rate smaller and of inferior quality to those available in North and West Asia. However, going through the mountains and hostile nations of southern China – to say nothing of the less-known lands of the rest of Southeast Asia – was not an option. Instead, they followed the ambassador's route to the northwest to send out riches, including a substantial quantity of silk, and bring back horses. This route wasn't ideal either (the ambassador in question had taken years to make the round trip from China and had been taken prisoner by hostile nomads twice), but the empire took pains to start securing a conduit for this important market. Instead of a disorganized silk trade, with tiny quantities of goods filtering across Central Asia, the Silk Road was coming into being.

Chinese influence expanded into the lightly populated steppes of the west through a combination of diplomacy and military might, and the growing empire extended the Great Wall as it went, eventually stopping in the western Gobi Desert. Beyond the end of the wall, the Chinese encountered a series of small towns and petty kingdoms built around oases scattered around the edges of the Taklamakan Desert. They took over these places (though as semi-independent client kingdoms rather than as possessions directly ruled from the center) and established garrisons. The Chinese also had wells dug to irrigate the surrounding territory, helping the garrison towns be more self-sufficient.

I can see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one's decency, can be called clothes . . .

– Seneca the Younger, *Declamations*

The series of oasis towns eventually connected central China to the western end of the Tarim Basin.

With this infrastructure in place, the volume of transcontinental trade increased steadily. The Chinese exported silk, bronze items, and tea, while such goods as jade, wool, grape wine, Mediterranean red coral, and Roman glass vessels made their way east. Slaves, gold, precious stones, ivory, novel crops, spices, medicines, and dyes were traded to and from various places along the line. Some Chinese items went directly from the Chinese government to the Kushans in exchange for horses, while others filtered via older-style trade relays, which nevertheless increased in volume now that safer and more definite routes had been established.

Control of the oasis towns which defined the Silk Road shifted over time. The Chinese presence around the Tarim Basin became shaky because of internal problems in the early first century A.D. (notably, an interregnum following the collapse of the Western Han dynasty). After a period of relative stability, the Chinese influence withdrew around 125 A.D. The Kushans filled that power vacuum, moving into the Tarim Basin from the west by the middle of the second century A.D. A century later, the Kushan Empire fell apart as well, with most of its southern constituent parts absorbed by India's Gupta Empire, and its northern regions by the Sasanian Persians. However, neither empire went past the mountains to absorb the oasis towns of the Tarim Basin. They remained independent.

OUT OF TOUCH

The most romantic descriptions of the Silk Road say that it starts in Chang'An and ends in Rome. Rome and China certainly did trade with one another along the Silk Road; silk was sufficiently popular and expensive that Roman moralists complained bitterly about both its expense and the decadence it inspired. However, the two empires traded indirectly, through a series of middlemen. Each had some hazy knowledge of a great empire on the opposite side of the Eurasian landmass, but despite some effort to make contact with one another, they never clearly succeeded.

During the period of the Roman empire, there were two near-misses using overland routes: a Roman traveler of uncertain date made it as far east as the Pamirs but just a few days' travel short of Chinese-controlled Central Asia, while a late first century A.D. Chinese envoy tasked with contacting Rome reached Iran before turning back after being misled by the Parthians (who were eager to retain their lucrative control over East-West trade) about how much further it was to Roman territory.

In the following centuries, Chinese records indicate occasional visits by people claiming to be Roman or Byzantine ambassadors. Their points of entry and mentions of goods they brought as diplomatic gifts suggest that they took ocean routes, reaching China by way of Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, there's no indication in Western records that such ambassadors were ever sent or arrived back in Europe. So while they might have been imperial diplomats, they might just as likely have been envoys sent by Roman allies or client states closer to China, or even conmen claiming Roman connections in order to receive gifts and trade concessions. Naturally, that suggests campaign possibilities, with adventurers on a long-range diplomatic mission or charged with escorting a party of foreign diplomats who might not be all that they appear . . . but how would they know? Particularly ambitious adventurers may also see the immensely lucrative possibilities in feigning Roman connections themselves.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Although the Tarim Basin towns were no longer operating under the protection of larger states, they and the Silk Road remained going concerns. With the drilling and irrigation technologies obtained from the Chinese, they could support populations large enough to defend against casual raids. Formerly, the presence of the Kushans west of the Pamirs had led to the development of cross-continent trade routes by passing goods farther to the west. Now, despite the disappearance of the Kushans and a sharp decline in supply from the Chinese side, demand on both ends of the Silk Road remained for goods those on one end could only get from the other. It continued to be worth the while of merchants to make the long, difficult series of serial trades by which expensive goods crossed the continent.

As with other active trade routes, the Silk Road carried ideas as well as merchandise. One of the first ideas to travel along the Silk Road in a big way was Buddhism. As routes from the subcontinent into the rest of Asia and beyond opened up, Indian Buddhist missionaries followed them. They had at best modest success to the west, making little impact past what is now Afghanistan, and what they achieved there was relatively

short-lived. However, they firmly established Buddhism as, if not the dominant, then at least the leading religion of lands to the east of Samarkand for centuries to come.

The Buddhists also had an important impact on the physical infrastructure of the Silk Road. As some of them settled down along trade routes through the Tarim Basin in the third and fourth centuries, they constructed a string of landmarks and shelters, such as cave shrines (see p. 40) and monumental statues. These sites provided facilities which merchants and pilgrims could use to ease their journeys, as well as centers of learning to further propagate Buddhism. The Taklamakan itself was no more hospitable than it had been before, but routes across it were becoming clearer.

If anything, the decline of the major states on either end of the Silk Road opened it up further. In addition to Buddhist monks and merchants in some way culturally affiliated with either the Chinese or the Kushans, nomads from Sogdiana began to travel the Silk Road, taking their Zoroastrian religion (and, to a lesser extent, Manichaeism) and Iranian languages with them. The Sogdians likewise started to establish local residence and friendly trading networks.

Buddhist trips also became a two-way affair, with Chinese monks making pilgrimages to their religion's homeland. Indeed, the individual travelers along the Silk Road about whom we know the most (which is, granted, saying very little) aren't kings or generals, but Chinese monks: Faxian, who trekked as far as Sri Lanka early in the fifth century, and Xuanzang, a seventh-century monk whose expedition became the basis for the classic novel *Journey to the West*.

In the fifth century, towns along the southern Taklamakan route started to fail, possibly a result of a climate shift which reduced rainfall in the region and made settlements less viable. By the sixth century, a number of the oasis towns, notably those on the eastern end of the southern route, were abandoned and the route fell out of use. However, the western towns from Khotan on remained active and occupied.

The lack of outside control which arose after the fall of the Kushans wasn't a permanent state of affairs. By the early sixth century, the nomadic Hephthalite Huns had taken over a large chunk of the Sasanians' northern and eastern territory, including Sogdiana and Bactria, and even penetrated into the Tarim Basin. While they controlled Kashgar and the west, the eastern half of the basin remained independent or under distant Chinese control, which fitfully returned now and again. The Hunnic territories fell to the Gokturks, another coalition of nomads, by the third quarter of the century.

Also in the sixth century, China lost its monopoly on silk production. Silkworms had already been cultivated outside of China proper for a few centuries, but still in areas in the Chinese sphere of influence, and with decidedly inferior technology. One traveler through the region noted that the natives grew silkworms but, rather than unraveling the cocoons into long fibers to spin as thread, split them open and used the fragments of raw fiber for padding. However, according to tradition, a pair of Christian monks brought silkworms and basic silk-producing skills from China to the Byzantine Empire

during the reign of the emperor Justinian. This time around, China gained real competition

The Byzantine imperial government wasted no time in cultivating mulberry trees and building factories for silk production. In the decades that followed, silk production spread to Persia, India, and beyond. However, Westerners couldn't match the Chinese volume of production or precisely duplicate their techniques, so Chinese silk (both raw thread and finished goods) remained in demand. Even so, new styles of silk textiles out of the Byzantine Empire and Persia drew customers in China as well, so they simply added to the volume of trade. It's also around this time that blown glass, up to that point a product of Western countries, started to appear as a native product in East Asia, so the loss of monopolies was more or less equal on both sides.

The seventh century saw a revival of Chinese control of the Tarim Basin under the Tang dynasty. By at least 635, the little kingdoms of the region were once again tributaries to China. However, a series of revolts in the western territories starting around 662 dislodged Chinese authority and culminated in the region being conquered by the new Tibetan Empire by 670. The Tibetans established strongholds near abandoned towns along the southern Taklamakan route to secure passes through the Kunlun Mountains. They likewise revived an old watchtower system established by the Chinese centuries earlier. The Tarim Basin changed hands between the Tibetans and Chinese several times over the next century. No matter how powerful the Tang resurgence, though, Chinese expansion again met its limits at the western end of the Central Asian highlands.

During this period, traffic in religious pilgrims also started to become complicated by a noticeable decline in Buddhism in its homeland. Chinese monks didn't stop visiting India, but it was becoming more difficult to find other Buddhists and Buddhist texts at the far end of the road.

THE LOST LEGION

During the 1940s, a historian came up with a novel theory bringing together a variety of historical trivia: In 53 B.C., the triumvir Crassus was defeated by the Parthians at the battle of Carrhae, and a number of his troops who had been taken prisoner there were never seen again, at least not by the Romans. About 18 years later, the Parthians lost a battle with a Chinese army near the Talas River (not the last battle between Chinese and Westerners there; see p. 19). Some of the Parthian troops fought in a novel formation with their shields close together, described by a Chinese observer as being like fish scales. The conjecture arising from this was that the Parthians had kept the legion captured at Carrhae and set them to work on the opposite side of their empire, where they could be useful without any worry about them fleeing back to Rome. Those troops, or perhaps a few old veterans mixed with new soldiers they had trained, ended up fighting the Chinese in a Roman tortoise formation, whose overlapping shields resembled fish scales to the Chinese observers.

If that weren't sufficiently extreme, further speculation has it that those former legionaries, again on the losing side of a battle, were once more captured and relocated, this time to deep inside the Chinese Empire. The village of Liqian, which is about halfway between Chang'an and Dunhuang, has a population with a remarkably high proportion of light-haired and light-eyed residents. Perhaps, it is said, these people are descendants of that old Roman army, and Liqian is a transliteration of "legion" or "Latin."

Though it's impossible to comprehensively rule out this hypothesis, it seems highly unlikely. The light hair and eyes can be found in West Asian populations such as the people of Kashgar, and recent genetic testing in Liqian suggests that the Uighurs or some other Turkic group would be a more likely source of those genes than Southern Europeans. Liqian also has no other signs of Roman influence, such as loan words from Latin or indications of the worship of Roman gods. Still, for the purposes of an adventure, it's intriguing to imagine a pocket of Roman culture hidden behind the borders of a far-off empire.

While the Tarim Basin was being contested by Tibet and China though the seventh century, the western end of the Silk Road saw significant changes as well. Weakened by an unsuccessful war against the Byzantine Empire, the once-powerful Sasanian Empire fell to Muslims advancing from the south. Though Turkic confederacies picked up some of the pieces from the Sasanian collapse, the caliphate took most of the old Sasanian territory at least up to the Oxus, thereby gaining control of the westernmost approaches to the Silk Road. The caliphate continued to expand, albeit slowly, taking Samarkand by 710.

Through the eighth century, China and the caliphate engaged in minor skirmishes as their expanding spheres of influence collided. Proxies often drove these; for example, a defeated minor ally, fleeing his homeland, would appeal to his Muslim or Chinese patrons to aid him in regaining his throne from his rival, a proxy for the other major power. The last significant battle between the two took place in 751, when a Tang-backed army met a force under the control of the new Abbasid caliphate at the Talas River, a minor waterway at the northern edge of the Tien Shan, northwest of Kashgar. The caliphate won a tactical victory, but the battle had no notable strategic effect, and China retained a hold on most of Central Asia for years thereafter. The most notable outcome of the battle is that, according to tradition, prisoners from the Chinese army (who may have been soldiers in armies of client kingdoms rather than Chinese themselves) taught their captors the craft of papermaking. Up to that point, paper had been made only in eastern Asia and, to a modest extent, in India. By the end of the eighth century, paper was produced throughout the Near and Middle East and was eventually passed on to Europe.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, the caliphate's relatively peaceful control over the western end of the Silk Road helped to stabilize trade, but it also set into motion a number of social changes. Most notably, the rise of Islam meant that institutions previously supported by other religions were eclipsed by Muslim ventures. Buddhist temples and cave shrines became less important as pilgrimage sites in Muslim countries, and were replaced as centers of culture by notable mosques and the tombs of holy men. Even outside of predominantly Muslim areas, adventurous Muslim merchants took their religion with them and established places where their co-religionists could find shelter along the road. This process was accelerated on the Silk Road by the ongoing conversion of Sogdians, whose heartland was now governed by the caliphate, to Islam. While Islam didn't become a majority religion in the Tarim Basin for another few centuries,

Sogdian merchants established a network of Islamic institutions through the region.

Instead of coming from the west or south, the next significant challenge to Chinese power on the Silk Road came from within. In 755, a half-Sogdian general called An Lushan in Chinese sources (he probably went by the Iranian name Rokshan) revolted against the Tang government from his post in northeastern China and eventually drove the sitting emperor out of Chang'An. Though the An Lushan Rebellion collapsed by 763 and didn't directly touch the Silk Road territories, it set off a series of events which did. While the Chinese were fighting their civil war, resurgent Tibetans reoccupied most of the Tarim Basin, and even took Chang'An in the year the revolt ended. The new Uighur khanate, an alliance of Turkic-speaking nomads from Northern Asia, occupied the northeastern portion of the Tarim Basin, and the Chinese were completely displaced. Although trade along the Silk Road continued (neither the Uighurs, the Tibetans, nor the Abbasids had any quarrel with the Sogdians and other merchants who worked the Central Asian trade routes or objection to the customs duties paid along the way), the withdrawal of Chinese support for garrisons meant the flow of money and silk into the region was greatly reduced.

Over the next few decades, the Tibetans, Abbasids, and Uighurs contested with one another for control over various parts of the Silk Road. Although the Tibetans managed to strike as far west as Samarkand, they were slowly squeezed out of their northern territories through the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The Uighur khanate fell to the Kirghiz (yet another tribal confederation, this one centered in Mongolia) around 840. Survivors fled their North Asian homeland to establish themselves as a new ethnic group around the Tarim Basin and to set up a handful of tiny successor states. However, the Tibetans were unable to take advantage of the situation because of their own internal problems, culminating in the collapse of their own empire a decade later.

A shaky Tang resurgence finally restored nominal control of at least of some of its western territories, but only briefly and in part. The Abbasids and several successor dynasties ruling Iran and territories immediately adjacent to the east controlled the western approaches to the Silk Road and, at times, parts of the Tarim Basin. Meanwhile, Uighurs still held onto semi-independent Silk Road territories in the east even though they'd been driven out of the northern steppes. At the beginning of the 10th century, the Tang dynasty – long beset by revolts and natural disasters – collapsed, and the old Silk Road started a long, slow decline.

END OF THE ROAD

The fall of the Tang was the beginning of a very long end for the Silk Road. Though foreign trade was alive and well under the Tang's eventual successors – the Song dynasty (indeed, the Song loved exotic imported goods) – technology hadn't been standing still. Incremental improvements in naval technology made longer and longer ocean voyages feasible. Furthermore, imperial Chinese control over more southerly ports allowed merchants to start that much closer to destinations in India and beyond. A *lack* of control over the Western Regions, slowly

falling into the hands of expanding Muslim kingdoms through the 11th century, made overland travel that much more perilous. Sea travel had been possible earlier, but the improved speed and relative (though by no means perfect) safety of carrying goods between India and China by ship made such voyages preferable to land travel and very much preferable to the arduous routes over the mountains and through the deserts of Central Asia.

Moreover, China found a new commodity on which it had a monopoly to replace silk: porcelain. The fine, high-fired pottery was in demand in the West, but the fragile, bulky ceramic was better suited to transport by ship, where it could be carried with adequate packing, than by overland caravans, further encouraging sea transport. Though some goods continued to travel west through the Taklamakan, China abandoned its western territories for centuries to come, except for a brief period in the 13th to 14th century.

Perhaps ironically, the next major blow to the Silk Road was an event which was favorable to transcontinental trade. The most significant occurrence in the history of the 13th century was the Mongol expansion. The Mongol confederation founded by Genghis Khan established an empire which covered most of the core Silk Road territories by 1225 and much of Eurasia from China to Vienna by 1275. The Mongols

Principal Export: Death

While any number of goods went through Central Asia, the most notable thing originating there is something no one wanted. Scientists believe that *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for bubonic plague, originated in Central Asia about 20,000 years ago, surviving in reservoirs of small animals around the mountains and deserts. The plague struck many times through history, hitting Europe at least as early as the reign of Justinian. It's a remote risk for travelers; centuries passed between major outbreaks. But when it does hit, it's devastating.

suppressed religious strife, made significant strides in imposing law and order, and were very open to trade. This meant that the plains north of the Tien Shan became a much more attractive trade route. Towns bypassing the Taklamakan saw significant growth during this period. Still, the Taklamakan route was not abandoned completely. Marco Polo traveled through the desert in the 1270s on his way to China, though his father and uncle had taken a more northerly route in the 1260s. Nevertheless, while the world had never seen so much East-West trade before, a fast-declining proportion of it came through the old desert routes.

Silk Road traffic decreased in the 13th century, and it was almost completely cut off in the 14th. After being unsteady for quite some time, Mongol hegemony finally collapsed. Resurgent Turks and Persians overthrew Mongol overlords along the western approaches to the Silk Road, while revolts in China replaced the Mongol-descended Yuan dynasty with the native Ming. The Pax Mongolica which had allowed easy transcontinental communication and trade ceased to exist.

The final blow to the Silk Road came in the early 15th century. China adopted isolationist policies which made trade nigh impossible. By the time the Qing regained Central Asia, the overland trade routes were all but forgotten in the West, save for the recollections of Marco Polo, and China had largely lost interest in foreign goods. As seaborne explorers from Europe turned to the east, clippers, steamships, and gunboat diplomacy (necessarily linked to the far-away coasts) became the main instruments of trade. The Silk Road became a curiosity to be rediscovered by explorers and geographers of the late 19th century.

TIMELINE

- 206 B.C. – Han dynasty begins.
- 180 B.C. – Loulan (p. 24) allies with China.
- 130 B.C. – China initiates trade with Kushan Empire, opening the Silk Road through Central Asia.
- 77 B.C. – Loulan kingdom comes under closer Chinese supervision, becomes Shanshan.
- c. 125 – Chinese withdraw from Tarim Basin, at least partly replaced by Kushans.
- 220 – Han dynasty falls.
- 265 – Jin dynasty begins.
- 330 – Loulan abandoned.
- 399 – Faxian leaves China for India, returning in 412 via sea routes.
- c. 400 – Southern Taklamakan routes begin to decline.
- 420 – Jin dynasty falls.
- 500 – New garrison established at Loulan.
- c. 500 – Southern Taklamakan towns abandoned.
- 515 – Western Tarim Basin under Hephthalite control.
- 567 – Western Tarim Basin falls to Gokturks.
- 618 – Tang dynasty begins.
- 629 – Xuanzang leaves China for India, returning in 645.
- 630 – Loulan completely abandoned.
- c. 635 – Most of Tarim Basin tributary to China.
- 651 – Muslims overrun Persia.
- 662 – Rebellion in Western Regions.
- 665 – Tibetan conquest of Tarim Basin begins.
- 670 – Tibetans complete conquest of Tarim Basin.
- 692 – Chinese retake Tarim Basin.
- 710 – Caliphate conquers Samarkand.
- 720 – Tibetans retake Tarim Basin.
- 740 – Chinese retake Tarim Basin.
- 751 – Chinese and Muslim armies face one another at Talas River.
- 755 – An Lushan Rebellion.
- 762 – Chinese presence in the Western Regions collapses; Tarim Basin controlled by Tibetans and Uighurs.
- 786 – Kashgar at least briefly under Chinese control, but Tibetans retake Tarim Basin.
- 800 – Kashgar falls under Arab rule.
- 802 – Uighurs drive Tibetans out of Tarim Basin.
- 850 – Collapsing Uighur khanate leads to colonization in Tarim Basin.
- 907 – Tang dynasty collapses.

