

religious interactions between the East and the West.

Some 1,500 years later, another Silk Road on the sea was opened by the Chinese explorer, diplomat and admiral Zheng He during the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Commissioned by Emperor Yongle and his successor, Zheng commanded seven expeditionary voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and East Africa from 1405 to 1433. It is said that his giant ships could carry hundreds of sailors on their four decks and were bigger than any wooden ship ever recorded.

At the end of the 19th century, German geographer and traveler Ferdinand von Richthofen named the routes *die Seidenstrasse*, which means "the Silk Road," in his book "China." It derives its name from the lucrative trade of silk textiles produced almost exclusively in China.

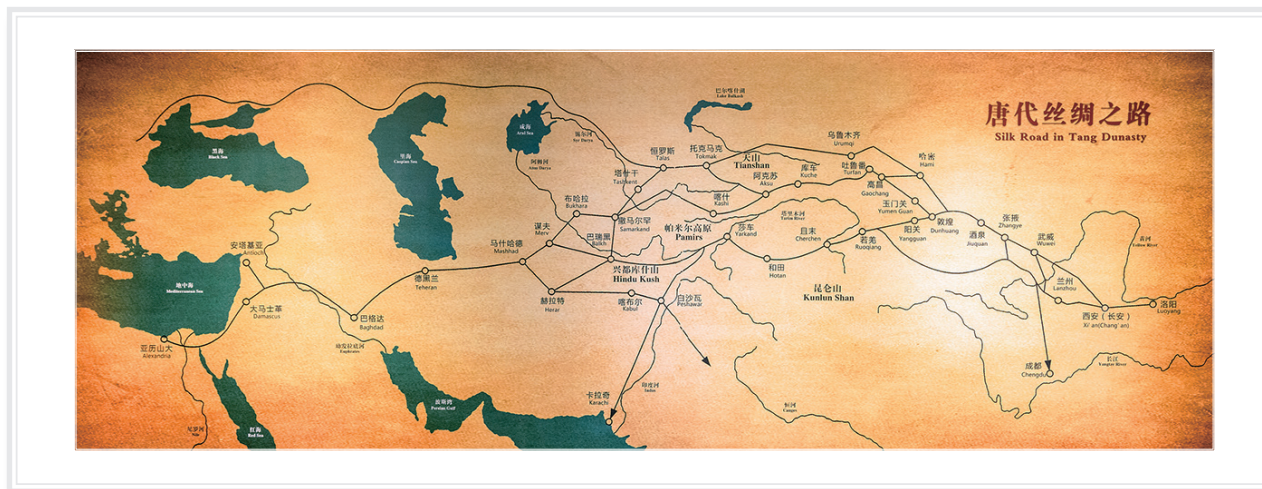
The ancient Silk Road was a platform for interpersonal and cultural exchanges, where ethnic, racial, religious and cultural convergence took place across the centuries.

Through the overland and maritime trade routes, Chinese silk, tea and porcelain were exported to Europe, Mediterranean regions and Southeast Asia, while exotic agricultural products and fruits, such as walnuts, pepper, grapes, pomegranates and carrots, were imported to China.

During the 10th century, the poems of famous Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) poets Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen were spread to Western countries via the route, while foreign music and musical instruments became popular among both the general public and the imperial family in China.

Between the 12th and 15th centuries, the inventions of paper, compass and gunpowder in China reached Europe through the Silk Road, enabling the Renaissance, the Maritime Exploration, the Protestant Reformation and the scientific and industrial revolutions that changed the world.

The Mogao Caves in



A map of the ancient Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). — IC

A World Bank report has predicted that Belt and Road Initiative transport projects could, by 2030, help lift **7.6 million** people out of extreme poverty and **32 million** people out of moderate poverty globally, according to Xinhua.

northwest China's Gansu Province, a UNESCO World Heritage Site containing the finest examples of Buddhist art spanning a period of 1,000 years, records and showcases how Eastern and Western cultures were exchanged.

Exotic clothes, musical instruments and dancing postures are portrayed in the delicate frescoes in the former Silk Road hub city of Dunhuang.

The ancient route has undergone a revival during the 21st century.

China's B&R Initiative

China proposed to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in cooperation with other countries along the route in 2013.

The initiative focuses on promoting policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer interpersonal ties, with the goal of bringing benefit to all and building a community with a shared future for mankind.

From 2013 to 2021, the total volume of trade of goods between China and countries

along the BRI routes amounted to nearly US\$11 trillion, while two-way investment exceeded US\$230 billion, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce.

After the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the China-Europe freight railway, known as the new Silk Road, became a lifeline for the transport of anti-COVID supplies, especially when air and sea transport were largely crippled.

By July 2022, the railway had transported 109,000 tons, or 14.2 million pieces of medical items, to Italy, Germany, Spain, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands and Lithuania, and from there to more European countries.

More projects focus on the basic needs of people in developing countries. In Senegal, a rural well-drilling project, consisting of 251 wells and 1,800km of water pipelines that China had pledged to fund, has brought clean water to one-seventh of Senegal's population.

Meanwhile in Argentina, a photovoltaic plant in the country's northern province of Jujuy powers some 160,000 homes.

Through the modern Maritime Silk Road, Chinese hybrid



Students learn at the Luban Workshop at Djibouti Industrial and Commercial School in Djibouti City, capital of Djibouti. — Xinhua

rice has been promoted in many places in Africa to significantly increase food production and reduce famine and poverty.

"One of the Belt and Road Initiative's contributions to the African continent is on poverty alleviation and agricultural development," said Lewis M. Ndichu, a researcher at Nairobi-based think tank Africa Policy Institute.

Over 20 Luban Workshops, named after China's legendary master carpenter Lu Ban (507-444 BC), have shared the nation's vocational educational experiences with 19 countries, including Thailand, Cambodia, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Djibouti and Egypt.

Traditional Chinese medicine has become a new option for patients in countries along the Belt and Road amid China's promotion of TCM overseas.

In 2021, Xi'an TCM Hospital of Encephalopathy in northwest

China's Shaanxi Province, Astana Medical University and the School of Medicine of Nazarbayev University jointly set up a rehabilitation center for brain diseases at Nur-Sultan, capital of Kazakhstan. Over 3,700 people have sought treatment at the center.

The Belt and Road Initiative gives the Central Asia region an opportunity to fulfill the strategic task of direct access to seaports and turn the region into a transportation hub of transcontinental highways from east to west and from north to south, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Zhaparov has commented to Xinhua news agency.

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