

Early Korean History: Silla Korea (57 B.C.E-935 C.E.) and the Silk Road

“Silla survived for nearly 1,000 years and for a period of time, and along with Tang China, was more advanced than probably any area of Europe except for the Byzantine Empire”
(*Asia in Focus: The Koreas*)

The Lesson: Silla Korea and the Silk Road (Grades: 7, 9 and 10)

Subjects: Ancient History, Asian Studies, Geography and World History

Time: Two or more class periods

Objectives: 1. Prove how Korea was part of the Silk Road. 2. Present an Eastern instead of a Western view of the Silk Road trade and a time period that produced one of the world’s “Golden Ages.” 3. Provide an understanding of the circumstances that help to create a “Golden Age.” 4. Recognize that many of today’s issues related to globalization were also present for past cultures. 5. Provide an opportunity for students to understand the impact of globalization on their own lives and their country.

The following pages together with a PowerPoint lecture (*Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Globalization Then and Now*) and the Korea Society’s PowerPoint lecture (*Silla Korea and the Silk Road*) can be downloaded (<http://www.koreanseminar.org>). These resources will show Korea’s integral involvement in Silk Road trade, the transmission of Silk Road ideas and goods, and their possible impact at the time. They will facilitate achieving the objectives of the lesson. The Globalization PowerPoint is appropriate for secondary students and available with our materials at this resource site.

The 2016 California History-Social Science Framework recommends a study of the Silk Road and the use of the Power Point lectures for the “images and archaeological evidence that provide opportunities for students to analyze cultural interaction and trade across Eurasia.” The Korea Society’s eBook, *Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Age, Golden Threads*, provides additional information (<http://www.koreasociety.org>) or more easily accessed by using Google search.

For homework and discussion: Ask your students where their cars, cell phones, clothing, computers, shoes, and household possessions are made. What languages are spoken in their homes and neighborhoods? What types of food do they enjoy? What developments have occurred that have particularly influenced their lives? What are the benefits and challenges of globalization in terms of their own lives? What are the current challenges of globalization for the United States? Class discussions will help prepare students for the PowerPoint lecture titled *Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Globalization Then and Now*. (The Korea Society has given permission to include pages from *Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Ages, Golden Threads*).

Handout 1



PART I. WAS SILLA PART OF THE SILK ROAD?

SECTION A. WHY STUDY SILLA? A CASE STUDY IN CREATIVITY

In various periods in world history, opportune meetings of trade and talent have created golden ages of literature and thought. Examples include the golden age of Athens, Greece, Renaissance Italy, and Elizabethan England. While historians have focused on Renaissance Italy as an example of a civilization with access to new routes of open trade, little has been done to show the ways in which earlier trade routes stimulated other cultures into an era of unprecedented cultural and philosophical development. Silla represents an Eastern version of a golden age which flourished in part as the result of trade and cultural exchange.

What makes Silla unique? Early Korean history depicts constant tension with its large neighbor China, and Silla's history is marked by both accommodation and resistance to Chinese influence. By the fifth century, the Korean Peninsula was divided into the Three Kingdoms—Koguryo (37 BCE–668 CE), Paekche (18 BCE–660 CE) and Silla (57 BCE–668 CE). Of the Three Kingdoms, Koguryo had the greatest military skill and bore the brunt of repelling Chinese attempts to conquer the Korean peninsula. It seemed most likely to unify the peninsula. Paekche, known for its design and construction of pagodas and temples and for its friendly ties to Japan, resisted Koguryo and, for a time, allied itself with Silla.

Internal problems in China gave the Three Kingdoms respite, but the creation of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) and the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) meant a full frontal attack on Koguryo. The eventual result was that Koguryo expended its resources and suffered heavy casualties while the Paekche-Japanese trade alliance was challenged by Silla. Meanwhile, Silla was able to spend its resources on developing forts, a naval fleet and an army, thus successfully conquering Kaya, the land of iron, seizing the heart of the peninsula on the west coast, a gateway to China and driving far up the West coast to achieve a position on Koguryo's flank. In 668 CE Silla, with the support of Tang China, defeated Koguryo and unified the Korean peninsula. Then for the next nine years, the Tang forces unsuccessfully tried to annex Silla into China by using their "divide and conquer" tactics. Thus Silla, which had seemed the least likely to unify the Korean peninsula, became the state to do so.