If you want to know about creation and time, read difficulties resolved on the journey to the west.

– *Journey to the West, Chapter 1*

CHAPTER THREE

GAZETTEER

Su and Ang walked back down to the camels. Ang sniffed at her fingers, still scented with incense. Smoke from the small sticks barely rose above the toes of the enormous Buddha in the cliffside behind them before it dispersed. Which, Su reflected, would lead to a sermon about something from his sister if it were pointed out to her.

"Do you hear that?" Ang asked.

"Bells. Do you think it's those westerners?"

As if announced, a string of camels came around the nearby slope. The riders were tall-hatted and long-coated, with thick

beards. Su bowed politely to the leader, who nodded back. They had met two days before, and Su had negotiated permission to travel with the small caravan. The last of the party passed by them just as the Huis and their servants finished mounting up themselves. They fell in behind, camel bells tinkling gently.

Ang leaned closer to her brother. "Do you think they all have blue eyes?"

The Silk Road is defined less by important individuals than by the many peoples, places, and cultural trends it encompasses.

TOWNS AND NOTABLE PLACES

For most travelers, a trip along the Silk Road will be defined by stops on the journey. Although the course is dotted with many small towns and religious sites, these are the most significant ones around the Tarim Basin and adjacent territories.

To the east of [Bamiyan] there is a convent, in which there is a figure of Buddha lying in a sleeping position, as when he attained Nirvana. The figure is in length about 1,000 feet or so.

– Xuanzang, *Record of the Western Regions*

ANXI

The name Anxi (meaning "Tranquil West") refers to a number of places west of the Chinese heartland, but most durably for a garrison town at the western end of the Hexi Corridor. A military headquarters was established here during the Han dynasty, and it remained a site of military importance for a long time thereafter.

It is also a point marking a split in the Silk Road between northern and southern routes. Those traveling the northern Taklamakan passage might head through the checkpoint at Yumenguan and on to Turfan, while those heading south go through Dunhuang and Yanguan.

BALUKA

An intermediate link between Kucha and Kashgar on the northern Taklamakan route, Baluka (modern Aksu) is also close to a pass through the Tien Shan, making it a spot where travelers and invaders from the north can enter the Taklamakan

Desert routes. During the Han dynasty, it was a petty kingdom with a population around 25,000. Visitors noted that its culture and industry were similar to Kucha (pp. 23-24) in many ways. The city's most important product is a fabric made from a blend of cotton and animal hair. Baluka's region is prone to small sandstorms which blow dust around with a fog-like appearance.

BAMIYAN

If the Silk Road were to have an official gateway at the western end, Bamiyan would be a good choice. About 380 miles south of Samarkand and a similar distance west of Gilgit, this valley in the Hindu Kush Mountains is one of the westernmost significant Buddhist sites, hosting an enormous cave-shrine complex which can house thousands of monks at a time and any number of travelers.

It is particularly notable for a number of Buddhist art treasures. They include a reclining Buddha of unknown vintage over 60' long, as well as the earliest known oil paintings and a pair of monumental standing Buddha statues carved into niches in a cliff side dating to as early as the fifth century. The larger of the pair, at 180', was the tallest such statue in the world until it was destroyed in 2001. In the seventh century, the town was reported to have a monumental sleeping Buddha statue nearly 1,000' long, though that has somehow become lost over the years.

DUNHUANG

Though at least parts of the Taklamakan were under indirect Chinese authority for most of the period here, Dunhuang is traditionally the last town in China proper as one leaves for the west, and the first stop for incoming visitors.

This makes the town an important one for trade. It serves as a point where long-traveling western merchants can finally exchange goods inside China, and many of them would need to come no farther east.

It has also ended up as an important Buddhist site. There is a major Buddhist cave shrine (p. 40) carved into a steep, tree-lined riverbank at Mogao, about 10 miles southeast of Dunhuang itself. In addition to its size and its extensive murals, the Mogao caves are notable today for a priceless trove of documents and Buddhist paraphernalia hidden there in the 11th century.

The Diamond Sutra

One of the great treasures of the Silk Road found by modern explorers was produced late in the period in question here and hidden in the Mogao caves. The Diamond Sutra is a widely known sermon attributed to the Buddha. Somewhere in China in 868, an edition of it was elegantly printed with wood blocks on a paper scroll over five yards long, ending with an elaborate woodcut engraving of the Buddha delivering the sermon, surrounded by disciples. It appears to have been mass-produced to be distributed for free, as some modern missionaries give away Bibles and other holy books. A copy made its way to the Mogao caves and was sealed away in a side room around the year 1000. Nine centuries years later, a self-appointed caretaker for the now-abandoned caves discovered the hidden library. Not long thereafter, a European explorer obtained it. Though printing dates back even farther, the Mogao copy of the Diamond Sutra remains the world's oldest surviving, datable, intact printed book. (The Mogao library which preserved the Diamond Sutra also contained the world's oldest complete star atlas, a Chinese work dating to the mid-seventh century.)

FERGHANA VALLEY

Heading west and a little north from Kashgar toward Samarkand, travelers journey through a jumble of mountains where the Pamirs meet the Tien Shan. Eventually, the passage emerges in the Ferghana Valley, a fertile plain flanked on the north and south by spurs of the nearby mountain ranges extending to an open end on the west. This plain is about 180 miles from east to west and a little less than half that north to south. Not only is this northern part of the Sogdian homeland a relatively easy part of the route to travel, it has been long regarded by the Chinese as the source of the best horses. The horses sold here are for the most part actually raised elsewhere, and brought for sale in Ferghana, the closest horse-friendly territory available. The relatively fertile and well-watered environment and easy access to the west make it an excellent place for westerners to bring horses; taking them to points east involves an arduous trip over the mountains and difficult conditions for keeping horses thereafter.

FLAMING HILLS

Also called the Flaming Mountains, this is a 65-mile-long section of the Tien Shan east of Turfan. The barren hills are primarily composed of heavily eroded red sandstone. They

take on a particularly impressive flame-like appearance in the light of the setting sun. Coincidentally, it's also one of the hottest places along the Silk Road; summer temperatures frequently hit 120°F. The name was actually popularized by the 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey To The West*, but a variety of legends drawing on the fiery (or, alternatively, bloody) color predate that story. The hills are home to another significant Buddhist cave complex, started as early as the fifth century. The complex has come to be known as the Thousand Buddha Caves for its many, many paintings.

GILGIT

The town of Gilgit covers a few narrow strips of land around the confluence of the Gilgit and Hunza rivers in modern northeastern Pakistan, with impressive mountains all around it. Indeed, some of the world's tallest mountains can be found in the Gilgit-Baltistan area. Though always a modestly sized town, Gilgit has long had a strategic importance along the Silk Road. Going upstream, the Hunza leads to a series of steep river valleys and precarious but functional passes. The passes eventually reach the oasis towns on the southwestern edge of the Taklamakan. Going downstream, the Gilgit merges into the Indus, providing access to western India and the ocean beyond. It is a major point of entry to the West for travelers from China and a point of departure for those heading the other direction. It is particularly notable for traffic in Buddhist pilgrims. The area is covered with what can only be described as Buddhist graffiti.

The region's primary industries are trade and subsistence farming (grain on the river banks; sheep and goat herding on the slopes). To a lesser degree, mining is also practiced. Gilgit has produced gold since pre-history. It is also a source of a range of precious stones including amethyst, aquamarine, emeralds, rubies, and topaz, though it's unclear how many were mined in antiquity.

Weather around Gilgit is extreme, with long, cold winters and short but hot summers. The broad swings in temperature lead to frequent landslides down the steep mountain slopes. What little arable land there is in the mountainous region is on narrow margins along the riversides, so seasonal flooding is another frequent hazard.

IRON GATE PASS

Iron Gate Pass is a customs checkpoint a few miles outside of Korla on the road to Yanqi and Turfan. The road passes through a deep gorge separating the Tarim Basin proper from a separate, smaller basin containing Yanqi (p. 26) and Baghrash Kol. At least as early as the Tang dynasty, a fortified gate was placed at one of the road's narrowest points. At Iron Gate Pass, the navigable path is perhaps as wide as a modern four-lane road. The pass is bound by a steep hillside rising up on one side and a short drop into a rapid stream on the other. The checkpoint is a thick, fortified wall across the narrow passage, with an arched gateway (about the width of a modern single-lane road), a crenellated parapet, and a gabled chamber on top. The impressively rugged hillsides surrounding the gorge have inspired classic poems and sad legends of love-suicides.

JIAOHE

This unusual town, which might be regarded as a suburb or satellite town of Turfan, lies on the northern Taklamakan route about seven miles west of the main city. The settlement almost completely covers a mesa-like 55-acre island shaped like a long, narrow leaf pointing to the southeast at the confluence of two rivers. The rivers cut across the land between them several times before their courses finally merge; Jiaohe's southern tip is at that point. Since water surrounds the town, and most of its sides are sheer cliffs up to 100' high, building walls was deemed unnecessary. (The northern approach involves a steep slope, but not a cliff.) The town has two main landings: one on the northeastern bank near the residences of the wealthy, and the other on the western side of the southern tip near the homes of the poorer residents. A main street crosses the island between them.

Jiaohe served at least for a while as the capital of a kingdom during the Han dynasty, and a large garrison was established there during the Tang dynasty. The population at that point was about 7,500 people. Nearly 1,000 of them were garrison troops, and a substantial number of the remainder were Buddhist monks living in monasteries concentrated in the center and northern part of the island.

KASHGAR

Kashgar is the westernmost town of the Tarim Basin, at the meeting of the Kunlun, Tien Shan, and Pamir mountain ranges. Kashgar was first noted as a small-to-medium-sized petty kingdom, with a population of 10,000 to 15,000 during the Han dynasty, but its importance grew. It frequently served as the capital of a larger kingdom covering the western end of the Tarim Basin; from the fourth to seventh centuries, it is said to have ruled a dozen other towns. At the high points of China's authority, it was a significant subject state, one of four important garrison towns, and the westernmost extension of Chinese hegemony.

It is also the main gateway between East and West. Iranian languages and religions, Islam, and any number of Western armies entered the Tarim Basin via Kashgar. In addition to its importance as a trade center, it is noted for its wool fabrics and carpets. Because of so much contact with long-distance travelers, Kashgar ended up with a distinctly mixed population. To this day, residents with blue eyes and light-colored hair may be found there.

KHOTAN

Khotan is both economically significant and relatively large for an oasis town, with an estimated population around 20,000. During the earlier centuries of the Silk Road, it was a stop along the way on the southern route around the Taklamakan. It also provided access to passes through the mountains toward India and Tibet, a significance it retained even after it became one of the last towns to survive on the southern Taklamakan route.

Although it produces fine textiles – notably carpets and felt – Khotan is particularly important for a trade good greatly

desired in China: jade. The mountains of the Khotan region have produced white “mutton fat” jade for millennia. Jade hunters mostly scour the rivers and streams flowing down from the nearby mountains to find chunks of valuable stone which have washed downhill. Khotan also started cultivating silkworms by the fifth century, which according to legend were smuggled there by a Chinese princess sent to marry a local king. It is suspected of being the ultimate source of the silk technology transmitted to the Byzantines.

The Rat King of Khotan

A legend from Khotan tells that once, when an army of mounted Huns threatened the kingdom, the king offered prayers to the rats of the desert. Overnight, the king of the rats led his subjects on a peculiar raid where they chewed through the invaders' armor, harnesses, and other leather items. Thus disarmed, the Huns became easy prey for the Khotanese. The king built a shrine to the rat king, who is depicted as human-shaped but with a rat's head, to the west of the city, and travelers in the region continued to make offerings to the rats for centuries thereafter.

KORLA

Korla is at about the halfway point along the northern Taklamakan route. The oasis constitutes one of the branch points along the Silk Road, since it links to routes northeast through passes in the Tien Shan to Turfan by way of Iron Gate Pass as well as more directly east to Loulan and Lop Nor. It is, though, a relatively modest kingdom, with a population of around 10,000. It is best known for its fragrant pears, but some esoteric healers make use of the petroleum, which seeps from the ground, as an ointment.

KUCHA

Kucha produces grain, many fruits (grapes, pomegranates, several stone fruits), and almonds. Its considerable mineral wealth includes a wide range of both utilitarian and precious metals, and useful resources such as sal ammoniac. It also makes fine textiles (the usual mix of carpets and felt), deer-skins, and incense. The kingdom of Kucha's population was reported at over 80,000 during the Han dynasty, making it the largest settlement along the Silk Road at the time.

It is more noted as a center of Buddhism. During the third century, construction on a Buddhist cave shrine started at Kizil, about 40 miles west of the city. In time, the complex grew to over 250 caves stretching across a mile of hillside. About two-thirds of them are small chambers, suitable for residences for the monks and visitors. The remainder are large, elaborately decorated chambers for study and ritual. Some are divided into front and back chambers, while others have a large central pillar which serves as a stupa (pp. 39-40) around which people can practice devotions. The town itself has a pair of monumental Buddha statues flanking its western gate. Buddhism in Kucha tends toward Theravada Buddhism rather than the Mahayana version predominating elsewhere.

One peculiar local custom is that the native people of Kucha practice head-flattening. Infants' heads are pressed between boards secured with strips of cloth over the course of several months. This gives their heads a distinctive elongated, conical shape.

Adventure Seed: Head Games

Just why *do* the people of Kucha (pp. 23-24) flatten their children's heads? Local legends tell that inhabitants of a nearby town interbred with dragons and became powerful but rebellious, eventually to be slaughtered by their king (the dragons, apparently not being very choosy, also interbred with horses, providing remarkable cavalry mounts). Perhaps half-dragon refugees fled from the destruction of their town to Kucha and intermarried. Are children's head being flattened as a sign of local individuality, or in remembrance of the peculiar shape of their powerful ancestors' hybrid physiology? Or are some of the dragonish traits breeding true, with the head-flattening ritual serving as cover for a natural head shape? For an adventure with multiple twists, the people of Kucha may have interbred not with dragons as they thought, but with long-headed aliens.

Adventure Seed: C.S.I. Taklamakan

One grave in Miran (below) contained a man who had died by violence and a woman who apparently did not. The conventional interpretation is that the woman killed herself or was killed, perhaps by poison or suffocation, on the death of her husband in order to be buried with him. It's certainly conceivable that this custom made its way from India along with Buddhism and Indian scripts. However, it's also possible that the woman might have died from natural causes or some other agent which leaves no marks and the husband killed himself, or even that one or both were killed by a third party. If this couple owned a lot of property, the exact circumstances of their deaths might be significant to potential heirs. The player characters might be called on to investigate, using the most primitive forensic capabilities and interviewing locals who don't want to talk about it. Were the deaths murder? Suicide? One of each?

LOP NOR

Lop Nor is a salt lake or possibly set of lakes at the eastern end of the Tarim Basin, fed by streams coming from the west. Like the Levant's Dead Sea and Utah's Great Salt Lake, Lop Nor has no outlet. Water collects there and evaporates, leaving behind an ever-increasing quantity of salt leached from the ground along the course of the rivers feeding it. Nevertheless, it supports a substantial quantity of fish, fowl, and salt-tolerant vegetation, so it is rich territory for fishing and hunting, even if the water itself is unsuitable for drinking.

Lop Nor is not a well-behaved lake. There's no indication that people in antiquity realized it, but it moves over time. The rivers which feed into it silt up and find new courses, eventually filling up new and different low-lying areas at the eastern

end of the Tarim Basin. Modern explorers discovered that the lake migrated over 50 miles over the course of about 40 years, and then back again. The lake's migration (or just the shift in the Tarim River feeding into it) may have caused the collapse of Loulan.

LOULAN

The city of Loulan sits on the north shore of Lop Nor, at the last possible junction between northern and southern Taklamakan routes. It was the capital of a kingdom called Kroraina locally (and Shanshan by the Han Chinese), a territory spreading as far as halfway along the southern Taklamakan route. At its height, the population was a few tens of thousands, and it supported a large community of Buddhist monks. Since it was at a significant point along the Silk Road, it was of particular interest to the Chinese, but it proved hard to hold on to. Around the fourth century, the city went into decline and was eventually abandoned as part of the general collapse of the southern Taklamakan route. A Tibetan garrison briefly reoccupied the site during the years they controlled the southern Tarim Basin, and then abandoned again.

MIRAN

Miran is a town along the southern Taklamakan route, with a few thousand residents and some Buddhist institutions. It was part of the Shanshan kingdom ruled from Loulan, but became the capital itself briefly when Loulan was abandoned. Like other towns in that region, it was itself abandoned during the course of the fifth century. However, it was reoccupied and fortified by the Tibetans during eighth century. The fort is a lop-sided quadrangle, with earthen walls ranging from 100 to 55 yards long. It became a significant garrison, probably due to its proximity to mountain passes coming out of Tibet.

One of Miran's more intriguing features is a mural which may have been painted by an artist from somewhere in the Roman world. Though the artist's name is written in the local script, Kharosthi, the name could plausibly be a transliteration of "Titus." More importantly, the style of art is very much Greco-Roman, with flying cherubs, curling wreaths, and Western features on many of the figures.

NIYA

Niya, a small town on the southern Taklamakan route, is probably typical of towns around the Tarim Basin. With a reported population just under 3,500, it's big enough to be more than a village of farmers, but not by much. However, there are enough craftsmen there to smelt their own iron and, eventually, work with glass.

Like most sites along the southern route, Niya declined in the fifth century and was eventually abandoned. Niya is deeper into the desert than most towns, perhaps an extra day's ride, so reaching it can be difficult and dangerous for those who don't know exactly where they're going.

SAMARKAND

Samarkand, one of the leading cities of Sogdiana, is a trade capital, with its merchants bringing in goods as diverse as Chinese silk and Egyptian glass. Historical Samarkand is a bit north of the modern city (indeed, the Samarkand of this period is known only from archaeological investigation; famous landmarks like Timur's mausoleum are centuries in the future). It occupies a hilltop with an area a little over three-quarters of a square mile, bound on the north by the Siab River, on the east by a major canal, and on the west by a natural ravine. A double wall further protects it. In addition to the adjacent river and irrigation network, an aboveground aqueduct provides the city with water.

The city suffered a serious blow in the early eighth century when, after a series of revolts, many of its residents were killed or driven out, and its walls were at least partly destroyed. However, it recovered by the ninth century. The walls were rebuilt, and it acquired a suburb of craftsmen which also became fortified.

STONE TOWER

The precise location of this town somewhere between Kashgar and the Ferghana Valley has been lost. Many places in Central Asia, including at least two in this gazetteer, have names which could be plausibly translated as "Stone Tower"; modern historians following a traveler's itinerary deduced the location of this one.

Stone Tower marks the easternmost point along the Silk Road a named Westerner is known to have traveled during antiquity. A Roman merchant of Macedonian ancestry, Maes Titianos, made it to this active trading post in search of silk. He went no farther himself, but instead dispatched agents more familiar with the region to continue onward.

TASHKURGAN

This town occupies a sort of crossroads. It sits on a north-south route from India as well as an east-west route from Bactria, with both routes terminating at towns around the southwestern edge of the Taklamakan. Tashkurgan was at one time the capital of a small mountain kingdom, and it hosts a sizable Buddhist community. However, because of its altitude high in the Pamirs, the environment is unsuitable for supporting a large population, limiting its size and importance.

