

Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Age, Golden Threads

The Silk Road is pivotal in world history and East Asian history courses. But the role of Korea and Japan in the Silk Road trade and the impact of the Silk Road on their respective societies are generally ignored. Most maps of the Silk Road do not extend into the territories of Korea nor Japan.

This book is aimed at correcting that oversight with information on the breadth of Korea's involvement in transmitting goods and ideas along the Silk Road. The accompanying lesson book, *Silla Korea and the Silk Road*, examines whether Korea's Silla kingdom benefited from its links to the Silk Road, and raises questions about the contemporary issues surrounding globalization.

Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Age, Golden Threads contains 158 pages of maps and photographs, 26 handouts and 2 articles for advanced readers. Also included are guidelines on where to include Silla Korea in to the world history curriculum, a pronunciation guide and bibliography.

Handout Summaries

Part I: Was Silla Part of the Silk Road?

Handout 1: Part I - Section A. Why Study Silla? A Case Study in Creativity

Various periods in world history have spawned “golden ages”—moments of intense cultural activity that produced a flowering of art, literature and philosophy. Silla represents such a golden age in a Korean context. The handout includes maps of the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla and Korea's role in the Silk Road trade.

Handout 2: Part I - Section B. Silk as a Medium of Exchange: Comparative Timeline

The Silk Road was more than a series of commercial highways connecting China, Central Asia and Europe. It was also a network that facilitated cultural exchanges. Korea actively participated in Silk Road commerce, trading silk, glass, bronze, pottery, tea and silver. It also modified and transmitted belief systems that came to it through the Silk Road, such as Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Korean art, architecture, song and dance developed in response to these new religions and philosophies

Handout 3: Part I - Section C. Silk as a Medium of Exchange

In 37 BCE, Silla's King Hyokkose and Queen Aryong promoted silk cultivation by teaching villagers how to produce the fabric by feeding mulberry leaves to silkworms. Because silk was valuable and scarce it soon became a medium of exchange. In 306 CE, silk cultivation practices were transmitted from Korea to Japan. The handout presents seven examples of the silk trade's importance in Sillan history.

Handout 4: Part I - Section D. What Can Archaeology Reveal About Trade Goods?

Relics from three Buddhist temples—Hwangnyong, Kamun and Songnim—are presented to illustrate how Silla's connection to the Silk Road can be examined through artifacts.

Handout 5: Part I – Section E. How Did Silla Pass on Goods to Japan and its Other Areas of Influence?

The Silk Road extended across the East Sea from Korea to Japan. In the eighth century CE, Silla sent Buddhist monks and artisans to Japan which resulted in the construction of *Todai-ji* (temple). Commerce between East China, Korea and Japan was handled by Sillan merchants. The handout presents photographs of Japanese trade objects and a long quotation on Sillans in China from *Ennin's Travels in Tang China* written by Edwin O. Reischauer.

Part II: Did The Silk Road Create Silla's Golden Age?

Handout 6: Part II – Section A. How Does an Era Become Known as a Golden Age?

Historians consider Korea's Unified Silla period a golden age on par with Periclean Athens, Renaissance Italy and Suleiman's Istanbul. During all these periods, cultural activity was sparked by new and foreign ideas that challenged basic social assumptions and, at times, were violently resisted.

Handout 7: Part II – Section B. What Elements of Silla's Golden Age Reflect Silk Road Influences?

The handout compares the state of politics, art, religion and education from the founding of Silla (57 BCE) to the Unified Silla period (668 CE).

Handout 8: Part II – Section B-1. Economy

The seaborne trade of Silk Road goods between China, Korea and Japan played a vital role in Silla's economic development. In the eighth and ninth centuries, those trade routes were controlled by the Korean merchant prince Chang Pogo and his paramilitary forces. Chang's navy provided safe passage to traveling Buddhist monks bringing new ideas from China and India to Korea and Japan.

Handout 9: Part II – Section B-2. Politics

Silla maintained a unique political mechanism known as the "bone-rank" system. Through this system, three women led the kingdom as a sovereign. The bone-rank system preserved stability, aided by the *hwabaek* (council of nobles), which allowed the people to petition and participate in the government. Contact with China introduced political innovations, such as civil service exams, as well as a more structured government.

Handout 10: Part II – Section B-3. Art and Architecture

The handout examines Korean art and architecture from prehistory through the Silla period. Bronze artifacts and animal-shaped bronze belt buckles reveal the cultural influences from Scytho-Siberian culture.

Handout 11: Part II – Section B-4. Religion

Shamanism was the dominant religion in early Korean history. When Buddhism was introduced, it quickly became the state religion, inspiring a renaissance of art, architecture and even military organizations. Its influence was strong enough that several Korean rulers abdicated to become Buddhist monks or nuns. Shamanism never disappeared, however, and along with Confucianism and Taoism, coexisted with Buddhism.

Handout 12: Part II – Section B-5. Education and Science

The Silk Road trade introduced Korea to numerous educational and scientific innovations, such as paper, clocks, calendar, efficient farming tools, the Chinese writing system and various scientific theories.

Handout 13: Part II – Section B-6. Military

King Chinhung reigned from 540 to 576 CE. He created a force of upper-class warriors called the *hwarang*. Heavily influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, the *hwarang* reflected Silla's interest in nature, dance and poetry. Their military efficiency was one of the reasons Silla succeeded in unifying Korea.