By uniting all Three Kingdoms, Silla incorporated Koguryo's military skills and Paekche's artisans to design and build pagodas and temples. Moreover, Silla was able to maintain diplomatic ties with Tang China, thereby benefiting from the trade routes and cultural exchanges passing through China along the Silk Road. Silla, from her long alliance with China, did not see the Tang as a total enemy and new ideas flowed from China and its Silk Road contacts. At the same time, the people of Silla were aware that to accept too much would merely make them a province of China itself. The balance between these two positions may be one of the reasons for the golden age of Silla.





PART VI. WHERE TO INCLUDE SILLA KOREA

TEACHING THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SILK ROAD IN THE POST-CLASSICAL ERA (CA.500–1450 CE)

by

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In many world history survey courses and introductory textbooks, Korea comes into the historical narrative only as a flashpoint for the Cold War in the mid-20th century. This, of course, doesn't quite do justice to a people's history. But few teachers have been taught anything about Korea, and in consequence they can't teach anything about Korea. Drawing on *Silla Korea and the Silk Road* and a few other sources, I'm going to suggest ways to incorporate Korean history into that great Classical and Post-Classical topic of World History, the Silk Road.

Everyone knows that the Silk Road began in China and went westward by land and water routes, across Eurasia. Although scholars and teachers may have their "favorite parts" of the Silk Road to explore with our classes, we all tend to teach that the land-based silk routes began in Chang'an (or Xi'an) China and ended in the bazaars and marketplaces of the eastern Mediterranean area. Some adventurous souls went through the Khyber Pass into the Indian subcontinent, and others sailed the sea-based routes of the Indian Ocean Basin.

I'm going to argue that including/inserting Korea, although east of Chang'an, into the history of the Silk Road is easy to do, is important to do, and adds to our students historical understanding of East Asian history in total as well as their appreciation for the intricacies of interactions along Silk Road in the Classical and Post-Classical eras.

I'm going to approach this task thematically. First, historians "use" the Silk Road as a way to discuss cross-cultural diffusion—the conditions that allow for the spread of ideas, peoples, merchandise, technologies, diseases—from point A to point B and all the way through point Z. Second, we discuss the reasons and processes by which people—individually or as a significant part of the whole society—adopt or adapt pieces of foreign cultures and blend them into their own cultures. (This is a process that Jerry Bentley termed syncretism in his book *Old World Encounters*.)

In the Classical era, the Korean peninsula was divided for centuries into three small kingdoms (cf. map on p. 6). There was a good deal of contact with China. All three used Chinese writing, with transcription systems for Korean words; there was a Confucian academy founded in Koguryo in 372.¹ One kingdom, the Silla (57 BCE–668 CE), began military

and political moves to conquer the other two kingdoms in the 6th century CE, and with the help of the Tang Chinese dynasty, succeeded in conquering/uniting most of the peninsula in 668 CE. The Tang, however, had helped Silla merely as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy, and in turn began to fight the Silla. The Silla forces fought and defeated the Tang forces by 676, and thereby unified most of the peninsula under the single, aristocratic government of the Silla kingdom. For Korean scholars, the Unified Silla kingdom (668–935 CE) presents a golden age of the development in Korean culture, unified and separate from Chinese domination.²

Silla was a prosperous kingdom: its economy was based on agriculture, but there were gold mines, iron mines and a complex handicraft industry orchestrated by the royal government.³ The capital at Kyongju “became a large and splendid city, having a million inhabitants at its height.”⁴

Although Silla Korea was politically independent from Tang China, there was almost constant diplomatic, economic and cultural contact between Korea and China. Korea also became the conduit of Chinese ideas to Japan. Economically, the Silla became part of the Tang tributary system, and there was also much cultural borrowing between the two empires.⁵ Silla Koreans borrowed and adapted thoughtfully, melding Chinese systems with native practices—a process Jerry Bentley termed syncretism.⁶