TURFAN

Though it sits next to a mountain range, Turfan occupies an exceptionally deep depression toward the eastern end of the Tien Shan. It is about 11 miles away from Lake Aiding, which, at 500' below sea level, is the fourth lowest spot in the world. (Like Lop Nor, Aiding is very salty.) Despite being so far east, Turfan retained strong trade ties with the Iranian world even after the Chinese took direct control of the city in 640, probably because of the presence of a community of Sogdian merchants. Persian silver coins are as easily found there as Chinese copper cash.

Turfan's immediate surroundings are a remarkably productive agricultural region because of a sophisticated irrigation network. This network is called a *karez* in regions influenced by the Persian tradition, but it is better known by the Arabic *qanat* elsewhere. The network consists of miles of nearly but not quite horizontal tunnels dug into the surrounding mountainsides. These subterranean canals protect water from evaporation along the way. They are accessed through vertically dug wells. At their end, they feed into surface irrigation networks. With this network, runoff from the mountains can be controlled and distributed across productive fields rather than causing bouts of flooding on otherwise desert-like land.

Traditionally, these networks are built by *muqannis*, a nearly hereditary group of skilled engineers specializing in this kind of work. They represent another kind of traveler one might find moving through the region; they also work digging or restoring underground tunnels, which is suggestive of certain types of adventures.

STOPS ALONG THE WAY

These are just a few of the many other cities along the Silk Road where travelers may find themselves.

Beiting: This well-fortified city, probably the largest Chinese town north of the Tien Shan, also served as capital of the Uighur kingdom.

Bukhara: Like Samarkand, an important center of trade, culture, and scholarship in western Asia.

Chang'An: Capital of China for most of this period, square-walled Chang'An contains huge markets, an administrative sub-city, the fabulous Daming palace, and up to a million people.

Kabul: One of the oldest cities on the Silk Road, Kabul was at various times governed by Greeks and Indians before a long dynasty of Turkic rulers emerged in the fifth century.

Lhasa: Founded as a palace in the seventh century, Lhasa became a religious site rather than a center of political power in the ninth.

Liqian: A nondescript town in China's dry east, but not quite in the desert, with a very West Asian population.

Tehran: A minor town along the silk routes at this time, which would eventually become Iran's capital.

YANGUAN AND YUMENGUAN

The fortress of Yumenguan sits 55 miles northwest of Dunhuang. The name of the fortress translates evocatively as Jade Gate Pass. Even so, "pass" is slightly misleading. Yumenguan is in the middle of a desert plain, not a physical gap between obstacles. "Border checkpoint" might be more accurate, if less poetic. It marks the extreme western border of China. Travelers are required to present themselves either there or at its sister station Yanguan before moving on. The fortress's earthen curtain walls are a mere 27 by 29 yards, about 30' tall and 15' thick at the base. There are conflicting stories for how it got its name, the most plausible of which is that it was named for jade shipments arriving from North Asia.

Yanguan, 40 miles south of Yumenguan, has a similar function. (The name translates to a less charming "Southern Pass.")

Travelers through Yanguan are typically taking the southern Taklamakan route, while those going through Yumenguan are more likely traveling the northern Taklamakan route or alternative northern routes around the Tien Shan. But while it fills a similar function, Yanguan appears to have been a

smaller facility, consisting of a single earthen watchtower atop a hill.

ITINERARY

Here are some distances between notable points along the Silk Road.

<i>Cities</i>	<i>Distance</i>
Kashgar to Baluka	280 miles
Kashgar to Gilgit	260 miles
Kashgar to Khotan	350 miles
Kashgar to Samarkand	490 miles
Khotan to Baluka	340 miles
Khotan to Dunhuang	800 miles
Khotan to Niya	150 miles
Khotan to Yarkand	100 miles
Loulan to Dunhuang	250 miles
Turfan to Anxi	500 miles
Turfan to Baluka	575 miles
Turfan to Korla	180 miles

YANQI

A town 43 miles northeast of Korla, Yanqi was at times the leading settlement of its area and, during the early centuries of the Silk Road, the capital of one of its petty kingdoms. Yanqi lies about 15 miles west of Baghrash Kol, a remarkably large freshwater lake (380 square miles in the early modern period). An outlet leading toward Lop Nor keeps water flowing and fresh, rather than salty like the marshes and lakes to the east.

YARKAND

Standing between Kashgar and Khotan, Yarkand started as a small kingdom with a population around 5,000 and was eventually overtaken by its larger neighbor to the northwest. It provides a jumping-off place for journeys south to Gilgit and India (though the passes south from Khotan are somewhat easier to travel on and provide better access to Tibet). It also offers access to the west, particularly toward the Oxus, nearly as good as that afforded by Kashgar. It serves as a major gateway for Buddhist pilgrims, though most just pass through on their way elsewhere, so it lacks large Buddhist establishments like those at Mogao and Kizil.

PEOPLES AND EMPIRES

The Silk Road connected an ever-shifting array of nations and ethnic groups. These are the primary influences.

THE CALIPHATE

In the early seventh century, Islam spread explosively from its place of origin on the Arabian Peninsula into a vast empire, the caliphate. By the middle of the eighth century, the caliphate extended from the foothills of the Central Asian highlands to the Atlantic coasts of Morocco and Spain. Conversion to Islam was not explicitly required or forced on the caliphate's new subjects, nor was Islam as actively missionary as Christianity or Buddhism. Nonetheless, potential access to the new elite as well as policies imposing additional taxes and various restrictions on infidels strongly encouraged people to become Muslims. Consequently, areas that were a patchwork of Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and other faiths moved steadily in the direction of the new religion, and Arabic became a common second language.

Until 750, the caliphate was ruled by the Umayyad dynasty, for the most part from a capital established at Damascus. The Umayyads were then overthrown by their distant cousins, the Abbasid dynasty, who moved the capital to the newly founded city of Baghdad. As early as the late eighth century, though, the caliphate started to crumble into a number of successor states, starting in Spain (where the deposed Umayyads reappeared) and Morocco, and progressing inward toward the center of the empire. Local dynasties in Afghanistan, Iran, and across North Africa took control of their own territories. They

continued to pay lip service to the caliph as a supreme religious authority, but the Abbasids were reduced to the status of figureheads until the Mongols wiped them out.

CHINA

China's a large and complicated place. Moreover, China of the early dynasties is in a long process of becoming the China of popular conception: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism still contend with one another. The imperial bureaucracy has yet to take its mature shape. Mandarin Chinese has yet to develop as a dialect let alone become a national standard, although there is a purely literary "classical" Chinese widely used throughout the period and beyond. Indeed, the very idea of "China" is very much in motion.

Moreover, during the period in question here, far from being a model of long-term unity and stability, China collapses into multiple rival kingdoms *twice* (three times, counting the aftermath of the Tang) and spends about 300 years as a shifting set of rival states. So far as the Silk Road is concerned, the eastern approaches to Central Asia from Chang'An to Dunhuang are usually under the control of *some* state which claims to be ruled by the true emperor, but that emperor's authority may cover just Northern China, or as little as the Hexi Corridor and some adjacent territory. There's vastly more going on than can be covered here, but this timeline can at least set out who is in charge of the eastern end of the Silk Road from the fall of the Han to the rise of the Tang, and when the dangerous changes of dynasty are.

- 220** – After the Han collapse, China breaks into three kingdoms. Wei, with its capital at Luoyang (northeast of Chang’An) holds the northern provinces.
- 265** – The Jin dynasty displaces the emperor of Wei and in a few decades reunites China. Chang’An is briefly capital again, but the imperial seat moves several times.
- 304** – The Sixteen Kingdoms period follows the Jin collapse. Northern China becomes an ever-changing patchwork of small states mostly ruled by non-Chinese invaders and settlers, notably a long-lived Hunnic confederation.
- 439** – The Northern Wei dynasty manages to reunite Northern China, again moving the capital several times.
- 535** – Wei breaks up into eastern and western regions. The western part uses Chang’An as its capital, even after the Western Wei are displaced by the Northern Zhou, who reunite the north, in 557.
- 581** – The Sui dynasty emerges and eventually reunites the various fragmented bits of China, paving the way for the Tang dynasty.

An ever-shifting array of peoples.

HELLENISTIC KINGDOMS

When Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., he left behind an empire that stretched from Greece and Egypt in the west through Persia to the Indus and Jaxartes rivers in the east. The empire fragmented instantly, with Alexander’s generals taking control of the pieces. In the east, most notably in Bactria and northwestern India, this produced kingdoms with Indian, Persian, and other non-Greek majorities under a Greek ruling class, or at least a ruling class which, though assimilating over time, retained a veneer of Hellenistic culture, expressed in clothing, religion, art, architecture, and language. For example, Greek words, or at least Greek characters, were frequently used on coins, and Greek gods appeared in local art. The last of the Greek-influenced kingdoms and their Hellenizing ruling classes finally collapsed in the early first century A.D., but the influence of the Greeks remained in subtle ways.

INDIA

During this period (and, indeed, until very recently), India was a collection of smaller states, with larger empires periodically rising and falling to dominate parts of the subcontinent, but never all of it. During the years of the Silk Road, overland trade routes were controlled by a succession of more-or-less short-lived empires uniting northern India punctuated by periods of small, fragmented states: the Gupta Empire, which lasted from the fourth to sixth centuries; the mid-seventh century Harsha Empire; which rose and fell in less than a half-century along with its founder; and their successors, the Pratihara and Pala empires, which between them dominated northern India from the seventh century to well after the decline of the overland silk routes. In addition to serving as important markets for goods, these empires were major sources of Buddhist texts, and scientific innovations such as place-value number systems. (The Guptas and the Palas were particularly notable promoters of Buddhism.)

MONGOLS AND TURKS

The lands to the north of China and the Tarim Basin were occupied by a large number of nomadic tribes: Turkic speakers toward the west; Mongol speakers to the east. Though a lack of historical records obscures a lot of detail, they were similar in a number of ways despite linguistic differences. They lived by herding, some hunting and gathering, occasional horticulture, and trade with agriculturalist neighbors such as the Chinese. And, of course, sometimes they raided wealthy neighbors, or even went beyond raiding into conquest.

At any given moment, some large chunk of the North Asian steppes was dominated by a confederation of tribes. After a few generations, the old confederation would fall apart, either because of internal dissent or in the face of attacks by a rising new coalition of tribes. This led to a series of short-lived empires rising and falling in North Asia, around and sometimes spilling into the Tarim Basin and China itself: the Kushan Empire, the Hephthalite Huns, the Gokturks, the Uighurs, and others.

TIBET

Surrounded by most of the world’s tallest mountain ranges and populated primarily by nomadic yak-herders and barley-growing subsistence farmers, the Tibetan plateau was an obstacle to work around rather than a destination to visit for the first several centuries of the Silk Road. That began to change in the early seventh century when a series of rulers from around Lhasa began to conquer the plateau and unify it into a Tibetan Empire, spreading a distinctive form of Buddhism as they went. Before the middle of the century, the Tibetans were a threat to western Chinese territories. By the end of the century, they had moved into the Tarim Basin. The Tibetans and Chinese spent the next two centuries fighting off and on, with territories from eastern Afghanistan to Chang’An changing hands repeatedly. The empire suffered a severe civil war in the middle of the ninth century and collapsed into a great many small kingdoms and territories ruled by warlords until the Mongols finally absorbed it in the 13th century.

TOCHARIANS

The most likely original people of the Tarim Basin are called the Tocharians. The designation is actually a bit of a misnomer. It comes from a name used to refer to certain people in Bactria, whom early scholars associated with towns around the Taklamakan. That association has since been discredited, but no new name has gained currency.

The earliest we see of the Tocharians (or, at least, their presumed ancestors) are mummified burials found around the Tarim Basin, dating to the second millennium B.C. They had light-colored hair and eyes and wore fabric woven in patterns resembling tartans from the British Isles. The Tocharians of the Silk Road period wrote in an Indo-European language, the farthest east such languages have been found. This has led to fanciful speculation that the Tocharians were a lost tribe of wandering Celts or something similar. However, genetic testing has them clearly related to other West Asians. Beyond that, little is known, save that they were predominantly Buddhists in the last few centuries before Uighurs overran them.

UIGHURS

The Uighurs started out as the ruling coalition of one of the countless steppe empires of North Asia. They were a

The Face of Mourning

The Uighurs have a tradition of slashing their faces when someone close to them, such as a spouse or immediate family member, dies. Both men and women practice this. When adventurers meet Uighurs with facial scars, it doesn't necessarily mean that they've seen combat, but simply that they've lost loved ones.

political rather than a cultural entity; indeed, the name means something like "union." However, they were driven out of the steppes by the Kyrgyz, yet another nomadic confederacy, during the mid-ninth century and migrated to the Tarim Basin, where they overran the remaining Tocharians, settled Sogdians, governing Chinese, and anybody else who happened to be there. They settled around the existing towns and intermarried with the natives, largely imposing their Turkic language on the region. In time, this combination became its own ethnicity, and the Uighurs became a people rather than a diverse, defeated alliance.

RELIGIONS

Unlike many regions of the medieval world, the Silk Road has no dominant religion. Individual regimes might hold their preferred faith up as the standard, but no one religion consistently overshadows the others.

It was officially suppressed in 845 and, while it survived on the fringes of Chinese society and eventually revived, Buddhism did not recover quickly.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism was the first profoundly influential religion along the Silk Road. Buddhism posits reincarnation, but holds that an endless succession of lives isn't necessarily a good thing. A central tenet of Buddhism is that life is suffering, and that suffering is caused by desire and attachment to material things. If one can reach a true and profound understanding of this and free oneself from desire, one becomes enlightened and is freed from a long and unhappy cycle of death and rebirth. Committed Buddhist practice, therefore, is often an exercise in meditation and asceticism to eliminate desire and achieve enlightenment.

The particular form of Buddhism which spread north from India and across the Silk Road has some aspects which make it well-suited to expanding beyond its native territory. It is inherently a missionary faith, encouraging adherents to lead others to enlightenment as well searching for it on their own. Moreover, it holds that the prayer, meditation, and self-denial of a Buddhist monk are not the only routes to long-term spiritual fulfillment. Certain other acts of virtue can reward the provider with a pleasant afterlife between incarnations. In the days before widespread Christianity and Islam promised paradise, this was quite an innovation, and one which became very attractive. The virtuous acts in question include supporting Buddhist congregations and their monasteries. This led in turn to the construction of Buddhist cave shrines (see p. 40) and other monuments along the Silk Road, providing the trade routes with an infrastructure which would outlast any given political regime.

Buddhism was eventually crowded out of the western end of the Silk Road by Islam, but survived in various forms in India, Tibet, and contested areas of the Tarim Basin. It did well in China, but nevertheless faced problems. Some of its doctrines clashed with essentially Confucian state ideology, and it was never entirely trusted by the imperial government and many Chinese scholars because of its foreign origin.

Incalculable is the merit of the Bodhisattva who practices charity without any attachment to appearances.

– *Diamond Sutra, Chapter 4*

CHRISTIANITY

The predominant form of Christianity to spread east along the Silk Road is often called Nestorian Christianity, though the Nestorians don't call themselves that. They just regard themselves as Christians. Nestorianism arose in the fifth century A.D. and split with Orthodox Christianity over a doctrinal dispute. Nestorians maintain that Christ had separate rather than united human and divine natures (see *GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.*, p. 21, for more on early Christianity, the Eastern Church, and Christological controversies). Since they faced persecution in the strictly Orthodox Byzantine Empire, many Nestorians migrated east to Persia where they joined a Christian community already estranged from Rome and Constantinople. Like other sects, the Nestorians sent out missionaries, who traveled from Persia into India and, by the seventh century, China.

Christianity met with at best modest success on the Silk Road. Congregations grew large enough that at least five bishoprics were established across India and China. A few chieftains and minor kings converted over the years, and others at least recognized the religion and kept priests on hand along with other religious advisers. However, it was a minority religion nearly everywhere it could be found. It eventually declined in many places, to the point where Christianity was all but extinct in China by the time Renaissance-era Catholic missionaries arrived, going the long way around via sea routes. Any Westerners who encounter native Christians in Asia might be initially delighted to meet co-religionists, but then unpleasantly surprised by numerous doctrinal differences.

GRECO-ROMAN PAGANISM

While the religion was never widely shared by conquered peoples, the ruling classes of the Hellenistic kingdoms of the East (p. 27) continued to revere a variety of gods from much farther west. Though the last of the Greek-influenced kingdoms went under just as the Silk Road was getting established, aspects of Greco-Roman religion continued to lurk along the route. It's unclear whether they were being actively worshiped rather than used as artistic motifs, but identifiable representations of Hercules and Tyche, a goddess of fortune, could be found in Sogdiana as late as the fourth century.

Greco-Roman paganism also had a very visible effect on Buddhism. Artists following Greek-inspired traditions but working in northern India and adjacent parts of western Asia introduced new elements into Buddhist art, including the styles of robes, halos, and naturalistic depiction of expressions.

Aspects of these styles spread east along with Buddhism itself, influencing religious art as far away as Japan.

ISLAM

If Buddhism was the most influential religion on the Silk Road, Islam was the second. It appeared in the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century and expanded quickly. Muslim armies overran Persia by 651, taking Islam up to around the Oxus River. In the century that followed, Muslim rule stretched into Sogdiana and Bactria as far as Samarkand and the Pamirs. Once Islam became the dominant religion of the western part of the Silk Road in the wake of a series of military conquests and political establishments, steady large-scale conversions followed so that it became the most widely practiced religion of the western end of the Silk Road. Muslim influence slowly made its way across the Pamirs into the Tarim Basin, where it joined the complicated stew of faiths there.

MAGIC!

The peoples of the Silk Road have diverse beliefs on magic and the supernatural. Buddhists, for example, have no trouble believing in a broad range of gods and spirits who have a variety of remarkable abilities. Most also assume that humans can gain extraordinary powers of perception, travel quickly, change their appearance, alter the weather, perform supernatural feats of strength, and undertake other seemingly impossible tasks either by casting spells or as a natural consequence of meditation and enlightenment. They also tell stories of items imbued with magical powers. In fact, one of Buddhism's early "selling points" was the purported ability of Buddhists to heal the sick and prevent bad weather. However, there are also philosophical tendencies within Buddhism which dismiss magical feats as just one more form of attachment to material things and a distraction from true enlightenment.

Zoroastrian magic appears largely concerned with incantations and written spells and invocations (particularly ones composed by priests) and elaborate systems of astrology. However, it appears that vastly more magic is attributed to Zoroastrians than is actually practiced by them. Indeed, the word "magician" comes to us from the Persian word *magus*, the name of a group of Zoroastrian religious practitioners.

Christians and Muslims have supernatural beliefs which tend to center around God-granted abilities given to holy people and spells cast by amoral or downright evil sorcerers. Both also avail themselves of amulets (small objects ranging from personal ornaments to passages from scripture written on a scrap of paper) to hopefully grant supernatural protection. Christians in particular rely on relics of saints and fear malign supernatural powers granted by the devil, but both Christians and Muslims are more likely to ascribe a moral character, either good or evil, to magic.

Manichaeism theoretically prohibits the use of magic. However, in practice, the prohibition is frequently interpreted as outlawing certain kinds of magic, notably

enchantments and illusions. Other types of magic, such as healing and ensuring good fortune, are regarded as fair game. Like Christians and Muslims, Manicheans make use of amulets, notably incantations written on paper and household implements such as bowls.

