

History of the Silk Road

A gold Byzantine coin of the Anastasius I era (491 - 518) was unearthed last October from a Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) tomb in Luoyang, Henan Province. The find caused no particular stir in China's numismatic circles, however. Over recent decades Persian and Roman gold coins have occasionally come to light in historical sites along the ancient Silk Road.



A gold Byzantine coin of the Anastasius I era.

They form part of the raft of evidence that this 2,000-year-old 7,000-km-long "road" was a vital trade route and communications network that connected China with India, Persia, Arabia, Greece and Rome.

By staff reporter LI WUZHOU

Trade Route

German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen was the first, in 1877, to refer to this ancient route as the Silk Road. Gemstones, silk and porcelain were most prominent among the broad range of goods transported along it from the East to the West. Exchanges of commodities and workers from the Asian and European civilizations led to an intermingling of cultures, ideas and religions, as well as of expertise in economics, politics, science and technology and military science.

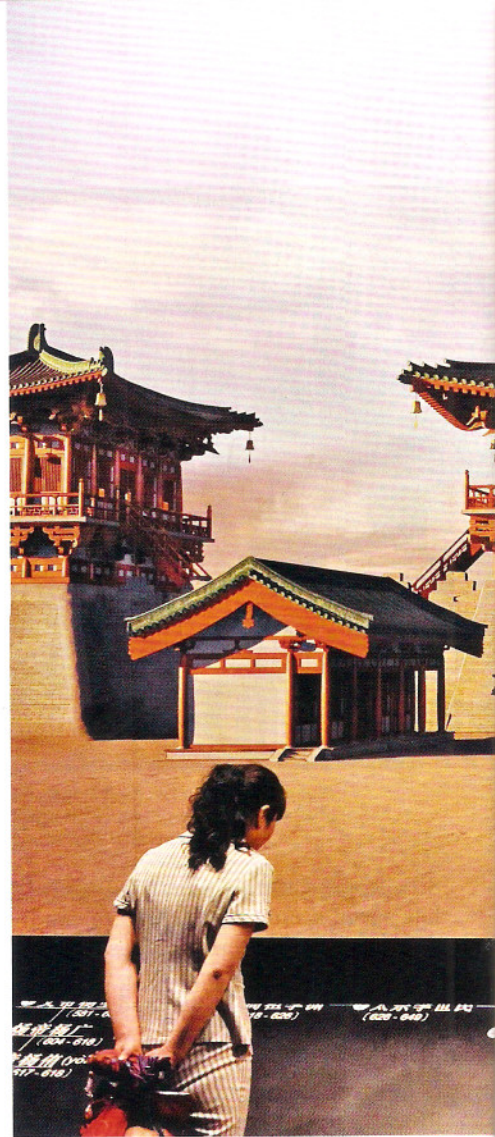
Silk was the most desired Chinese export, one that Chinese envoys would most often present as gifts to foreign heads of state. This luxurious fabric was in high demand throughout the Roman Empire, a third century author having extolled its gossamer-like texture in an array of floral hues. The astronomical amounts paid for silk imports, the price for one pound of fine silk at one time soaring to 600 grams of gold, forced the

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senate to prohibit the wearing of silk garments. Legendary Egyptian queen Cleopatra would receive foreign diplomats attired in silk robes, and Chinese silk was found in the tomb of a pharaoh laid to rest in 1000 BC. Phoenician red silk robes came into vogue among royal families and the aristocracy of Eastern and Western Europe. Even the *Koran* praises Chinese silk as a heavenly fabric.

Rise and Decline

The Silk Road approached its heyday in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), although travel along it began much ear-



Scientists document features of the remains of a Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) bridge in the city gate wall of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province.



lier. Archeologists confirm the existence of an intermittent trade route across the prairies along the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus and Yellow rivers, consisting of a number of minor passages that caravans traversed.

As early as 5,000 years ago, lapis lazuli, the deep blue semi-precious stone originating in Afghanistan, had made its way into Egypt. This further attests to the flow of goods along this prairie passage that later evolved into the Silk Road. About 1,000 years later, lapis lazuli was brought into Harappa, a large city of the Indus Civilization. Soon after it entered China, and became revered as one of the seven treasures of Buddhism.

Soft jade artifacts from Xinjiang found in the tomb of Lady Hao, concubine of King Wuding (?-1192 BC), last monarch of the Shang Dynasty (C. 2100-1600 BC), constitute more evidence of exchanges between the inland Chinese civilization and neighboring regimes to its west and beyond.