When one teaches Tang China (usually as part of the triumvirate of Sui, Tang, Song China), it's not hard to mention that other places in East Asia developed sophisticated urban economies in this era. Furthermore, one usually emphasizes the *westward* expansion of the Tang, and its control over the East and South China Seas. It's easy to insert a piece about Tang's *eastward* expansion, its unusual defeat and its accommodation of the Silla. This also gives some complexity to the idea of creating and maintaining a tributary empire and what it meant to be a tributary state. This is easy to do, and it sets up Korea as a political unit in East Asian history, and begins to familiarize students with Korea as a unit of analysis in World History. This leads us to the Silk Road.

SILK ROAD

The Silk Road was not really a single interstate highway, of course, but a series of trading routes. The first and easiest thing a teacher can do is to acquire a map that includes Korea and Japan (cf. maps on pp. 5 & 34). A map will make the obvious point that the trade routes extended *eastward* from Chang'an as well as westward. The Eurasian trade routes of the Post-Classical period also extended into the waterways. The Indian Ocean Basin trade networks connected with the East Asian/South China Sea networks, and the foreign merchant port communities of southeast China became hubs of cross-cultural interactions between the Koreans and the wider Eurasian world.

When I discuss imperial roads and significant trade routes—Roman, Persian, Incan, trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean basin and the Silk Road—I give my students a little mantra: “What travels across the roads? Military, merchants and missionaries.” While this may not cover everything and everyone, it works really well for my students, and they have a ready handle with which to grasp the complicated interactions across “trade routes.”

MERCHANTS & MERCHANDISE

Since trade and travel along the Silk Road were handled like a long distance relay, and merchants very rarely traveled the length of Eurasia with their goods, it's not surprising that Koreans didn't generally travel very far west to conduct their trade. Korean merchants traveled to China and Japan, primarily.

By the late Tang dynasty, however, there were large numbers of Korean merchants living in the port cities of southeast China, especially Guangdong and Fuzhou (cf. map on p. 34).⁷ “As foreign trade was usually monopolized by the local government and only special envoys dispatched by the royal house could travel and barter abroads, the majority of all businessmen active on the Guangdong market were those from overseas.”⁸ Persians and Arab traders were the majority of traders there, followed by those from India, Ceylon, Malay, Rome and Korea.⁹ Korean merchants of the Silla era had access to the merchandise from all these areas, which highlights Korean involvement in the maritime Eurasian trade routes.¹⁰ Some Korean merchants also traveled significantly westward: a Silla envoy is depicted in a wall painting in Samarkand.¹¹ Even though the Silla merchants may not have traveled past the Chinese coast, they were well connected with the Eurasian trade routes.

EXPORTS

From the early Silla kingdom through the Unified Silla Kingdom, Koreans exported *their own goods* to China as either tributary payments or as trade goods. They probably traveled in flat-bottom boats across the comparatively shallow Yellow Sea.¹² These items included bronze, iron and metalware (including such things as scissors and candle snuffers), wool, livestock (dogs, horses and exotic birds), medicines and perfumes, paper, candles, honey, pine nuts, ginseng and slaves.¹³ The Koreans had obtained sericulture from China during

Types of Merchandise Imported and Exported During the Silla Period

IMPORTED GOODS (from China)	EXPORTED GOODS (to China and Japan)
silk (cloth and threads), buddhist relics, gold, silver ornaments, books (paper), tea, peonies, bells (silver, gold, bronze), mirrors, weapons, ceramics, musical instruments from Central Asia, gold daggers from Central Asia, transparent glassware and jewelry from the Mediterranean, etc.	wood, iron, bronze bells, perfume, medicines, metals, tools, spices, scissors, copper needles, candle-snuffers, fabric dye, paper, Buddhist statuaries, silk, gold and glass, crystal jewelry, weapons, armor, horse trappings, etc.
TRIBUTARY TRADE (with Tang China)	
livestock (exotic birds, horses), books, paper, highly crafted silver and gold pieces, bells, knives and hair pieces, silk (embroidered, finely decorated), ginseng, pinenuts, medicines, etc.	

the Han dynasty (probably from Chinese immigrants/smugglers) and had their own indigenous silk-making industries.¹⁴ Koreans sometimes sent Korean-made silk to China, especially if it was elaborately embroidered.¹⁵ Chinese silk, however, seems to have been more valued than domestic silk in Korea: there are some sources that speak of Silla kings giving *Chinese* silk as a high-level gift.¹⁶ Korean exports to China have a slightly utilitarian flavor to them.