The Uighurs and most of the other Turkic and Mongol tribes living in and around the Silk Road practice various forms of shamanism, with holy men (called, among other things, *kham* or *bakshi*) communicating with spirits of nature and ancestors. The Uighurs frequently use birds of prey, either actually or symbolically, as conduits to the spirits to divine the future or ensure good fortune. Shamans might speak with spirits or even be possessed by them.

For fantasy campaigns, the many magical traditions available on the Silk Road suggest using multiple magic systems. Zoroastrian and Buddhist traditions of incantations might use the spell-based system of **GURPS Magic** (or perhaps, for more advanced practitioners, **GURPS Thaumatology: Ritual Path Magic**). Traditions relying on the accumulation of merit or sanctity (Buddhism again, and possibly strains of magic coming from the Abrahamic religions) might use meditative magic (**GURPS Fantasy**, p. 161). Alternatively, they might imbue practitioners with sufficient power that abilities based on advantages might be more suitable. **GURPS Thaumatology: Chinese Elemental Magic** is, of course, idea for handling various Chinese mystical traditions. **GURPS** offers a variety of rules for alchemy (**GURPS Thaumatology**, p. 100, **GURPS Fantasy**, p. 156, **GURPS Fantasy-Tech 1: The Edge of Reality**, p. 29, **Alchemical Elixirs** in **Ritual Path Magic**, or "Dungeon Brewmasters" in **Pyramid #3/82: Magical Creations**); since most of the societies impinging on the Silk Road had their own alchemical systems, all of them might be in use. Finally, astrology (**Fantasy-Tech 1**, p. 30) is widely practiced and magical amulets (see **Material Magic**, **GURPS Thaumatology**, p. 95) are widespread.

Islam recognizes Jewish and Christian traditions as near misses, in a way, following the right god but with flawed doctrines. Consequently, Jews and Christians are largely tolerated in Muslim states; other religions may be treated more harshly. Despite nominally recognizing the spiritual authority of the caliph, the religion is nevertheless divided into a number of sects and tendencies. Notably, though Muslims of the Shia tendency dominate the western approaches to the Silk Road in Iran, most Muslims on the Silk Road itself are Sunnis.

JUDAISM

There were small Jewish communities at least as far east as Sogdiana centuries before the formation of the Silk Road. Jews had extensive experience with long-distance trade, with dispersed Jewish enclaves serving as local intermediaries and sources of information for traveling merchants. As trade routes to the East opened up, Jewish merchants followed them and established small communities in China perhaps as early as the seventh century A.D., eventually serving as the backbone of subsidiary trade networks reaching across Eurasia.

Judaism has never been a strongly missionary faith, so Jewish communities along the Silk Road remained small minority enclaves. As Abrahamic monotheists, Jews were also sometimes confused with Christians and Muslims. In some places in China, Jews even shared religious facilities with Muslims.



MANICHAISM

The prophet Mani founded Manichaeism in Mesopotamia during the third century A.D. It is a syncretic religion incorporating aspects of Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. The Manicheans believe that the material world is a corrupt construction made from the corpses of dead demons as part of a cosmic war between forces of light and darkness. However, the world also contains fragments of a global soul. Through a monastic routine of prayer, ceremony, and asceticism (including abstaining from meat, alcohol, and sex), dedicated believers, often called the “elect,” may liberate these fragments to return to a paradisiacal World of Light. Sufficiently virtuous

people would find their own souls linked to fragments of the global soul and would eventually ascend to the World of Light in a process resembling reincarnation, while the souls of sinners would fall into the hands of demons. Recognizing that the demands on the most dedicated believers are too onerous for them to survive unaided, the religion allows for large congregations of “hearers” to live more normal lives and support the elect through alms.

Many of these ideas were cribbed from other major religions of its time. The more-or-less equally matched forces of good and evil came from Zoroastrianism. The idea of salvation and redemption of the soul came from Christianity; Christ also had a prominent place as an important, if misunderstood, prophet. And the structure of dedicated monastic communities supported by less restricted believers, as well as the idea of souls reborn in other bodies, came from Buddhism. Indeed, Mani claimed specifically to be a prophet who was trying to correct misunderstandings and corruption of the messages of Christ, Buddha, and so on.

Manichaeism became remarkably widespread in a very short period, perhaps because Manicheans could find points in common between their religion and just about any other. It also had an attractive approach to iconography; Mani himself was apparently a gifted painter. Roman legions took the religion west with them, spreading it as far as Britain, and others took it east to China. Still, it remained a minority religion in most places. The Uighur khanate is the only country which adopted Manichaeism as its official religion. Moreover, its similarity to other religions, while potentially a benefit for finding converts, also made it a widespread target for suppression through Europe and Asia. It was forcibly restricted in many Christian, Buddhist, and eventually Muslim regions – often being regarded as a heresy of each dominant faith – as well as in ninth-century China as part of a general purge of foreign religions.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism, founded by the prophet Zarathustra in the second millennium B.C., was the official religion of the Persian Empire. It went into eclipse during the Hellenistic period, but was revived by the Sasanian Persians. Despite having nationalist associations, the movements of Persian traders managed to spread the religion along the Silk Road and into China.

The official form of the religion at the time held that the universe is a field of conflict between Ahura Mazda, a god of order and purity, and Angra Mainyu, a god of corruption and chaos, and worshipers were encouraged to choose the former over the latter. Ahura Mazda is aided by a variety of *amesh spentas* and *yatazas*, helper spirits who might be understood as angels, avatars, or lesser deities. Zoroastrianism encourages active involvement in the world; it has no tradition of monasticism or similar contemplative pursuits.

Zoroastrians revere water and flame as symbols of purity. Temples are built around a place for a sacred fire, and generally have a well, pool, or other water source somewhere on the grounds. They also expose their dead in “towers of silence” (p. 40) to avoid polluting the earth.

CHAPTER FOUR

WAR AND MONEY

As they drew closer, the promontory resolved itself as an artificial tower atop a low rise, not one of the many yardangs they had passed. Still, the color of the earthen walls made it nearly indistinguishable from the sandy hills around it. What had appeared to be a cluster of shrubbery around its base were bundles of cut branches. The sun glinted from arrowheads at its parapet. Hui Su opened the pouch by his knee and drew out the

guosuo, wondering if he would need to hand over some of their silk or silver.

Political power over the Silk Road shifted frequently between Chinese, Turkic and Mongol confederacies, Tibetans, Muslims, and no one at all. But despite many changes in political control and dominant culture, there were always commerce . . . and battles to gain power over that commerce.

ARMS, ARMOR, AND THE MILITARY

Over its centuries of operation, the Silk Road saw a huge variety of fighting people, from professional warriors of great empires to thugs armed with little more than a willingness to do violence. One of the few constants was not weapons, armor, or martial style, but fortifications. For a considerable length, the eastern end of the Silk Road is protected by, or at least runs parallel to, the Great Wall of China (though it was a series of long walls rather than a single structure, particularly during this period). Unlike the stone-faced, elaborately crenellated sections of the Great Wall tourists see in eastern China, the western end is earthen, alternating layers of packed earth or sun-dried brick with courses of reeds and twigs, giving the structure resilience and preventing cracking.

The Great Wall probably ends near Anxi, but that's not the end of ancient China's defenses. Beyond Anxi and Dunhuang, a network of square towers, 20' to 40' high, extends into the desert. These towers have the same earth-and-thatch construction as the western end of the Great Wall. A series of towers set more or less as far west as Yumenguan and Yanguan extends to the south, defining a border. In addition, another line of towers extends west from Yumenguan at least as far as Lop Nor; some evidence suggests the tower system stretching to Lop Nor may have been connected by segments of wall as well, though the precise date, extent, and course of the walls are in question.

Placed on hilltops and at similar strategic points, these towers can serve as small local garrisons to fend off similarly small incursions, but are more important as watchtowers and parts of a communications network. The towers maintain supplies of wood which can be lit to signal other towers of imminent danger. This system became more elaborate over time. Watchtowers were constructed in other parts of the Tarim Basin, so by the end of the Tang dynasty, the infrastructure was in place for beacon relays across its entire length, though staffing was lax by that time. The Tibetans, during their occupation, restored parts of the system and introduced more elaborate signaling as well, using from one to three signal fires to indicate different threat levels.

Troops stationed at the towers are equipped to defend their fortifications. In addition to sword and shield, their main weapon is the crossbow, with 150 bolts per person. Beyond the missile-armed tower troops, the Chinese and their neighbors use infantry-heavy forces relying on a variety of polearms (many used the halberd-like *ji*, but plain spears were widely used as well). These forces are backed up by cavalry and, during very early periods, chariots. Most troops are unarmored, but wealthier ones use a variety of armors, notably scale. China also recruits mercenaries and uses troops from client kingdoms, so a Chinese army can have any number of different troop types depending on their origin.

By contrast, the nomadic armies which plague China and occasionally invade the Tarim Basin are composed almost entirely of mounted archers. These warriors rely heavily on recurved bows, and fall back on javelins or swords only occasionally. If armored, they typically wear leather or heavy felt.

Tibet fields soldiers armored in heavy mail, armed with swords and notably long spears. Tibetan horses might be mail-armored as well, but they are primarily used for transportation; soldiers dismount to fight. One Chinese general, after noting the Tibetans' astonishing courage and resolve on the battlefield, also remarked that they were poor archers.

Since they're the product of a large, diverse, and not strongly centralized empire, Muslim armies are mixed, with their composition changing frequently. The main Abbasid armies are composed of relatively heavy troops. They have large bodies of cavalry using bow and spear as their main weapons with maces and swords as backup weapons, riders favoring mail, and horses often armored with felt barding. They are supported by bowmen and spear-wielding heavy infantry. However, there is considerable variation based on region and available funding. For example, as Islam expanded to the east, armies included more and lighter mounted archers in the nomadic style. Many Iranian cavalry are skilled with the lasso, though it would rarely be used in battle.

Some regions also produce mounted infantry; they use horses or mules to maneuver around the battlefield, and then dismount to fight. Contrary to popular images, Muslim troops use straight swords during this period, not scimitars.

ARMS CONTROL

The Silk Road sees a number of different traditions concerning arms control among the general population. For example, for a steppe nomad, a bow and a blade are just part of everyday kit, and prohibitions on carrying such weapons would be baffling, even if going armed into someone's home

MASS COMBAT

These are the primary types of *GURPS Mass Combat* elements deployed by the various societies of the Silk Road territories.

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Element types</i>
Caliphate	Heavy Cavalry, Heavy Infantry
China	Bowmen, Heavy Cavalry, Medium Infantry
Steppe Nomads	Horse Archers
Tibet	Heavy Infantry, Pikemen

Forces employed by the larger empires can have much more varied troop types. Troop and equipment quality are, of course, highly variable, though horse archers from North Asia are usually at least Average quality and frequently better. A handful of native troops from around the Taklamakan and some soldiers of the caliphate might have the Terrain (Desert) feature, but most soldiers fighting on the Silk Road come from more hospitable terrain elsewhere.

might be considered impolite. For large chunks of Chinese history, though, only some people were allowed to carry weapons; for Taklamakan cities under Chinese control, that works out to about one person per household. Moreover, that right was essentially synonymous with an obligation to provide military service. The right to bear arms was less "You get to carry a sword!" and more "If there's a war, you're on the front lines, so be ready."

Whether someone is allowed to carry weapons openly, then, depends on who's in charge of any given location, how orderly conditions are at the moment, and whether that person can make arrangements with the local Powers That Be. As a rule, few will question openly armed travelers on the road. (Sogdian merchants, for example, are frequently depicted in native art as traveling equipped with swords.) Particularly during unsettled times, carrying weapons against bandits is simply good sense. The closer one gets to civilization, though, the better an idea it is to put away deadly gear (those same Sogdians aren't represented as armed quite so often in Chinese art).

Even ignoring legal restrictions, carrying arms is *socially* a problem. Openly displaying weapons and armor gives the appearance of looking for trouble. That rarely goes over well anywhere, but in increasingly Confucian China, which puts a premium on social harmony and looks down on fighting men, it's likely to get a person classified as a troublemaker and be grounds for exclusion from polite venues like temples and the households of the wealthy and powerful. Naturally, martial artists, whose weapons are mostly just sticks and lightly modified agricultural implements, are at an advantage here.

TRADE

The point of the Silk Road is, of course, commerce. Multiple empires contest control over a region of desert known for its lethality in order to benefit from the goods crossing it, either using the merchandise directly or acting as intermediaries who take a cut as items pass through their territory. The high degree of difficulty means that the volume of trade along the Silk Road is actually quite low relative to, say, major shipping routes across the Mediterranean or along the Indian coast. But that difficulty means that whatever goods can make it from one end of the road to the other are virtually guaranteed a very high price.

It appears that there are two significant types of trade expeditions. One is an official embassy. It is common practice in the Chinese sphere of influence for subsidiary kings to send sizable official parties to the Chinese capital bearing large quantities of tribute. After their visit, they are sent back home bearing similarly substantial gifts. This practice in itself is a back-door method of conducting business without actually admitting to commerce, but members of the embassy are also permitted to make deals with local merchants while in China. However, such embassies are rare, with many years or even decades passing between a ruler or his envoys setting out on the long, difficult, expensive journey to Chang'An.

The other type of trade expedition is the small, private caravan. Trivial numbers of merchants (rarely consisting of more than a dozen or so people and animals) carry loads of goods a greater or lesser distance depending on the knowledge and ambition of the individual dealer.

It has been suggested that most silk enters the Silk Road territories through the Chinese government and is carried further by individual traders. What doesn't enter the Silk Road as gifts to client kings is sent as payment for soldiers stationed locally. From there, it diffuses outward in smaller quantities as everyone in Chinese pay trades their silk for other goods. Many bolts of silk find their way into the hands of merchants to carry them farther and farther away from their source.

TRANSPORT COSTS

The enormous cost of goods shipped along the Silk Road surprises no one. Particularly by low-tech standards, it's a very, *very* long way from China to Europe and the Near East. The trip from Chang'An to Samarkand alone is about 2,600 miles. (The trip from Samarkand to Western Europe is an expedition of similar magnitude, though access to the Volga and Don rivers and the Black and Mediterranean Seas can make parts of that journey much faster and easier.)

Even under ideal conditions, it takes eight or nine months to cross the distance, and conditions are never uniformly ideal. (See *Climate and Land Use*, pp. 6-7) There are also the costs and other difficulties of dealing with animal drivers and other people associated with a merchant caravan, the risk of robbery or dying of illness or natural disaster along the way, and possible seasonal delays. One good reason to trade in short or mid-length relays is that seasonal closings of mountain passes and some desert routes make it very difficult to travel continuously along the whole route.

These difficulties, compounded by legal and linguistic limitations, encouraged the development of trade by multiple shorter-range relays. Networks of merchants united by religion, ethnicity, or other factors buy or sell goods for a relatively modest profit, moving them similarly modest distances before trading them to someone else in their network better suited to take them on the next leg of their journey. For example, a merchant living in Dunhuang might travel to Chang'an to buy bales of silk and bring them back to the edge of the Chinese Empire for warehousing. He would sell the silk to merchants more familiar than he with conditions in the Tarim Basin, who might take it across the Taklamakan to sell to merchants in, say, Khotan or Kashgar. They in turn would stockpile silk to be sold to merchants making the different but equally difficult trip over the mountains into Transoxiana or northern India for resale there, and so on. Though warehousing and reselling add to the cost, they don't add as much as would a single merchant assuming the fees and risks of shepherding a single shipment of goods 2,600 miles by himself.

In addition to facing death on the trail, merchants can expect taxes in the marketplace. Some are sales taxes.

At Korla, a charge of 2-3% on the value of goods sold is imposed. In places in the Muslim world, a sliding scale was applied, depending on one's relationship with the state and religion: 2.5% for Muslims, 5% for resident non-Muslims, and 10% for foreigners. In greater Persia, road tolls are often charged. These might be collected at bridges, borders, or city gates. At one river crossing in Transoxiana, traveling merchants must pay two dirhams (about \$120) per loaded camel or one dirham for each smaller beast of burden. Assessments could be quite high in places, up to 30 dirhams. At least theoretically, these fees are meant to maintain the roads and pay for security.

All of this gives merchants reasons to strike special deals with officials and create alliances. Merchants might, for example, have the option of purchasing a license which allows them to trade freely, avoiding individual tolls in favor of an annual lump-sum payment. Converting to Islam certainly made good

financial sense to those merchants who worked on the western end of the Silk Road after the eighth century. Other merchants might collaborate with a Muslim or other native, or negotiate a concession from the government.

Nevertheless, no matter how many deals a merchant cuts, the cumulative cost of transport remains enormous under all circumstances. By the time goods hit the western end of the Silk Road, a price increase of \$100 per pound is close to an absolute minimum, and could be much more. The challenge to merchants is to keep their operating expenses below that figure and survive the many risks along the way. However, if one survives, a single long trip can be very much worth it, because merchants selling exotic goods can charge dizzying prices. Shortly before the Byzantines established their own silk industry, raw silk imported to Constantinople could sell for between \$4,000 to \$8,000 per pound, and even in 13th century Europe, after sea routes across the Indian Ocean had overtaken the Central Asian land routes and silk production had been established in the Near East, an ounce of silk thread still cost a week's middle-class wages, or about \$160.



TRADE GOODS

Though it started with a simple quest to trade silk for horses, the Silk Road became a conduit for trading a huge variety of goods.

Silk Textiles

The most traded luxury good to be found on the Silk Road is the one from which it gets its name. Silk cultivation (see *GURPS Low-Tech*, p. 23 for details) was started in China but eventually came to be practiced through the rest of Asia and into Europe. But even when sericulture spread across Eurasia, Chinese silk remained a significant item of trade. It did so because not all silks and silk fabrics are the same. Both silk and the silk market differed from place to place for technical and political reasons.

Chinese silk is distinct in part because of the technical characteristics of the Chinese silk industry. For a very long time, Chinese silk could be identified by exceptionally long strands of fiber in the thread. Chinese silk producers had highly developed methods for unraveling a silk cocoon in one piece, resulting in unusually fine thread and consequently fine fabric. It took foreign producers centuries to develop similar techniques. China also produces far more silk than any other nation, so it remains an important source for raw material. At least some foreign producers, notably the Byzantines, had silkworms producing relatively small quantities of yellowish fiber rather than the pure white fiber of Chinese silkworms.

Legal conditions play a role as well. During the earlier dynasties, the Chinese government held a legal monopoly on the production of silk brocades (heavy fabrics with raised,

woven textures) and embroidered silks, and government-run factories would only sell those fabrics to a limited set of customers, so not everyone who wanted particular silk products could get them.

The Byzantines were the first civilization outside of the Chinese sphere of influence to produce their own silk, starting in the sixth century. Nonetheless, production remained low for a long time. They also created purple murex dye, a color unavailable elsewhere, which took to silk very well. The imperial government maintained a monopoly on this purple and used it as a badge of status available only to honored officials and foreign dignitaries.

The Sasanian Persians and Muslim caliphate came to silk manufacture relatively late. Unlike China and the Byzantine Empire, they placed no legal restrictions on the production and use of silk. However, silk gained some cultural baggage after the rise of Islam. Though not prohibited in the Koran, some strains of Muslim legal and religious thought were concerned that silk garments might be too luxurious. Both as a cost-saving measure and a way of avoiding religious issues, Muslim weavers developed a style of weaving elaborately decorated borders a few inches wide which could be attached to ordinary clothes, using a blend of silk and lesser fibers. This allowed the pious to use a bit of silk and permitted more people to own garments made at least partially of silk. The Muslim world also acquired superior methods of unraveling silk cocoons in the eighth century, letting them produce silk thread of similar quality to that coming out of China, though they never matched China's volume of production.