Part III: Silla Individuals and the Silk Road

This set of handouts examines the lives of twelve prominent individuals from the Silla period and their connection to the Silk Road.

Handout 14: Part III – Section B-1. Queen Sondok: Golden Age Ruler

Queen Sondok reigned from 632 to 647 CE. Frequently compared to Elizabeth I of England, Queen Sondok was one of the first female sovereign in East Asian history. Both Elizabeth I and Queen Sondok encouraged a renaissance in thought, literature and the arts that would strongly influence their respective cultures, and both struck a balance between competing religious groups.

Handout 15: Part III – Section B-2. Queen Chindok: The Diplomat

Queen Chindok (reigned from 647 to 654 CE) succeeded her cousin Queen Sondok as sovereign of Silla. She secured an alliance with Tang China and adopted many Chinese

customs. But at the same time, she enhanced Korean culture by encouraging innovation in Korean poetry and education.

Handout 16: Part III – Section B-3. Kim Yusin: Silla's Greatest General

Kim Yusin (595-673 CE) was the commander of Silla's army. His military skill kept Korean sections of the Silk Road under Korean control, and in 668 CE, brought all of Korea under Silla's dominion. He subsequently marshaled his forces to prevent Tang China from invading the peninsula.

Handout 17: Part III – Section B-4. Wonhyo: Eminent Buddhist Monk

Wonhyo (617-686 CE) was an eminent Buddhist monk who studied in Silla. His ideas shaped Korean Buddhism, and his scholarly work was translated into many languages, including Sanskrit.

Handout 18: Part III – Section B-5. Sol Ch'ong: Confucian Scholar

Sol Ch'ong (c. 660-730 CE) was a Korean scholar; one of the first to spread Confucian tenets through his writings, he is remembered for making Confucian learning accessible for generations of Koreans. The son of Sillan Princess Yosok and the famous Buddhist monk Wonhyo, he is also known for creating *idu*, a system of transcribing Korean words in Chinese characters.

Handout 19: Part III – Section B-6. Yangji: Artist Monk

Yangji was a seventh century Korean monk and artist, renowned for his sculptures, which exhibit particularly strong Central Asian influences. His work functions as a valuable window on Buddhist art of the period.

Handout 20: Part III – Section B-7. Ko Sonji: Korean General of Tang China

Ko Sonji (?-755 CE) was a Korean expatriate in Tang China who rose to prominence as a general in China's imperial army. Known as Gao Xianzhi in Chinese, Ko conquered Kashmir for Tang China, an important event in the history of both China and the Silk Road.

Handout 21: Part III – Section B-8. Kim Taesong: Prime Minister and Patron of Pulguksa and Sokkuram

Kim Taesong was an eighth century master builder and patron responsible for the construction of Pulkuk Temple and the Sokkuram Grotto in Kyongju. Building shrines in caves, as Kim did, was a Buddhist tradition along the Silk Road. Both Pulkuk Temple and Sokkuram Grotto are now UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Handout 22: Part III – Section B-9. Hyech'o: Traveling Monk

Hyech'o (c. 704-787 CE) earned the name "Traveling Monk" for his frequent, extended trips through China, India and Central Asia to study and promote Buddhism. Hyech'o was the third master of Tantric Buddhism and a great evangelist for the faith across Asia. Hyecho's legacy was first introduced to the world when French scholar Paul Pelliot discovered his book, *The Hyech'o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India*, in a cave in Dunhwang and publicized it.

Handout 23: Part III – Section B-10. Chang Pogo: Emperor of the Yellow Sea

Chang Pogo (c. 790-846 CE) was Silla's top naval commander in the early ninth century. His fleet patrolled the waters of East Asia, greatly reducing piracy and slavery and fostering safer trade routes.

Handout 24: Part III – Section B-11. Ch'oe Ch'iwon: Father of Korean Literature

Ch'oe Ch'iwon (c. 857-915 CE) has been dubbed the father of Korean literature. He studied in China and became the first Korean to pass the Tang civil examination. His writing reflected a blend of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist ideas.

Handout 25: Part III – Section B-12. Wang Kon: Conqueror of Silla and Founder of Koryo

Wang Kon (877-943 CE) conquered Silla and founded the new kingdom of Koryo, which lasted nearly five centuries, produced some of the world's most beautiful ceramics and became the first civilization to publish books using moveable metal type. Though he destroyed its political structure, Wang Kon preserved Silla's cultural legacy.

Part IV: Concluding Exercise: Does International Trade Hurt or Help a Culture?

Handout 26: Part IV – Concluding Exercise: Does International Trade Hurt or Help a culture? Silla as a Case Study

Silla was impacted both positively and negatively by its participation in the Silk Road's international trade. This handout presents both sides of the argument and asks students to debate.

Part V: Articles for Advanced Readers

John Goulde, *Cultural Exchanges Across North Asia*

William Wayne Farris. "Ancient Japan's Korea Connection," *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures: Issues in the Historical Archaeology of Ancient Japan*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 55-121, reviewed by Sarah Kim

Part VI: Where to Include Silla Korea in a World History Curriculum

Ane Lintvedt discusses how to teach the history of Silla and its significance of the Silk Road in the post-Classical era.

Pronunciation Guide

Bibliography