Horses were very important to Silla Korea, and were exported to China in large numbers. Gilt-bronze saddle fittings and iron stirrups, as well as vessels decorated with horses have been found in Silla tombs, and there were Silla sumptuary laws stipulating who could own horses and how luxurious their fittings could be.¹⁷ (The horses were probably the sturdy Mongolian variety, which had been exported to China, probably by the Koguryo since their territory had included some Manchurian steppe lands, since the late Han period.)¹⁸ In 669, there were 174 horse farms in Silla, 22 of which were allocated to the palace, 10 to government offices, and the rest distributed to local aristocrats.¹⁹ Animals were a small but important part of the Eurasian trade routes, and Silla was one of the few places where they could be easily obtained by the Chinese and the Japanese.

In contrast, Koreans exported both utilitarian items *and* luxury goods to Japan. The luxury goods were obtained from Chinese trade via the Silk Road, with Korean merchants serving as the middlemen. Koreans sold everything to the Japanese, including metalware, weaponry and armor, and jewelry. The Koreans brought silk to Japan and eventually silk production secrets, perhaps as early as the 4th century CE.²⁰

I think the export of paper is also noteworthy: the production of paper as well as wood-block printing were well developed in Korea by the 10th century; and Koreans developed cast metal type in the 13th-century, well before Gutenberg in the Holy Roman Empire, ca. 1485.²¹

IMPORTS

Koreans imported luxury goods that merchants had brought to China from the Silk Road. Wild mountain ponies from Manchuria were obtained from the northern nomads and domesticated in Silla Korea. Many were later re-exported as domestic animals along the Silk Roads by the Silla government and merchants. Aristocratic and royal tombs show Central Asian musical instruments, an elaborate gold and jeweled dagger from the steppes of Turkmenistan; highly crafted bells, mirrors, silver and gold jewelry, and transparent glass vases and beads from the Mediterranean.²² These luxury goods supported the status of the Korean aristocracy as well as the coffers of the merchants.

The Silla elite's desire for gold ornaments originally arose from contacts with various kingdoms of China and with the nomadic cultures of the northeast. Gold, the raw material, initially was imported but eventually must have been produced within the Silla territories to satisfy the huge demand. Scythian gold ornaments make an intriguing and visually convincing precursor to Silla gold—witness the use of the ubiquitous tree-branch motif on their respective gold crowns. Exotic objects made in Central Asia and further west to the Mediterranean have been found in several Silla tombs, testimony to the vibrant international exchanges of the time. Close similari-



ties between the gold ornaments and crystal and jade necklaces of Silla and Japan illustrate the deep ties shared by the elites of the two neighboring kingdoms and the eastern flow of artisans and goods.²³

In the National Museum of Korea, there are stunning gold crowns from the 5th century in shapes reminiscent of deer antlers or tree branches, which was an ancient symbol of a shaman's ability to bridge the worlds of earth and heaven (cf. photos on pp. 49 & 74).²⁴

In their design—notably the vertical projections that suggest antlers, dangling pendants, and treelike shapes—and goldworking techniques, Korean crowns are similar to ones excavated from various parts of the Eurasian steppes, suggesting not only connections between these regions but also that Korean shamanism derived from Scytho-Siberian shamanism. The existence of active land and sea trade linking Korea with lands far to the west and south is evidenced by glass vessels and beads, some of which are imported from as far away as the Mediterranean. Pure gold earrings uncovered from Silla and Kaya tombs display a variety of designs and accomplished techniques, from simple cut gold sheet to complicated filigree and granulation. The ultimate source of such elaborate techniques as granulation is probably the Greek and Etruscan goldsmiths of western Asia and Europe, whose skills were transmitted to northern China and later to Korea. The resemblance of earrings found in Japan in the Kofun period (ca. 3rd century—538 CE.) to those from Silla and Kaya tombs suggests that such articles were imported from Korea.²⁵