All of these factors give various regions different roles and specialties in the international silk trade. China produces more and often finer silk thread than the rest of the world, and since other regions (such as the Byzantine Empire) can't make enough to keep up with demand, raw silk and silk thread continued to be notable exports. China also exports finished cloth with unique patterns or using particularly fine weaving techniques.

Sometimes, silk from China is processed or reprocessed closer to its destination to take advantage of local technologies or demands. Not only is bulk silk dyed and spun into thread outside of the country of its origin, the Romans sometimes reduce silk fabric to its component threads and run it through a loom again to produce a lighter, more transparent cloth.

Mediterranean purple attained prestige in China and India, so Byzantine silk is exceptionally valuable on the export market. The Abbasid caliphate produces relatively inexpensive silk garments and eventually matches the quality of Chinese silk thread, if not its quantity. And though the Byzantine and Chinese empires have monopolies on the production of certain kinds of silk, their trade is much more difficult to control. For example, though an up-and-coming merchant in China without good political connections might not be able to obtain natively produced brocades from government-controlled workshops, he could import similarly rich silks from outside the empire.

SAMPLE PRICES

One of the big problems facing anyone studying ancient economies is that it's very difficult to tell how much things cost at any given time. Records of market prices are sparse at the best of times and often nonexistent, and even where such records exist, they're usually exceptional or represent only a single transaction.

But sometimes historians get lucky. In 743, officials in Turfan surveyed the city's markets and compiled records indicating high, low, and median prices for various goods, ranging from flour to camels to perfume ingredients. This table lists median prices for selected goods from those records, along with the unit of measurement where applicable; for most goods, the range of prices from minimum to maximum is about 20% of the median.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Azurite	\$80	oz.	[1]
Cauldron, 3-bushel capacity	\$700	each	
Cauldron, 5-bushel capacity	\$1,000	each	
Chinese ginger	\$13	oz.	
Cinnamon	\$9	oz.	
Cloves	\$30	1/4 oz.	
Crocus flower	\$40	1/4 oz.	[2]
Floral brocade	\$27	foot	[3]
Malachite	\$8	oz.	[1]
Musk	\$110	1/4 oz.	
Nard	\$14	oz.	
Rhino horn	\$8	oz.	
Sal ammoniac	\$8	oz.	
Sandalwood perfume extract	\$40	1/4 oz.	
Silk damask, purple and terracotta	\$65	foot	[3]
Silk damask, bright red	\$55	foot	[3]
Stone honey	\$30	oz.	
Sword, steel with iron inlay	\$800	each	
Vermillion	\$140	oz.	[1]

Notes

[1] A colorful mineral used as a pigment.

[2] Crocus is the source of saffron, hence the high price.

[3] Fabrics with woven figures. Brocades have a slightly raised design on top of the fabric, making it visible on one side, while damasks have the design woven in to the fabric, making it reversible with designs visible on both sides.

Horses

From the Chinese perspective, the purpose of the Silk Road is less to sell silk and more to buy horses from people in West Asia. At various times, the Chinese engage in similar trade with Tibet, exchanging Tibetan mounts for Chinese tea. Particularly in the empire's early years, Chinese horses were relatively small and correspondingly weak, tolerable for pulling chariots but not as good for riding. The Chinese also lack the kinds of wide pastures necessary to breed sufficient numbers of good horses. (If using the rules for horses from *GURPS Low Tech Companion 3: Daily Life and Economics*, Central Asia is effectively advanced in horse breeding for the first few centuries of the Silk Road; treat it as TL3 from the outset, while neighboring regions must transition from TL2 to TL3.) Even in later years as they acquired good breeding stock, internal demand for horses for the military and use by the elite far exceeds China's ability to produce enough horses to go around. Consequently, China has to import them from the professional herdsman of the Central and West Asian plains.

Most imported horses are relatively short, pony-like mounts from the North Asian steppes, simply because they are the kind most readily at hand. However, the Chinese put a particular premium on large "heavenly" or "blood-sweating" horses purchased from the Ferghana valley. They are so called because, when exercising, they appeared to sweat red blood. Rather than a sign of a particularly good breed of horses, however, it is now believed that the red sweat was a symptom of skin parasites. On the Chinese market, though, the reputation of such horses at least doubles the prices (+1 CF for those using *GURPS Low-Tech*).

Other Goods

In addition to silk, a variety of other commodities are traded along the Silk Road. Though grain and other quotidian items are bought and sold locally, extremely valuable items travel particularly long distances. This table specifies some of the more expensive goods which are dealt with a pouch-full at a time, listed by source.

Source	Item
Afghanistan	Lapis, turquoise
Africa	Gold, ivory
Baltic Sea	Amber
China	Bronze, lacquer-ware, silk, tea
India	Diamond, ebony, green cardamom, indigo, ivory, pepper, saffron, sandalwood
Kashmir	Bdellium and nard (perfume ingredients)
Khotan	Jade
Mediterranean	Amber, coral, glass, murex
North Asia	Sable and other furs
Persia	Asafetida, gilded silver, jasmine
Red Sea	Ambergris, coral, frankincense, myrrh, topaz
Russia	Ermine, mink, sable
Southeast Asia	Black cardamom, cloves, patchouli
Sri Lanka	Pearls
Tibet	Musk
West-Central India	Agate, carnelian

Other items could originate from many sources, such as sculptures, carpets, felt, medicines (rarely distinguished in the minds of buyers and sellers alike from spices and perfume ingredients), wool and woolen fabrics (mostly from Europe and mountainous regions of Persia and India), slaves, and wine.

Less commonly traded, difficult-to-maintain exotic goods make their way along the Silk Road from time to time. These include novel plants (typically unusual fruit-bearing or flowering ones) and exotic animals such as cheetahs (trained as hunting animals for the elite) and unusual dog breeds. These generally go as royal gifts in the company of diplomatic expeditions. Few individual traders have the resources to maintain such delicate goods on their own.

I know that you do not lack twenty staters.

*– Letter from Shayn,
a Sogdian in Dunhuang,
to her long-absent husband.*

Money

There are three standards of value along the Silk Road: grain, coinage, and bolts of silk. For many transactions, grain can be used to purchase goods at a value of about \$1 per pound. Most grain is probably wheat, though Tibet produces mainly barley, and higher-priced rice is reasonably well represented (see *Food*, pp. 37-38). A bolt of silk is standardized during much of this period: 22" wide by 39' long, or 71.5 square feet, undyed, and made in typical Chinese fashion of long fibers. This might weigh as little as 2 lbs. and cost \$75 to \$100.

Coins are complicated. On the eastern approaches, currency is almost exclusively made from copper or copper alloys, usually mixed with small quantities of lead, tin, or both. Chinese coins come in a variety of denominations, starting at around \$0.60 to \$1. Most are circular coins with a square hole in the middle (though, during the later years of the Han dynasty, a few high-denomination coins are shaped like stylized knives or shovels). They are often strung together in bundles of 1,000 and, in large transactions, traded as a unit. Silver is traded by weight.

Central Asia sees the use of silver coinage as well as copper. These coins, either imported (usually from the greater Iranian cultural sphere) or minted locally in imitation of Western coins, circulate individually rather than as strings and are worth from \$60 to \$160 depending on fluctuations in size and purity; they are likely valued by weight rather than by face denomination. Gold is exchanged in some transactions, but is valued purely by weight. Foreign gold coins which make their way to Central Asia are either utilized as immensely valuable sequins (for example, almost all of the Byzantine solidi found in China were pierced suitably for use as decoration) or melted down into ingots. The western approaches use a full range of gold, silver, and copper coins whose value varies widely depending on the issuing authority, purity, and size (see *GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.*, p. 28, for just one example in the diversity of western coinage, or *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy Treasures 1: Glittering Prizes* for a more general treatment of preindustrial currency).

CHAPTER FIVE

LIFE ON THE SILK ROAD

Ang and the boy from India sat side by side, with Su watching them like a hawk. Neither was smiling as they struggled at their tablets. Finally, Ang sighed and set down the piece of cut bamboo. "This is . . . so different," she said. The Indian boy put down the brush, clearly no happier than her. Each looked at the other's tablet and smiled ruefully. "Look," she called to her brother, "he uses too much ink, and I use too little. I will have to learn to write all over again in India."

Su shook his head. "It will take you as long to get used to the food."

Ang shrugged. "I liked some of it. Will you try this?" She held out a bowl; small, tofu-like chunks sat in a yellow sauce. "It has a good flavor." Then she frowned. "I don't . . . feel so well, though."

With its mix of cultures and constantly shifting population of travelers of all kinds, the Silk Road saw a great many traditions going into the daily lives of the people who lived there.

CLOTHING

A basic Silk Road costume worn by both sexes involves a caftan (a long, front-opening coat), trousers, and boots or shoes. Caftans are worn belted, possibly with a button at the neck. They have round or V-shaped necks and slits up the sides. Distinctions in wealth and status are largely conveyed by materials, such as brightly colored fabric, brocade weaves, or precious metal plates on the belt. Among the Sogdians and Uighurs, the tight-fitting caftan's edges are commonly decorated with a border of a different fabric. On formal occasions or in cooler weather, a shawl (sometimes with decorative weights at the corners) or a short-sleeved outer tunic may be added. The costume includes form-fitting skullcaps, conical caps slightly rounded on top, a square cap among Uighurs, or tall hats donned by Sogdians. Turbans are worn by the eighth century. Men often keep their hair short in earlier periods, but grow longer later on. Women's hair is often plaited into multiple braids, which might be gathered together and put through a decorative metal tube.

Nomads from the North wear roughly similar costumes, with long coat and trousers. Their outfits are distinguished by a number of subtle variations. For example, they frequently include a very long sash, wrapped around the wearer's waist several times and tied tightly. Its folds serve as a

sort of pocket in which small items can be securely placed instead of in a separate pouch. Headgear is more diverse, with many designs incorporating earflaps which can be tied down in the cold winters. The most notable item in the nomadic wardrobe, though, is a pair of boots. Like modern riding boots, they are tall and heavy to protect the legs. They often have relatively high heels, which better accommodate stirrups but can be harder to walk in.

During the earlier years of the Silk Road, Chinese men of almost every station wear a short jacket and a combination of long trousers with a short skirt or apron over it, which might create the illusion of a long shirt worn under the shorter jacket. Women wear similar jackets, but with long skirts or full-length dresses; they have an elaborate system of headgear indicating social status. By the Tang dynasty, fashions shift somewhat. Despite an occasional vogue for "Western" clothing (in this case, clothes of Central Asia), the Chinese mostly use their own styles. The basic jacket-and-trousers or jacket-and-long-skirt scheme is still followed, but sleeves become very broad in contrast to the tight-fitting jackets of the West. They also use multiple layers of garments, elaborate ornamentation, and (among women) architectural hairstyles to indicate wealth and status.

The caftan-and-trousers suite can often be found on the western approaches to the Silk Road, particularly in Sogdiana and Bactria. However, it is found alongside a more western style of dress: a long shirt or robe pulled over the head, worn by itself or with a pair of baggy pants. Short vests, front-opening robes, and cloaks might be added depending on weather and desire for display. Headgear includes turbans and a variety of brimless caps.

My clothes may be different from a monk's robes, but there should be no distinction in the Dharma.

– *The Tale of Master Yuan of Mount Lu*

MUSIC

Music was and is a popular recreation in Central Asia. Important instruments include a variety of wooden flutes, the ocarina, the mouth harp, and a number of fiddles and lutes, most with only two or three strings. Reed instruments can be found, particularly at the eastern and western approaches, though they're less important in traditional music in the highlands. Small drums are used in a supporting role in ensembles, but brass instruments are extremely rare.

There is, of course, plenty of singing, usually solo or choruses singing in unison. One distinctive trait of the native music of the region is the peculiar technique of throat singing. Practitioners can create resonances in the mouth and throat, simultaneously creating two harmonizing notes. Though primarily found in Mongolia and Siberia, this weirdly growling style of singing is practiced along the Silk Road and beyond into Tibet and Pakistan.

Where there is music, there is frequently dance. Dance styles of the Tarim Basin appear to be

related to classical Indian dance, with an emphasis on hand gestures and hip movement. However, styles from elsewhere are incorporated, such as twirling Sogdian dances. Dancers and musicians from the Western Regions are extremely popular in China. Social dancing is usually segregated by sex in public places, but need not be so in private venues.

New Technique: Throat Singing

Hard

Default: Singing-4.

Prerequisite: Singing; cannot exceed Singing skill.

There are actually a variety of throat singing styles used across the globe, but one technique may be used to represent them all (unless campaign needs dictate otherwise). This technique lets you not just create the growling overtones of throat singing, but control them in ways suitable to the music being sung.

RECREATIONS

With its small towns and mixed populations, most places along the Silk Road lack the grand civic processions and public spectacles enjoyed in major cities. However, the people could always amuse themselves. In addition to universal recreations like drinking and dancing, with so many cultures mixing, there's frequently something new to do for a good time. For example, sports resembling polo are common across Central Asia, as are board games like chess, though there are many variants. Ancestors of backgammon and dominoes are also played in various places.

Traditional Uighur games include a sort of cross between tennis and soccer where players attempt to bat a stick into a scoring area while an opposing team tries to catch it, and a brutal relative of tag where one player whips the other players with a scarf or belt while the others try to take it from him while not being hit. Mongolians play a variety of games with *shagai*, sheep's anklebones which are used as multipurpose

gaming pieces. For example, they can be used as projectiles and targets in shooting games, counters for gambling, or a bit like four-sided dice. Each face represents a different animal: camel, goat, horse, and sheep. Different games involve capturing other players' dice, achieving specific totals and combinations of rolls, and so on. The steppe nomads play a surprising number of what we would recognize as board games, but they do so by sketching out the board on the ground.

The Chinese may have brought kites with them, though the high winds and dust storms of the Taklamakan would have been challenging. While the earliest were made of silk, much cheaper paper kites were developed during the Tang dynasty. It seems likely that *weiqi* (go) was played as well. The earliest surviving book on the game, dating to the sixth century, was found in Dunhuang. Very late in the period in question here, some might enjoy the novel meditative spectacle of a tea ceremony, just coming into vogue in the ninth century.

FOOD

Given the many cultural influences, Silk Road cuisine is quite varied, though cooking has to adapt itself to the ingredients available in the region. If comparing the food of the Silk Road to modern cuisines, it probably most closely resembles the food of Afghanistan with a significant Chinese influence.

Wheat and barley are the most common grains. Wheat is used in many forms: wrappings for a variety of filled dumplings essentially identical to modern potstickers, wontons, and spring rolls; flatbreads cooked on griddles or stuck to the side of clay ovens (indistinguishable from various types of Indian

roti) and which might be stuffed or flavored; noodles which might be fried or served in soups; and durable biscuits resembling hardtack. (Archaeologists excavating one Taklamakan site found pork and chive dumplings – a recipe still popular today – dating to the early Middle Ages but preserved by the dry desert climate.) Millet, usually served as porridge, is a lesser grain along most of the Silk Road despite widespread use in China. Rice is a relatively uncommon crop along the Silk Road as well as in northern China until after the Tang dynasty, and both was and still is considered relatively luxurious on the western end of the route.

Mutton and lamb are the most common meats. However, just about anything that can be butchered is eaten: beef, pork, yak, horse, camel, domesticated poultry, and so on. Animals are used for milk as well as meat where possible (for example, horses, sheep, and yaks as well as cows), and yogurt is a common food; though most Asians are lactose-intolerant, Central Asians are somewhat less so, and the fermentation process reduces lactose to a more tolerable level. Wild birds and deer are hunted where available, and fish are consumed where there are lakes and rivers, but they aren't a significant item of the diet in most places. Meats are typically chopped up finely and cooked with other ingredients rather than served as large steaks and chops. ("Mongolian barbecue" is a 20th-century Taiwanese invention and bears no resemblance to historical Mongol cuisine, which is heavy on fermented milk products, soups and stews, and boiled, unseasoned meat.)

Vegetables other than pungent aromatics such as garlic and onions are not particularly popular. However, fruit (notably stone fruits, pomegranates, grapes, and particularly melons) and tree nuts (such as hazelnuts, almonds, walnuts, and pistachios) are grown in many places and show up frequently in the diet. The oases of the Tarim Basin are still known for their succulent melons. Native vegetation also leans heavily toward aromatic herbs such as mint and coriander, which flavor the cuisine. Sugar, as likely to come from palm sap as from cane, is known and holds a special place in Buddhist cuisine, with honey and fruit syrups also used as sweeteners. Transoxiana is the source of "rock honey," a well-regarded sweet made from cooking down cane juice and milk; no recipes survive, but it may have resembled Indian halwas or modern milk caramels.

For such a dry place, there's a lot to drink. Beer, wine (made from the wide variety of locally produced fruit), rice wine, yogurt-based drinks resembling modern Indian lassi,

tea, and kumiz (fermented mare's milk) are all available. Tea is green (the fermentation process to make black tea is centuries away), compressed into bricks, and ground into a powder for brewing. Kumiz is at this time a largely seasonal drink, produced late in the summer and consumed in the fall, because it keeps poorly. Kumiz has a low alcohol content, about 2%, but could be fortified up to 10% by freeze distillation at least as early as the seventh century. Modern residents of the region practice an ingenious form of heat distillation, involving simmering the kumiz under a curve-bottomed pot filled with cold water. The alcohol vapor condenses on the bottom of the pot and either drips back into the kumiz or runs into a small pitcher suspended under the pot. This certainly could have been practiced in antiquity, but it's not clear how far back it goes. The volume of drinks based on juices and milk is perhaps not surprising, given that there are few sources of water, and many of those are brackish.

Religion colors local and personal food choices. For example, Buddhism and Manichaeism discourage eating meat, so some people along the Silk Road avoid animal flesh. Buddhists have introduced meat substitutes such as tofu and seitan, but they have not yet come into widespread use. Likewise, Judaism and Islam forbid the consumption of pork, and both Muslims and Christians have periodic fasts (Muslims during Ramadan, Christians around Lent) and other restrictions on their diet. However, these are not necessarily fixed rules. For example, some Buddhist traditions, recognizing that monks who beg for meals can't dictate what they get, allow the consumption of meat. Similarly, Muslim travelers are granted temporary relief from fasts, and some Muslim legal traditions are less strict than others concerning the religion's ban on wine, allowing limited consumption of fermented beverages not derived from grapes. And, of course, those who profess a religion may not invariably hold to its tenets.

HIGH IN THE PAMIRS

Alcohol isn't the only intoxicant available along the Silk Road. Several other substances are used and, to some extent, traded through Central Asia, for both medicinal and recreational use.

Cannabis is grown and may even have originated in Central Asia. Indeed, because the plant produces more of its intoxicating resin in hot, dry regions, Central Asian hemp is likely to be particularly strong, though conversely a poor source of rope fiber. Its use as a medicine, ritual adjunct, and even recreational substance are all well-established by the period in question here. One group of Central Asian nomads, whose range included Sogdiana, even had special ritual braziers for burning it. Whatever its origin, it seems to have been burned in open containers across Europe and Asia, or smoked in water pipes once they appear. Travelers from India might also prepare it as *bhang* (a paste used to make drinks and confections to counteract its bitter taste) or *charas*, better known in the West under its Arabic name, *hashish* (bricks of resin-heavy cannabis extract to be smoked or,

again, used in confections). Cannabis is also mixed with wine in China.

The western end of the Silk Road is the home of opium. Fields from the Middle East to Afghanistan and northern India supply markets across the Old World and have done so since classical antiquity. Its medicinal use is well-known, and the poppy appears frequently as a symbol in images of both healing and sleep. It is most often eaten or dissolved in wine (it's effective in very small doses, so it takes well to dilution), but it is sometimes smoked as well.

China produces an herb called *ma huang*, known in the West as ephedra. Ma huang is usually administered as a tisane. While relied on medicinally as a stimulant (much as in the modern world), it also has applications as a recreational drug. It's particularly used to heighten sexual sensation.

With the rules for drugs on *GURPS Low-Tech*, pp. 150-151, cannabis might have modest effectiveness as an analgesic, antiemetic, or calmativ. Opium is the standard sedative around the Silk Road. Ma huang counts as a stimulant.

BUILDINGS AND MONUMENTS

Architecture along the Silk Road runs the gamut from temporary huts to massive religious memorials.

CIVIL AND DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

The layout of cities and towns along the Silk Road reflects both local conditions (social and political as well as physical) and the societies which build them. Raiding by nomads is endemic along the Silk Road, and full-scale warfare is not uncommon, so just about every settlement is fortified. City walls are typically earthen and very thick. They might be faced with rubble or even cut stone, but this is more the exception than the rule. Settlements are generally well-equipped with cisterns. Dry conditions prevail all along the route, so residents have to collect water when they can and store it for a long time.

In the mountainous regions at the western end of the Silk Road, settlements follow natural landforms. Samarkand, for example, occupies a hilltop which gives it a jagged, bean-like shape. On the flatter land of the Tarim Basin and the Hexi Corridor, a lack of natural contours often results in more regularly shaped towns. Many of these towns were constructed as planned settlements by the Chinese army. Like Roman cities which similarly started as garrisons, the Chinese-founded towns are full of right angles. Defensive walls typically describe a square or rectangle (or, when small variations in terrain force a deviation from the plan, at least something with a small number of long, straight sides) and are filled with a rectangular street grid. The cities of the Tarim Basin also have deep wells outside of the city and a great deal of water-moving equipment (see *Low-Tech Companion 3*, p. 17) to keep the fields irrigated.

Most cities are sparsely populated enough that homes can be freestanding buildings, rather than sharing walls like modern urban row houses. The spaces between buildings may be used as ornamental or kitchen gardens, or simply as alleys to pass easily through the neighborhood.

Generally, domestic architecture along the Silk Road resembles that of other hot-weather regions. Dwellings incorporate shaded areas (sometimes with constructed awnings, sometimes with trellises over which leafy vines grow to provide a canopy) and courtyards to trap cool air and provide maximum shelter from the sun. In all cases, windows are built to provide some ventilation if necessary, but are kept small, so as not to compromise the insulation the structure provides.

One popular style of home is constructed of a wooden framework filled in with thatched panels, frequently made from reeds or tamarisk branches, and plastered over with earth to resist the wind. White poplar, which grows straight, is preferred and sometimes cultivated, but other woods are often used out of necessity.

Another popular style is a semi-subterranean earthen building. The floor of the building is a few feet below ground level, and the walls are made of thickly piled earth. This provides considerable insulation to keep the building cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Where residents can afford it, wall paintings on plaster are a popular form of decoration. Elaborate murals are a particularly common feature of well-to-do Sogdian homes. They are typically divided into three sections by height. They have elaborate but largely abstract patterns on the bottom, pictures of people in the middle, and pictures of gods and mythical scenes above.

Many nomads use felt-walled tents with a lightweight wooden framework (see the yurt, *Low-Tech*, p. 32). They might be collapsed for travel or, if the nomads in question are particularly well-off and travel on firm-soiled plains, carried on carts.

RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

During the period in question here, most religious architecture along the Silk Road is Buddhist and very visibly so. Bamiyan is not alone in having monumental Buddhist sculptures. For example, by the seventh century, Kucha had a pair of 90' standing Buddhas outside its west gate, and the Mogao cave shrine has large Buddha statues of its own.

Holy Hospital

Religion is almost universally associated with healing, making temples and shrines centers of healing as well as scholarship and worship. A temple at Khotan has a statue of the Buddha carved from sandalwood and allegedly from India. Petitioners at the temple in search of healing contribute bits of gold leaf to be applied to the statue in locations corresponding to their afflictions – the eyes for vision problems, the chest for heart problems, and so on. In this way, the statue came to be completely gilded.

Stupa

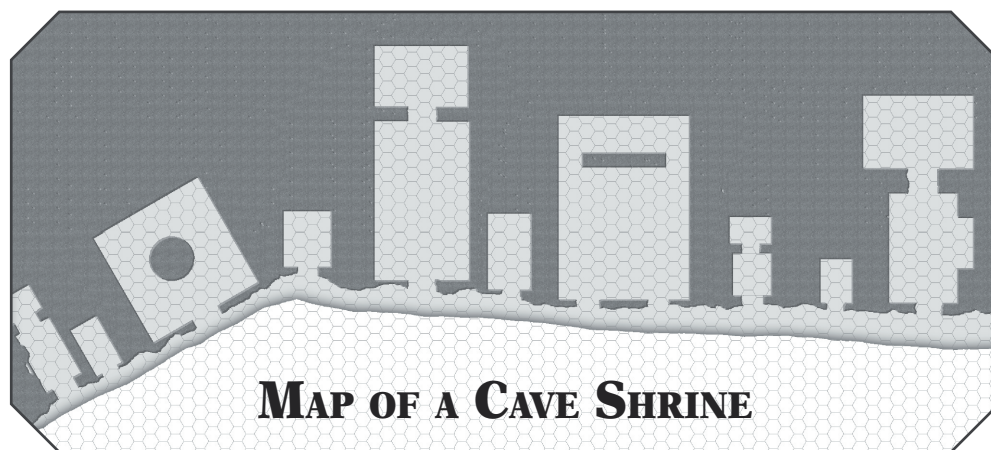
The most common item of Buddhist architecture is the stupa, a mound or pillar containing sacred objects buried in its core, ranging from the remains of holy men to written prayers to precious metals (with all the implications for treasure-hunters that implies; ruined stupas in modern Central Asia are riddled with holes made by people looking for valuable artifacts). Stupas are objects of pilgrimages, a bit like cathedrals in medieval Christendom and the tombs of holy men in Islam. Visiting and walking around them is an act which accumulates virtue. In India, the stupa is usually a dome-like mound of earth which might be plastered over or covered in masonry. Going farther away from India, stupas become taller and more pillar-like, and the round stupa might be set on a square base or stacked series of bases. The towering pagodas of China and Japan are the culmination of this trend.

Stupas along the Silk Road, particularly in the Central Asian deserts, are built like short, thick pillars two or three yards across, often on a stack of progressively wider square bases for a total height and width of 20' or 30'.

The stupa itself is surrounded by a walkway where worshippers may circle it, and the stupa and its walkway may be part of a larger temple or other religious establishment.

Cave Shrine

Another item of Buddhist architecture common along the Silk Road is the cave shrine (see the map of a typical cave shrine, below). Cave shrines are *not* deep, dungeon-like cave complexes, with limited entries and lots of rooms far underground. Rather, a typical cave shrine is composed of a large number of single rooms carved into a mountainside, each with its own separate entrance so that it can get natural light. In that way, they're similar to many modern motels, which have long rows of adjacent but unconnected rooms accessed from long outdoor walkways and balconies. Some complexes have caves two or even three rooms deep. In the more impressive ones, grand ceremonial chambers extend quite deeply into the mountainside. Still, shrines tend to be built wide and tall rather than deep; caves are dug in tiers several stories up from



ground level, accessed by a complex of wooden ladders, stairs, and scaffolding secured by posts driven into the cliff face. Large shrines might have elaborate rock carvings, detailed mural paintings, and multiple ceremonial chambers. The caves at Kizil were carved from a soft rock whose structural weakness limited the size of large chambers. The excavators, therefore, left stupa-like pillars in the middle of larger rooms.

Zoroastrian Structures

Zoroastrians have their own architecture. A Zoroastrian temple is built around a sanctuary housing a sacred flame. This sanctuary is a square building sometimes set apart by a wall or on a raised terrace, restricting access. During the Silk Road period, the sanctuary is frequently near a courtyard for public ceremonies, and may have a nearby ritual water source.

The Zoroastrians also produce a peculiar funerary structure. Because they regard flesh as corrupt, Zoroastrians do not immediately bury their dead, so as not to pollute the earth.

Instead, Zoroastrian communities use the *dakhma*, better known in English as a “tower of silence.” This is a low, flat-topped tower or mound, set well away from inhabited areas. Bodies are exposed to the sky until scavengers and weather remove the flesh. The bones may then be collected for destruction or burial. Other societies in Central Asia, notably Tibetans, likewise practice “sky burial,” allowing scavengers to consume the flesh of the dead, but do not use specialized architecture for it.

LANGUAGES

Covering as much territory as it does, the Silk Road naturally sees a great many languages, written with a dizzying combination of scripts.

On the western approaches, the dominant languages are a variety of Eastern Iranian tongues, notably Bactrian (spoken by the Kushans) early on, and later Sogdian and Pashto; though related to the languages of the Persian heartland, they're not so closely related as to be mutually comprehensible. Sogdian is a particularly common language along the Silk Road. The Hellenistic elite occasionally use Greek, and some Buddhists prefer Sanskrit. The expansion of Islam brought Arabic with it. Although it does not become the dominant spoken language, it is heavily used in religious and diplomatic contexts. Persian is also occasionally heard in these regions (more specifically, Middle Persian during the pre-Islamic period and New Persian, the direct ancestor of modern Farsi, by the early ninth century).

Bactrian is usually written with the Greek alphabet. Sogdian is transcribed with three different scripts, some of which are used to write other Persian languages. The other languages each have their own unique scripts.

The original languages of the Tarim Basin are dialects of Tocharian (a unique Indo-European family) primarily to the north, with Khotanese (another Eastern Iranian language) mostly in the south. Both Khotanese and Tocharian scripts have the same distant Aramaic ancestors as the Persian scripts used to write Sogdian, but they came by way of India rather than Persia. In the ninth century, Turkic languages brought by the Uighurs largely replace all of these tongues. Though a runic alphabet exists for Old Turkic, in the Tarim Basin it is written with a variety of scripts, including Arabic and versions of the scripts used for Sogdian.

On the eastern approaches, Chinese is usually the dominant language, though dialects have mutual intelligibility problems. For example, someone from the coast may communicate with someone from the western end of the Great Wall as though they each understood the other with Accented or even Broken fluency. Understanding of written Chinese, particularly within official circles, is more uniform, but there are still differences in dialect there; “Mandarin” Chinese, an elite dialect used in governmental circles, has yet to develop.

And despite the general dominance of Chinese, there are still pockets of other languages, and various nomads and their immediate descendants can be found speaking Turkic or Mongolian languages. Finally, the tiny Chinese Jewish community continues to read and write Hebrew.

Tibetan and various Indian languages appear sporadically, but are mostly spoken by travelers and the occasional outside invader rather than natives. The

most notable exception is Sanskrit, which is used as a language of religion and ritual by Buddhist monks.

*Whenever there is an irregular vapor over . . .
there will inevitably be a treasure underneath.*

– Dunhuang star chart

LIFE OF THE MIND

Though the Silk Road isn't necessarily a hotbed of intellectual activity, it nevertheless sees more scholarly and literary activity than one might expect from a series of deserts. Between the many merchants (who tend to be literate), Chinese officials (who by the Tang dynasty are starting to be appointed based on their command of the Confucian classics), and dedicated Buddhists (many of whom are on a mission to find and translate texts) moving through the area, the literacy rate is probably above average. Unfortunately, much of the writing done along the Silk Road has been lost.

Most of the known literature of the area is religious in nature. Buddhist monasteries along the way are centers of translation and copying texts. Most Tocharian texts, for example, are translations from Sanskrit of Buddhist works. A lot of Sogdian literature is also religious in nature, mostly Manichean, but addressing Christianity and other religions as well. Regardless of the language, though, most religious writing appears to be transmissions from elsewhere rather than original work.

The use of the Tarim Basin as a trade route gave rise to its own genre of writing: language guides for travelers. Bilingual dictionaries (giving, for example, a word in Arabic and its equivalent in Chinese), strictly speaking, don't exist. Instead, a number of phrase books are available which can give the reader some basic communication skills, like modern phrase books for tourists. Surviving examples provide things like polite greetings and responses, simple commercial transactions, and (particularly for Sanskrit phrase books) dialog about pilgrimages and religious texts. These phrase books tend to translate a language of the Tarim Basin into Chinese or Sanskrit. Relying on a phrase book gives the user Broken-level fluency for the purposes of a single skill. Varieties of Religious Ritual are the most common, but books for Savoir-Faire and Merchant are also available.

The ends of the Silk Road are exceptions to the general trend of an intellectual as well as physical desert. The imperial Chinese capital, the courts of India, and the major cities of Persia are all centers of learning and artistic ability. Samarkand is home to a noted university and many great poets.

WRITING MEDIA

Paper was invented around the same time the Silk Road was first being opened up. Paper on the Silk Road is frequently made from old rags, though as in China, it is also produced with bamboo, mulberry bark, and other plant fibers. Exceptionally fine papers are sometimes colored blue with indigo dye.

Paper is used primarily as a wrapping material for several centuries rather than as a writing surface. Even when it came into more common use as a medium for writing, it remained relatively expensive. Paper is regularly recycled, both as a writing medium and as a versatile material for making symbolic funerary items.

Instead of paper, other materials are used to make portable recordings. Though some documents are composed on cloth, tree bark (particularly birch), palm leaves (particularly for Sanskrit documents), or leather, the primary writing surface used along the Silk Road is wood. This version takes a number of forms. One is two flat sheets of wood cut to hinge together like a clamshell. A scribe could write on the inner surfaces, then close it to protect the writing. This is best suited to very short documents. More commonly, thin strips of wood are fastened together parallel to one another, producing something like a sushi rolling mat or a wooden placemat. Most often, the scribe would orient the slats vertically, writing from the top of a slat down to the bottom, then moving on to the next. The document could then be rolled up and tied or put in a bag for transport. Like papyrus scrolls around the Mediterranean, a scribe typically only uses one side, so old wooden scrolls can be recycled simply by writing on the blank side.

WRITING TOOLS

The Silk Road sees two major writing traditions. Chinese writing, particularly from the Han dynasty onward, usually uses brushes to apply ink. This ink is produced by grinding a stick of solid pigment with water in a small reservoir called an ink stone. A Chinese scribe's kit is likely to include at least one ink stone (which, despite the name, might actually be ceramic), several ink sticks, and a variety of brushes of various sizes.

More western (that is, Indian, Persian, and Arabic) writing traditions use pens, which are typically made from dried hollow reeds or thin bamboo, cut at a very sharp angle; the pen can draw a thick or thin line depending on the direction of its movement. Paraphernalia for producing ink is far less standardized, but a typical western scribe's kit likely contains various reeds, a small knife and/or shears to cut them, inkwells, and either pots of premade liquid ink or containers of pigment from which ink may be reconstituted as necessary.

Inks in the region usually are composed of some source of carbon like soot rather than iron-based compounds like oak galls, but other ink colors include blue (based on lapis lazuli) and red (based on red lead, cinnabar, and carmine). See *GURPS Low Tech*, p. 46, for all writing equipment.

CHAPTER SIX

CAMPAIGNS

The rotting corpses lurched forward along the narrow mountain trail, jerking one side ahead, then the other. The servant who had fallen now sprang up again. His face had gone pale, and his teeth were bared as he joined the others hopping and lurching toward the remaining travelers.

“Turn them! Turn them!” Su shouted, trying to get the yaks they had traded their camels for back under control. The panicked animals blocked the narrow trail as the bloodthirsty undead drew nearer. With the steep mountain to one side and a long, long drop to the other, there was no escape.

Ang stood quietly in the middle of the trail between Su and the monsters, head bowed and eyes closed. After a long moment, she looked up again, with the faintest of smiles.

One hand snapped out from under her robes holding a short staff. The other came out, a long knife held high. “Come,” she called to the corpses, “let me help you along your journey.”

Judged solely by the apparent volume of commerce, the Silk Road is far down the list of the most important trade routes in history. Sea traders like the galleys of Venice, the British East India Company, and the tea clippers of the end of

the Age of Sail moved vastly more material. But its historical importance goes far beyond the tonnage or monetary value of items exchanged. These are dwarfed by the influence of the ideas which traveled the deserts and mountains of Central Asia: the secrets of paper, silk, and glass manufacturing; artistic techniques; most of the world’s major religions; and hints of a larger world which served as a spur to later exploration and expansion. In an age where the world was composed of enclaves divided by language and religion as much as by geography, the Silk Road offered a conduit by which communication continued between major cultural areas in the Old World. Moreover, by allowing a trickle of exotic commodities to cross the continent, the Silk Road created and maintained markets for luxury goods which set the tone for social hierarchies across continents and eventually provided a push toward the growth of a truly global system.

More importantly for players and the GM, small groups and individuals – driven by a desire for profit, enlightenment, or glory – performed the hard work of carrying those ideas and precious goods. Thus, the Silk Road is excellent for a role-playing campaign.

BUILDING CHARACTERS

Although people on the Silk Road don’t have to fit any particular template, here are some suggestions for useful traits and common occupations.

TRAITS

While **GURPS** traits can be used as written, a number of them have only specific values and specializations available (or, at least, only a handful are actually useful).

Cultural Familiarity

p. B23

There are initially five major Cultural Familiarities around the Silk Road:

- Chinese.
- Indian – covers the subcontinent as far north as the Himalayas and modern Pakistan.
- Persian – covers the greater Iranian cultural sphere bracketed by Mesopotamia, the Pamirs, and India.
- Steppe – covers most of Northern Asia, including Mongols, Turkic speakers, and Huns.
- Tibetan.



Late in the period discussed here, CF (Persian) merges into CF (Muslim). Westerners are likely to have CF (Classical) into the sixth century, which then splits into CF (Western) and CF (Orthodox); see **GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.**, p. 35, for details.

Languages

p. B23

The Tarim Basin and its surrounding territories see a lot of languages spoken and written (see pp. 40-41). The most common are Khotanese and Tocharian, later replaced by the Turkic language of the Uighurs (technically, Old Turkic; a specifically Uighur language, derived from Old Turkic, doesn’t arise until fairly late in this period). Sogdian and Chinese, while less common in everyday use, are reasonably useful second languages for travelers.

Most languages spoken along the Silk Road come in a variety of dialects, some of which are more mutually comprehensible than others. Generally, a speaker of any given language has Accented fluency with related dialects. However, cases where mutual comprehensibility is worse, even to the point of a native speaker having no fluency in a related dialect, are certainly possible.

Many languages also have a variety of different written forms, such as Sogdian being written with several different scripts. In this case, someone with fluency in a given written form of a language can get matching fluency in a different form as a perk for one point.

Craft Secret

Well into TL3, the ability to unravel silkworm cocoons in long strands is a Craft Secret perk (*Low-Tech Companion 3*, p. 24) associated with Professional Skill (Sericulturalist). Most other specialties associated with silk manufacture are less the product of limitations on craft skills and more the result of geographical limitations (for example, murex dye was exclusively available to the Romans and Byzantines) or legal restrictions.

Animal Handling

p. B175

Animal Handling (Cattle) covers yaks as well as cows.

Current Affairs

p. B186

In this age, before the invention of informative broadcasts and, for most purposes, journalism itself, “news media” for the purposes of the Current Affairs skill consists of letters, travelers’ tales, and gossip in the marketplace. This skill largely works locally; the per-day penalty for being out of touch is punishing in a setting where the next important town over is weeks away. However, travelers approaching town can quickly catch up by talking to people leaving as they come in. Current Affairs (Travel) is primarily oriented toward religious journeys, though someone with that specialty knows about spots of particularly romantic character, like the suicide cliffs of Iron Gate Pass.

JOBS

If characters aren’t built as pure adventurers, they’ll need to hold down a job. Most of the occupations on *Low-Tech Companion 3*, pp. 45-49, through TL3 are available in Central Asia (except nautical professions like pilot and sailor), but some require special attention.

Tribal Chief: Leaders of nomadic confederations are similar to the tribal chief, but may have Status up to 5 or even 6 and income of Filthy Rich.

Animal Driver: Carts aren’t in common use for long-distance travel. Most drivers along the Silk Road have Animal Handling and Packing.

Bureaucrat: During the period in question here, Chinese officials are increasingly likely to have Philosophy and Literature in addition to or even replacing one of the prerequisite skills.

Herdsman: Herding is a major occupation among the steppe nomads. Any herdsman from the steppes has Riding-12+ in addition to Animal Handling.

A few new jobs are also suitable to Silk Road campaigns: the guide and the holy mendicant. Pay levels are calibrated for TL4 and must be adjusted for TL2 and TL3; see *Low-Tech Companion 3*, p. 45.

Guide

The dry-land equivalent of a pilot, a guide leads travelers through terrain he knows, getting them to their destination safely.

Prerequisites: Area Knowledge-12; either Navigation (Land)-12 or Survival (appropriate terrain type)-12.

Job Roll: Best prerequisite. On a critical failure, roll vs. worst prerequisite; if that fails, 1d injury.

Monthly Pay: \$775, adjusted for margin of success or failure.

Wealth Level: Average. Supports Status 0.

Notes

Desert and Mountains are the most suitable terrain types for guides around the Tarim Basin, though Plains is an option for many of the surrounding territories.

From those, one guide is to be given to the [official] and a keeper of the camel is to be provided as far as Khotan.

– Undated official wedge-tablet letter

Holy Mendicant

It’s common in many areas for certain kinds of holy people to travel supported by the kindness of strangers. This is suitable on the Silk Road primarily for many Buddhist pilgrims, but other religions have traditions of holy mendicants as well (most notably Catholic orders of begging friars, though those are well out of this period). It’s a little better than being a secular beggar, since the holy mendicant has a reservoir of good will among his co-religionists and can pad his income by giving blessings and performing other religious rituals.

Prerequisites: Clerical Investment; either Panhandling-12 or Religious Ritual-12.

Job Roll: Best prerequisite, +2 in regions where the mendicant’s religion is the predominant faith, -4 or worse in regions where it isn’t practiced at all. On a critical failure, roll vs. IQ; if that fails, 1d injury.

Monthly Pay: \$150, adjusted for margin of success or failure.

Wealth Level: Poor. Supports Status -2.

Notes

In their societies of origin, monks, mendicants, holy hermits, and the like can essentially exist *outside* of the local Status hierarchy (not all *do* – the leaders of wealthy monasteries and monastic orders are very much involved in hierarchies – but the monastic lifestyle at least opens up the possibility). The Status trait is, for all practical purposes, not applicable to this job; see *Transhuman Space: Changing Times*, p. 36, for a similar case of characters operating beyond Status. Since Status does not apply to them, they don’t have to keep up with a cost of living to retain their apparent standing in society; their only necessary cost of living is the bare minimum necessary for subsistence, and they receive no Status-related bonuses or penalties.

However, traits such as Social Regard (for the respect shown to those dedicating their lives to piety) or Social Stigma (if, for example, their social function is as repositories of sin or spiritual pollution) still apply. Additionally, such characters often have Disciplines of Faith or Vows which keep them firmly on the fringes of society. Outside of their communities of origin, they're just another, if somewhat peculiar, type of beggar, and there they suffer from low Status.

Up to this point both Chinese and Tibetans have [treated him] honorably and conducted him stage by stage.

– Letter accompanying a traveling monk

TRAVELERS ON THE ROAD

The three most common reasons for travel along the Silk Road, and therefore the most plausible reasons for adventure there, are trade, religious reasons, and war.

MERCHANTS

Merchants are one of the unvarying features of the Silk Road. They may travel any number of routes, from short relays between oasis towns to long stretches from one end of the Silk Road to another. The longer the trip, the more lucrative the merchant needs it to be. Challenges commercial travelers face can include survival and navigation in shifting terrain, avoiding open war, avoiding or defeating bandits, negotiating with corrupt officials (or with scrupulous ones if the merchants are trying to get away with something disreputable themselves), finding and maintaining local contacts, and striking lucrative deals.

A merchant caravan needs people with Merchant, Navigation, Packing, and Survival skills at the very least. Good merchant parties are also multi-lingual, capable of defending themselves, and either socially connected at their destination (with traits like Allies, Contacts, and Claim to Hospitality) or capable of making new connections. Because of the trust which must exist among members of a merchant group, they're also likely to be related or at least members of the same ethnic group, though some diversity can be very useful.

Buddhists making their way to and from India, or at least toward India, in search of old books and other lost, presumably more “authentic” teachings.

The oasis towns around the Taklamakan are reasonable destinations and support populations of Buddhist monks and translators, but the cities and ashrams of India are a particularly ambitious goal. Missionaries seeking converts to their own faith might be found as well: Buddhists in the early centuries of the Silk Road, followed by Christians and Manicheans. Muslims and Zoroastrians don't seek converts in the same way, though they wouldn't turn away prospective new worshipers, and the occasional individual might decide it's a good idea to spread the faith anyway.

What these people have in common is less a batch of abilities and more a powerful commitment. *Successful* pilgrims have traits similar to those of merchants, while successful missionaries have Teaching, Public Speaking, or other social skills on top of that. They may have such traits as Fanaticism or simply a Vow to serve their faith by making a long, difficult journey. Though pilgrims may be respected in their own communities, that high regard does not necessarily translate into general respectability. Even Buddhism, which came close to being the dominant faith of the Silk Road, was still a minority religion in China and subject to occasional persecution in the empire and its dependent territories.

Xia

Less realistically, but very much in line with local literary tradition, military people don't have to be soldiers in the service of an empire. Or, indeed, in the service of anyone. China has a long tradition of *xia* literature, stories of martial heroes who search for adventure. During China's early years, these *xia* are often simply assassins and hired killers, but they begin to take on a heroic character in Tang literature, using remarkable, even near-magical martial skills to fight for honor or the salvation of the people against corrupt officials as well as for riches, working alone or in small groups. In short, they become the same kind of archetype as noble ronin, knights-errant, Western gunslingers, and most player characters.

MISSIONARIES

While merchants are frequently the descendants or other associates of other merchants, holy men, or at least those who aspire to holiness, can be from just about any background. The most common pilgrims along the Silk Road are Chinese

MILITANTS

The Silk Road sees frequent conflicts, and with conflicts come fighters. The most common categories of troops are native soldiers of the oasis towns (often supported by Chinese silk and money) and imperial Chinese soldiers brought in to enhance garrisons and fight bigger battles. In peacetime, in addition to simply standing watch, such troops might perform police actions against bandits and raiders, escort officials and visiting diplomats, and act against smugglers under the direction of customs officials. Armies of horse-riding nomads are also a frequent feature along the Silk Road, whether sweeping through for plunder or conquering new territories. Likewise, Tibetan armies and those from the caliphate operate on the Silk Road. However, due to the mixing of cultures and the sometimes ad-hoc nature of armies through the region, all kinds of mercenaries and other third parties could find roles as specialists or auxiliary troops just about anywhere.

THE WILD EAST

For decades, Asian filmmakers have worked in a genre of “Easterns,” taking the tropes of American Westerns and applying them to the wide-open spaces of Central and Northern Asia. The overlap is natural. Both the Wild West and Central Asia are characterized by isolation and distance from centers of civilization. Both are sparsely populated frontier areas where members of larger civilization contend with both a hostile environment and less sophisticated local cultures. Consequently, both are settings where violent people can thrive and the law must sometimes be taken into one’s own hands.

Many fixtures of Westerns map easily onto the Silk Road. Gunslingers become lone warriors, perhaps adhering to their own private code of honor. Wagon trains of settlers on their

way west to settle new land or reach California to find gold become merchant caravans or expeditions of religious pilgrims, making their way to distant countries in search of riches or enlightenment. Native Americans become Turkic and Mongolian nomads. Small towns along the trail and their law enforcers become oasis towns and their sometimes inadequate garrisons. Prospectors panning for gold in West Coast streams become searchers for jade washing down the mountainsides near Khotan. In some cases, the cavalry which comes over the hill at the last minute may become the forces of a friendly nomadic confederation or the Chinese imperial army. Campaigns can be built on the progress of “lone gunmen” and “settlers” seeking their fortune in the dangerous wilderness.

THE GREAT GAME

Another genre to draw inspiration from is espionage. Central Asia was the theater for the 19th century’s “Great Game,” a sort of Cold War between the Russian Empire, expanding east and south from the direction of its European territories, and the British Empire, consolidating its hold on India. Historically, the towns of the Taklamakan could become the scene of countless intrigues as the caliphate, the dominant Indian and steppe powers of the moment, Tibet, and China struggle to gain influence along important trade routes.

*When everyone is
dead the Great Game
is finished. Not before.*

– Rudyard
Kipling, *Kim*

The diverse ethnic character of the region and the constant movements of travelers offer many opportunities to inject agents into just about any location along the way. Traveling characters (Buddhist pilgrims, merchants, etc.) might be recruited as spies, or individuals trusted by the powers of their home countries could be assigned to go undercover to gather information or even influence events on the ground. Religious and ethnic enclaves along the way can provide ready-made safe houses and local sources of information, or potential reservoirs of personnel for stirring up trouble or to draw material support from.

THE OUT-OF-TOWNERS

Just about any character who could originate in Central Asia is a natural fit for a Silk Road campaign, and there are enough travelers from adjacent regions that no one should bat an eye at adventurers from the greater Persian sphere of influence, India, China, or Northern Asia. But what about people from farther away? Most known individuals from the Silk Road are from ethnic groups or nations on or immediately around Silk Road territories, but the fact that it’s a transcontinental conduit is suggestive. It seems almost certain that individuals could make long journeys without being noticed by history.

East Asians other than Chinese don’t require a terrible stretch of the imagination to find a place on the Silk Road. Koreans, Japanese, and Southeast Asians could easily be pulled into China as mercenaries, prisoners, merchants, diplomats, or wandering scholars, drawn into the sprawling Chinese Empire by any number of means, and from there make their way west. (In the Tang period, Chinese authority spread from Manchuria to well into modern Vietnam.)

Going farther afield, Africans are entirely plausible. There’s evidence that black Africans appeared in China as early as the Tang dynasty. Speculation holds that, rather than traveling

the overland routes, they came via already established sea routes, in a relay starting with East Africa, passing along the Indian coast and around Southeast Asia to reach China. It’s known that they were prized as exotic (and therefore probably well-compensated) servants, but they could easily be merchants in their own right.

The historical record is largely silent on the subject of Europeans for most of the life of the Silk Road. For example, the earliest recorded Europeans to reach the far side of the Central Asian highlands as well as the earliest named East Asians to reach Europe arrived in the middle of the 13th century, long after the Silk Road’s golden age. The earliest Asians were ambassadors sent by the Mongol court. One of them, Rabban Sauma (a Nestorian monk born near Beijing) extended a pilgrimage to Jerusalem into a diplomatic mission which sent him as far as western France.

The first Europeans in the Far East were likewise religiously motivated ambassadors, these to the Mongol court, where they were generally politely received. What’s notable in these accounts is that one of the earliest of these European travelers mentions encountering other Europeans *already* living in Central and East Asia.

William of Rubruk, a Flemish missionary, was surprised to meet a French couple and an Englishman in the Mongol capital. It's certainly possible that they were exceptionally adventurous individuals who happened to fall into the orbit of an aggressively expansive empire which had a strong interest in bringing the whole world under its rule. They therefore might have naturally gravitated to the capital despite the immense distance because conditions of the moment particularly favored long-distance travel. However, it does indicate that the Silk Road and similar East-West routes could have swept people across the continent without being noted in written sources.

Even less-well-documented suggestions exist of earlier direct contact between East and West. Genetic evidence from a second-century graveyard in southern Italy indicates an individual of East Asian ancestry, if not necessarily origin. And there are hints of other long-range travels – the possible “Titus” who painted Buddhist

murals in Niya, suggesting that a few Western artisans made their way along the Silk Road, as well as the very remote possibility of Roman troops ending up as Chinese prisoners. Ultimately what this means for players is that characters from just about anywhere in the Old World, no matter how unlikely they might be, are at least possible travelers along the Silk Road and are even plausible with an appropriate backstory.

Lýipeya makes a complaint here now that soldiers of Saca carried off two cows of his . . . this dispute must be carefully investigated by you in person and a decision made according to law.

– Undated official wedge-tablet letter

THE WORLD AT YOUR DOORSTEP

Most of this has been a discussion of characters from all over the world making long journeys across many political and cultural borders, staying in motion on trips back and forth across the silk routes, but it doesn't have to be that way. A Silk Road campaign can be set in one place, and involve people with little direct experience of the world beyond what they see at home. In that case, all of that diversity simply comes to them.

For example, it's worth keeping in mind that warriors don't just have to fight on behalf of expanding empires and caravan masters; they can go into business for themselves. Though a band of adventurers probably can't challenge the might of the Chinese Empire or fast-moving united barbarian hordes, there were many smaller conflicts. Notably, the oasis towns of the Taklamakan periodically waged small wars against one another. As long as the conflicts stayed short and any new rulers confirmed their loyalty to distant masters, hegemonic powers like the Chinese would likely regard such conflicts as a local matter and continue to give their routine orders to whoever was left standing when the dust had settled. Suitably skilled warriors could stage a palace coup or raise a small army to wrest control of a town away from its current rulers, perhaps even building their own petty kingdom in time. Likewise, wealthy merchants

can bankroll small armies and palace coups to put themselves in charge. Here are some other relatively stationary roles characters can take on:

- Local officials working within the system, vying for control of their petty kingdom.
- Soldiers guarding their post or policing their city.
- Holy people translating texts and tending local religious communities.
- Merchants supplying travelers, possibly brokering trades of valuable goods.
- Translators, moneychangers, and others providing services mainly to visitors.
- Local guides, leading travelers on short, well-known routes between points along the way.
- Operators of caravanserais; while such people likely have associations in nearby towns, they're somewhat isolated from them on a day-to-day basis.

And while all of that is going on, Silk Road traffic will still flow past them. For example, a sedentary silk broker still has to deal with troops in Chinese employ unloading their pay and Sogdian merchants or Indian pilgrims buying it up for resale elsewhere, while a group of bandits might steal from a dazzling cross-section of travelers.

GURPS CROSSOVERS

The Silk Road can be a setting for a number of campaigns taking advantage of other **GURPS** books, or ideas from it can be inserted elsewhere.

BANESTORM

The conditions which led to the creation of the Silk Road in our history were political, technological, and geographical, and those circumstances have no exact duplicate on

Yrth. However, similar conditions might be created. If Yrth's Muslim countries are relatively hostile to Araterre and Megalos (thereby keeping shipping to a minimum), Megalos is attempting to blockade shipping to Caithness, or anybody is upset with Sahud, certain hazardous overland trade routes become viable. Caravan routes might develop hugging al-Haz's western mountains and the margin between the Great Desert and the Great Forest to connect Zarak and Caithness with Ytarria's southern coast and the nations beyond.

A particularly dangerous route would extend even farther north, with merchant caravans hoping for safety against northwestern orcs as they travel under the shadow of Zarak's westernmost defenses. In addition to transporting valuable goods (silk from Sahud, spices from the south, magic items and potions from all over, etc.), a silk road on Yrth might carry valuable ideas like dwarven engineering and Aralaise navigational techniques.

CONSTANTINOPLE

As a major medieval trade hub with direct links to Asia, the Constantinople of *GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.* was part of the Silk Road, albeit in a broader sense than used here. The emperors and Byzantine aristocracy were leading Western consumers of silk and other goods imported from the East, and the Byzantine Empire eventually went into competition with China as a silk producer. The Byzantine capital, then, can be both a destination and a home for adventurers along the Silk Road.

A Byzantine adventurer in Central Asia could come from one of several plausible origins. There was a long history of Roman/Byzantine emperors trying to make contact with China. Byzantine diplomats could easily find themselves traveling across the Taklamakan in search of the *other* empire at the eastern edge of the world. Many Byzantine emissaries were also missionary priests, so there could be a religious element as well, with the diplomats trying to reestablish contact with long-lost Christian communities along the way. Military men could make the trip as well, perhaps hoping to form an alliance against the rapidly expanding caliphate. Finally, adventurers from Constantinople need not be so lofty. Byzantine emperors loaned out artisans (for example, mosaic artists) as a diplomatic gesture, so mere craftsmen and their assistants might be sent far from home as part of a broader, and no doubt fiendishly complicated, agenda.

CRUSADES

Although the land routes between China and the West have declined somewhat by the start of the Crusades, they haven't fallen into complete disuse. Though not so active, Central Asia is still a conduit for silk and other goods. It's just one of many by this time.

The major change to Central Asia by the time of the Crusades is that it has started to become a predominantly Muslim region. In the middle of the 10th century, the leadership of the Karakhanids, a Turkic confederation which controlled the western Taklamakan and parts of Transoxiana, converted to Islam. The religion was already well-established east of the Pamirs, but now it gained official backing, and subsequent Turkic groups ruling the area remained Muslims as well. Muslim characters from closer to the Holy Land might travel east in search of allies to help drive out the Franks or simply to look for trade opportunities to finance their expensive struggle.

There can be a draw for "undercover" Crusaders as well. By the time of the Second Crusade, there was a widely held belief in Christendom that, somewhere far to the east, a

powerful Christian kingdom was ruled by a priest-king known as Prester John. If they don't get sidetracked into India, adventurers might very well work their way east over the old silk routes in search of this fabled potential ally. It is an open question whether traces of Nestorian Christianity they might find along the way encourage or disappoint them.

See *GURPS Crusades* and *GURPS Arabian Nights* for other details about these wars.

CLIFFHANGERS

The history of the Silk Road may just be background for adventures closer to the modern day. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Central Asia was the last "blank space" on the map, and it became the focus of the last gasp of the Age of Exploration. Explorers like Sir Marc Aurel Stein (p. 50; Stein was Hungarian by birth but became British) and Sven Hedin (a Swedish student of von Richthofen who came to support Hitler) explored "Chinese Turkestan," as it was called at the time, found many of the sites named here, and returned with exotic treasures. Roy Chapman Andrews (an enterprising, self-promoting American paleontologist) covered similar terrain in search of dinosaur fossils. Sir Francis Younghusband (a British army officer) went one better; after expeditions in the Tarim Basin, he led a military campaign to forcibly open Tibet, at the time very unfriendly to European overtures, to greater outside contact.

All of this took place against the backdrop of the Great Game (p. 45; most explorers to Central Asia were either funded or at least courted by the Russians or British) and both Russian and Chinese revolutions (Red, White, Kuomintang, and Chinese Communist and independent warlord and ethnic forces continued to tangle in Central Asia until after WWII). Rifles replace swords, and Lop Nor has surely wandered around a bit more, but Central Asia of the pulp era is still a great place for adventure.

DUNGEON FANTASY

Small bands of adventurous travelers wander through a forbidding though often visually impressive wilderness in search of wealth and esoteric wisdom, passing by lost cities the desert has swallowed and by monuments to strange religions – while contending with the occasional war, unfriendly border garrison, or barbarian horde. Let's face it: the Silk Road is as close to a real-world dungeon fantasy setting as you're ever likely to find. Indeed, the noted explorer Marc Aurel Stein, who brought back the Diamond Sutra from the Mogao caves, traveled the Taklamakan armed to drive off bandits and recovered priceless mystical texts hidden behind a secret door in a ruined underground temple. The real world doesn't get much more *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy* than that.

All one needs to do to turn the Silk Road into a *Dungeon Fantasy* setting is add magic and monsters, and even those don't require much of a stretch. Martial artists and mystics with amazing powers are already a part of Silk Road-related legendry (the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* is particularly recommended reading here) and would have been expected by travelers anyway, so the GM only needs to make them real.

Likewise, towns, from a traveler's point of view, already look a lot like *Dungeon Fantasy* towns: a relatively safe place to rest for a bit, stock up on supplies, sell valuables if need be, and purchase supernatural support (for example, giving donations to temples and buying healing and protective amulets from freelance holy people who operate in the streets and markets). Towns even have relatively well-developed economies dealing in both coins and other types of loot in the form of standardized bolts of silk. Various barbarians can be slotted in as nomadic warriors, and the bones found so often in the Taklamakan could easily imply dragons and legions of the undead. Ancient Tocharian burials and the abandoned towns of the southeast make nice targets for plunder and sources for more undead and other things better left buried. (A series of towns on the edge of a dangerous desert like those on the southern Taklamakan route is an ideal location for the adventure *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy Adventure 1: Mirror of the Fire Demon*. Just swap in appropriate names.)

HORROR

Traveling along the Silk Road isn't just difficult. It can be scary. Nature is a constant challenge, and it's not a great leap to conclude that winter snows in the mountains and sandstorms in the desert are the product of hostile and possibly even vindictive wind spirits. Worse, pilgrims, merchants, and soldiers can't simply settle down indoors and wait for things to blow over. They have places they must go, and must ultimately face their demons. High body counts along the way also suggest fertile ground for ghosts and ghouls.

Central Asia is a known source of Things Man Was Not Meant To Know. One Lovecraft story set the Plateau of Leng there, though its precise location is vague. There are hints that it might be in southwestern Tibet rather than the Tarim Basin (Leng is adjacent to the Plateau of Tseng, which is in turn inhabited by the Tcho-Tcho, who are of Southeast Asian origin), but unwise travelers seeking to circumvent the Hexi corridor might attempt that route on their way to or from the eastern end of the Taklamakan.

The Ontoclysm of *GURPS Horror: The Madness Dossier* happens about halfway through the period covered here, leaving China a shambles for quite some time until the Tang finally pick up the pieces. There are suggestions, though, that the reality-shaking didn't stop in Central Asia for some time thereafter; Lop Nor is *still* moving around when nobody's watching it. And maybe those yardangs are more than just natural shapes suggestive of cities and enormous monsters. Fortunately, for those who need them, there's a good source of Tibetan martial artists and lamas right next door.

INFINITE WORLDS

The Silk Road is a good place to inhibit or accelerate contact between several important Old World civilizations. Interdicting or facilitating transit through Central Asia could do a great deal to degrade or improve communication between East and West. Different outcomes at various battles around the Talas River could result in Chinese expansion into the Near East and beyond, or early Persian/Muslim expansion east. Likewise, a number of opportunities exist to aid or suppress the expansion of any number of major religions and

their one-time competitors. Centrum in particular might be interested in bolstering the Chinese Empire. Even by the Tang dynasty, the empire was starting to fill positions of power and authority using a meritocratic system of examinations rather than hereditary aristocracy or appointments of individual powerful magnates.

Since Europe's age of exploration was driven in large part by a desire for East Asian commodities, accelerating the transmission of some crops or technologies might suppress that expansion and prevent or at least greatly delay a later colonial age. Using the Silk Road to send the knowledge and materials necessary to produce tea, porcelain, and a variety of spices to Europe in the early Middle Ages makes long, difficult journeys to the East later on much less appealing.

The Silk Road can be a setting for a number of GURPS crossover campaigns.

LOW-TECH

On a societal level, the transmission of technology has profound implications. On an individual level, the transmission of technology is a goldmine: silk, glass, paper, multiple crops, and so on are all worth a fortune for the first local manufacturer who can undercut long-distance merchant networks. Other technological secrets weren't transferred over the Silk Road, but had to wait until later centuries for transmission, independent discovery, or outright theft, such as porcelain, tea production, and the cultivation of any number of spices. Any of those technologies, at the right time, could be immensely valuable to an individual as well as economically world-shaking (albeit probably not on the scale of a single lifetime), but also immensely difficult to take from one place to another. Entire campaigns could be realistically dedicated to a group of adventurers avoiding wars, dealing with suspicious and hostile governments, sustaining themselves in an alien society, and learning enough (some of which, like the specific chemistry of raw ingredients, may not be obvious to the medieval industrial spy) to take a single new trade or just a simple technique from its place of origin back to their home society.

In a somewhat more fantastic setting, distant lands are endless sources of wonders and prodigies. Even without magic, items from *GURPS Fantasy-Tech 1: The Edge of Reality* could be found somewhere along the Silk Road. Indeed, some can claim origins along the route: azzalum and vimanas purport to be Indian, while land-sailing chariots, airfoil parasols, and porcelain are attributed to China.

MARTIAL ARTS

The Silk Road saw a lot of fighting, and therefore a lot of fighting styles. Almost all of the styles in *GURPS Martial Arts* post-date the end of the Silk Road (Kalaripayit is one of the few exceptions), even though some of them do claim deeper roots than can be well-established by scholarship. Styles resembling Armatura and Armatura Equestris might be practiced by armies of the caliphate, which resemble in some ways those of the Byzantines and other Westerners.

Indeed, during this period, *Armatura Equestris* might be a better fit for Muslim cavalry than *Furusiyya*, which appears to have been influenced by Central Asian horsed-archer styles. The horsed archers of the steppes probably practice something resembling *Kyujutsu*, while spear-wielding styles resembling Chinese spear fighting and *Sojutsu* are a reasonable fit for infantry of the period. Beyond that, although few specific styles are definitely appropriate for the period, it's certainly possible that unarmed fighting styles similar to those which evolved elsewhere could have appeared along the Silk Road and vanished, only to be reinvented later. The same may be true of armed styles, though likely excluding those requiring TL4 fencing weapons and heavy lances (which are largely limited to Europe at this time).

The Silk Road is also a great place for a varied fighting campaign. Ethnic diversity and a dangerous environment provide any student of the martial arts with many opportunities to observe a huge range of fighting styles. Obscure locations may be home to reclusive masters of hidden combat styles. Buddhism is often represented in film and literature as the source of martial-arts styles and excellence, so Chinese pilgrims may be heading to India for more than purely spiritual guidance.

MYSTERIES

Crimes and the need to solve them can happen anywhere, of course, but there are layers of cultural and legal baggage which complicate things along the Silk Road. Chinese jurisprudence has a long tradition of investigative magistrates, while detective literature has a long tradition of stories about those magistrates. A Chinese official coming to preside over a town in the Taklamakan can, in many periods, be a bit like a marshal or other law enforcer arriving in a locale where the residents have always taken care of things their own way; the same can apply to any hegemonic power controlling a recently conquered town. Conversely, local investigators may have to deal with an additional layer of outside authority when handling crimes. Travelers and ethnic and religious groups of various kinds might enjoy special immunities, greatly complicating investigation and prosecution. (For example, members of an important merchant group may have the right to be tried in their own courts, while members of other religions may not be allowed to testify in Muslim courts in Muslim-ruled areas.)

A particular kind of locked room mystery can be set in a caravanserai during a sandstorm. The discovery of a dead body is an urgent demand for justice, but the dangerous blowing sand cuts the investigators off from any assistance, and they may not have the ability to detain busy travelers at the caravanserai once the weather improves.

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Although one could easily design a Silk Road campaign heavy on swashbuckling combat and fighting the forces of nature, it's just as easy to run one which is entirely about talking people into doing things: negotiating prices to buy goods for transport, coaxing reluctant assistants to come along, finding skilled guides along the way, circumventing acquisitive and officious bureaucrats at customs checkpoints,

negotiating prices yet again at the point of sale, and doing it all over again in reverse on the way back.

Potentially, a Silk Road campaign may shift between multiple reference societies. The Chinese Empire forms one such society whose influence frequently extends into the Western Territories; the caliphate is another significant one. Parallel social traits are a possibility (Marco Polo, for example, claims to have worked for the Chinese imperial administration, which would have given him some sort of Status or Social Regard applicable only there), but it's rare for anyone from one social milieu to achieve prominence in another without conquering it.

ADVENTURE SEED: ORIGIN STORY

The first Shaolin Temple was founded near the end of the fifth century, during the early period of Buddhism's initial penetration into China. A dubious legend has it that a monk of Indian or Persian origin named Bodhidharma visited the temple during its first few decades and left behind an iron chest containing two books of martial knowledge. A student of Bodhidharma's took one away, but the other provided the basis from which Shaolin's kung fu styles grew.

That chest would have traveled across the deserts of the Silk Road, which suggests several adventures or even a campaign. For example, bandits, armies, and other interested parties along the way might have caught wind of travelers carrying valuable books and tried to get them for themselves. Adventurers could be those bandits, trying to outmatch one of the more formidable figures in Buddhist legend, or they could be servants and escorts, sent ahead by or following behind Bodhidharma to get the books to where they're going. Later monks might set out from Shaolin, retracing his steps in order to find a copy of the lost first book.

SPACE

It's not too difficult to translate the social and geographical conditions of the Silk Road to a star-faring milieu. A very Silk Road-like setting just needs a few major cultural areas (alien empires, long-lost colonies, etc. standing in for the Persian/Muslim world, China, India, and the steppes) separated by greater distances than starships can traverse without refueling. However, the "desert" regions between them can be bridged by relays of barely habitable systems just close enough that spacecraft can travel from one to the next. A trickle of valuable goods and technologies can make their way along the limited routes, but difficult interstellar conditions (unusual magnetic fields, hyperspace disruptions, etc.) can interrupt voyages or lead to lost spacecraft. The tenuous trade routes also are subject to interruption by warfare and political disturbances. There's immense wealth – and immense risk – in store for those who travel the tremendous distances involved and try to make sense of alien cultures and alien technologies.

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As Central Asia has become more open to outsiders over the past few decades (a consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of China) and more evidence has come to light from the region's deserts, the study of the Silk Road has become an extremely active field. Indeed, the study of documents from the region of the city of Dunhuang alone has given rise to a subfield of "Dunhuangology." Some of the major works below were published only a few years apart and disagree with one another on significant points, a reflection of activity within the field.



NONFICTION

Boulnois, Luce (Helen Loveday, trans.). *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants* (Airphoto International, 2005). This lavishly illustrated popular history of the Silk Road goes from prehistory to the modern day. It can serve the GM as an accessible introduction and a valuable photo reference.

Foltz, Richard. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). This short volume discusses the origins of the various religions which appeared along the Silk Road, how they were carried along the route and received along the way, and how they interacted with one another.

Hansen, Valerie. *The Silk Road, A New History* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Rather than presenting an overarching narrative, this book takes a site-by-site approach to present recent challenges to previous thinking about the Silk Road, taking advantage of archaeological evidence to fill in gaps in the spotty textual record. It's worth reading this after Liu Xinru's book, published a mere two years earlier, to see how current research is challenging the older consensus.

International Dunhuang Project, idp.bl.uk. This project serves as a hub for the study of documents and other evidence from the eastern part of the Silk Road, with contributions from the major museums of China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, Korea, and Russia.

Kelly, Laura. *The Silk Road Gourmet: Volume One: Western and Southern Asia* (iUniverse, 2009). Although this book presents modern cuisine from the regions it discusses, archaeology has demonstrated that a number of culinary traditions along the Silk Road are extremely durable. Thus, it's a good-enough guide to the kinds of dishes which one might encounter historically. Note that several recipes contain New World ingredients like chile peppers, which wouldn't have been available in Central Asia until well after the overland silk routes had fallen into disuse. Several more volumes in the series are planned, covering Central and East Asia.

Liu Xinru. *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2010). This substantial history might be regarded as a comprehensive summary of the traditional consensus on the

history of transcontinental silk routes from the Han dynasty through the Mongol Empire. It's relatively scholarly, but still accessible to the general reader.

Polo, Marco (R.A. Latham, trans.). *Travels of Marco Polo* (Penguin, 1958). Though written centuries after the period in question here and found questionable by some historians, Polo's account of his trip across Asia was the West's first tale of the Silk Road routes.

Schafer, Edward H. *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (University of California Press, 1963). This book lavishly describes exotic and luxury goods found in Tang-era China, a great many of which were imported over Silk Road routes. This includes not just raw materials and produce, but also people and manufactured items.

Stein, Marc Aurel. *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan* (Oxford, 1907); *Ruins of Desert Cathay* (Macmillan, 1912). Stein was an explorer and archaeologist who investigated Central Asia during the early 20th century, discovering the first Tocharian documents and the Diamond Sutra. These are just some of his publications on the region. Many of Stein's works detail adventures in the remote deserts of western China as well as archaeological findings there (making them a good source for pulp adventure campaigns).

Wriggins, Sally Hovey. *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Westview Press, 2003). Many Chinese Buddhists undertook the long, difficult journey to India to search for forgotten texts in their religion's homeland. Xuanzang's journey is one of the best documented. This book covers not just his trip along the Silk Road, but also his activities in India and what he brought back to China.

FICTION

Dawood, N.J., translator. *The Thousand and One Nights* (Penguin, 1973). The classic anthology contains stories set in a number of Silk Road locations – albeit fancifully rendered – and generally during the reign of Haroun al-Raschid, which places the tales in the ninth-century golden age of the route. Notably, the distrust of women by the brother monarchs who rule important cities in Transoxiana provides the impetus for the framing story of Scheherazade telling a string of bedtime stories to save her life.

Whitfield, Susan. *Life Along the Silk Road* (University of California Press, 2015). This book is a hybrid of fact and fiction, heavily footnoted so the reader can figure out which is which. Its chapters are short biographies and "day in the life" narratives following various kinds of people in Central Asia around and somewhat after the Tang dynasty: a Sogdian merchant, a Tibetan soldier, a Chinese princess, etc. The characters are fictional, but they and their surroundings are composites of what we know about history and daily life along the silk routes.

Wu Cheng'en (W.J.F. Jenner, trans.). *Journey to the West* (Foreign Languages Press, 1993). This classic 16th-century tale is widely celebrated as one of four supremely important Chinese novels. It has been adapted into movies, TV shows, comic books, and other media dozens of times, involving everything from Jet Li to Gorillaz to *Dragon Ball*. It is a heavily fictionalized account of Xuanzang's journey from China to India to recover Buddhist texts lost or corrupted by poor translation in the East. Read in one way, it is an elaborate Buddhist allegory, with many lessons about illusion, impermanence, and proper thought and behavior. Read in another, it's a treasure-hunting quest where a cleric, a magical monkey king (who acts a bit like a Classical Chinese Bugs Bunny), a semi-divine half-pig warrior, an ogre, and a disguised dragon prince wander around the wilderness and fight monsters with enchanted weapons, magic spells, and furious kung fu action.

Yasushi Inoue (Jean Oda Moy, trans.). *Tun-huang* (NYRB Classics, 2010). Yasushi spent years researching this award-winning historical novel set during the declining years of the overland silk trade. It deals with a failed aspirant to office driven west to Dunhuang, where he assembles a treasury of Buddhist texts which will be found centuries later by Silk Road scholars.

FILM AND TELEVISION

Few of the movies here are set during the Silk Road's most vital years, nor do they necessarily take place in the main Silk Road territories, but they certainly reflect the Silk Road's look and feel.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2000). Though set during the Qing era, long after sea routes superseded the Silk Road, substantial portions of this gorgeous modern classic are set in the western deserts.

Dragon Blade (Daniel Lee, 2015). A battle between rival Roman factions takes place, for some reason, in the Western Regions during the Han dynasty, and a Chinese peacekeeping force is drawn into the conflict. Though it's no more historically accurate than one would expect from an action blockbuster, this unlikely tale does reflect something of the Silk Road's dazzling cultural diversity, with Chinese, Parthians, Huns, and various others interacting with one another and eventually uniting for a good cause.

Flying Swords of Dragon Gate (Tsui Hark, 2011). After some dynastic wrangling, a variety of dangerous people converge on an isolated inn in a desert, fighting the elements and each other to find a lost treasure. While the location of the inn around which much of the film's action takes place is indefinite and the film is set during the Ming dynasty, the combination of desert way post, nearby military garrison, wandering barbarians, and city swallowed by the sands make for a film packed with Silk Road-ready elements. The treasure-hunting plot which eventually emerges makes it easy to drop into many campaigns.

Good, The Bad, The Weird, The (Kim Jee-woon, 2008). This noisy, dusty, sometimes confusing, and consistently entertaining chase through 1930s Manchuria is a textbook Eastern, a clear homage to Westerns (and, specifically, drawing heavily from the Sergio Leone classic *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*) but transplanted to the deserts of Asia.

Musa (Kim Sung-Su, 2001). Though mostly set in the eastern Gobi during the Ming dynasty rather than the Taklamakan during the Tang or earlier, the terrain is similar to China's western deserts. Several scenes (including one with a caravan-serai full of clearly West Asian merchants) reflect the multicultural nature of the Silk Road.

Silk Road, The (Hajime Suzuki, 1980-1990). *The Silk Road* is an epic series-length documentary produced by Japanese and Chinese national television services. A joint Sino-Japanese film crew, accompanied by journalists and archaeologists, traveled along the old overland silk routes from Xi'an to the Pamirs and looked at both historical artifacts and modern inhabitants along the way. Though it is clearly composed to be both digestible by a mass audience and politically inoffensive, it was shot by the first documentary film crew to be allowed to travel that route. It remains an excellent introduction to the look and feel of the region. It vividly illustrates the physical rigors of a journey through the deserts and mountains of western China (as well as, it turns out, giving a last look at traditional ways of life now being wiped out by modernization and economic development). Several later series, much harder to obtain in English, have looked west and south beyond the Pamirs and reexamined the original series in light of evolving scholarship.

Warriors of Heaven and Earth (He Ping, 2003). Set in the Western Regions during the Tang dynasty, an honorable but disgraced military officer defends a Buddhist monk and a priceless relic against Gokturk raiders. This is one of the few films clearly set along the Silk Road during its golden years, taking advantage of Xinjiang's spectacular scenery. The soundtrack – featuring a mix of Chinese, Indian, and Turkish styles – is worth tracking down in its own right.

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Ancient Classics of Han, Qin, and Wei Dynasties (China Record Corporation, 1998) and *Ancient Classics of Tang Dynasty* (China Record Corporation, 1998). These collections provide a broad sampling of music which might have made its way up the Silk Road from the east.

Gyuto Tantric College. *Tibetan Buddhism: Tantras of Gyuto* (Electra/Nonesuch, 2002). This collection of Tibetan Buddhist music has sounds which might have been heard along the Silk Road during the Tibetan occupation, or just from Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims.

Music of Central Asia series (Smithsonian Folkways, 2006-2012). This 10-volume series presents traditional musicians from Afghanistan to China, as well as less traditional musicians (notably the Kronos Quartet on volume 8) collaborating with them in traditional styles.

Silk Road: A Musical Caravan, The (Smithsonian Folkways, 2002). This two-CD set is focused on traditional music from territories from Iran to Japan. The first disc is music of settled societies, while the second focuses on the music of nomadic groups.

Silk Road Project, silkroadproject.org. The Silk Road Project is a cultural and artistic foundation dedicated to studying and promoting East-West cultural exchange. While they provide academic publications and educational materials, one of its major projects is the Silk Road Ensemble, a cooperative of musicians led by the cellist Yo Yo Ma performing a mix of traditional music from Central Asia and new works inspired by it.

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[A road from Turfan] had been made by Sen Tsin-yuh, the Woo-ke Deputy Protector, to shorten the distance by a half, and evade the dangers of the white dragon mound.

– The Book of Han

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I had ample opportunities to familiarize myself with all the manifold contents of this remarkable refuse-heap during the three laborious days which its clearing cost me.

– Sir Marc Aurel Stein, **Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan**

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