Excavated Silla tombs reveal not only gold crowns, but long gold belts, bronze shoes, gold earrings, bracelets, finger and toe rings on the elite and royal corpses.²⁶

In an Arabic work of the 9th century, Silla was referred to as the “gold-glittering nation.”²⁷ Many tomb objects, like these crowns, do not appear in Chinese tombs, “suggesting *direct* Silla contact by sea and land with Mediterranean and Arab traders, rather than the ‘down-the-line’ trade which is usually implied.”²⁸

SPREAD OF WORLD RELIGIONS: BUDDHISM & CONFUCIANISM

One of the crucial cultural interactions along the Silk Road was the spread of world religions (and philosophies) from their places of origin to new places, and the syncretism (blending of the new with the old) that took place within the new cultures.

Chinese Buddhist monks brought Buddhism into the three kingdoms. The Koguryo court was the first to accept the religion in 372. The Paekche king followed suit twelve years later.²⁹ Buddhism became the official religion of the kingdom of Silla in 527. Monks, sponsored by the northern Korean kingdom of Paekche, spread Buddhism to Japan in 552.³⁰ Korea needs to be mentioned as the recipient as well as the conduit of Buddhism.

The conversion of the rulers to Buddhism no doubt hastened the conversion of the aristocrats and the common peoples. It also may have helped several prominent Silla rulers, especially its queens, solidify their power to rule, since Buddhism was considerably less

gender-conscious than Confucianism.³¹ Buddhism was used by Silla royalty to accentuate their claims of authority: Buddhism required a single community of believers, and if the rulers were the most important sponsors of Buddhism, then the believers would also be united behind a Buddhist leader.³² With its acceptance of nuns and female Bodhisattvas, Buddhism presented no philosophical problems for Silla queens, of which there were at least three. In Korean culture, bone-rank (bloodlines) trumped gender hierarchies: women ruled and participated in Korean public life.³³ Here is another example of cultural syncretism in the Post-Classical era.

Koreans of Unified Silla saw a veritable building boom of beautiful temples, and an influx of relics, artifacts and sculpture designed to compliment and adorn the temples, especially in the Silla capital of Kyongju. “Throughout the peninsula, the increasingly close association of Buddhism and the state is signaled by the erection of temples and crafting of icons at royal expense.”³⁴ Gandharan art—the Buddha presented with Greco-roman robes with Indian facial characteristics—was also brought to Korea and placed in Silla-built temples.³⁵ “Many eminent monks journeyed to Tang China or even to far away India to study the way of the Buddha.”³⁶ Korean monks can be added to the Chinese monks who made the arduous treks eastward along the Silk Road. Korean scholars also traveled to China and even to India to learn from other masters and to collect texts. Buddhism also influenced Silla Korean art forms: art and architecture of the period reflected Buddhist spirituality with its concepts of idealized beauty and contemplation.³⁷

Not surprisingly, given Unified Silla’s close contacts with Tang China, Confucianism came to rival Buddhism as an alternate system of thought during the Unified Silla period. The establishment of a national Confucian college in 682 was one result of this development. “This national educational institution made possible the inauguration of a state examination system for the selection of government officials in 788, and candidates who passed this examination were given appointments on the basis of their proficiency in reading Chinese texts.”³⁸

Confucianism was especially appealing to the lesser aristocrats, whose bone-rank dictated fixed positions in the government hierarchies. The examination system, on the other hand, held out the idea of a meritocracy, thereby bypassing one’s bone-rank.³⁹ Korean scholars traveled to China for ideas and for books.

Korean scholars had already adapted Chinese script, and paper books imported from China made the information exchange even easier.⁴⁰ Silla Korea “developed wood block printing into order to reproduce a variety of texts, especially Buddhist sutras and classical Confucian writing.”⁴¹ The world’s earliest extant wood-block printed text is a Korean Buddhist spell sutra from a pagoda dating to 751.

This article is based on a presentation delivered at The Korea Society in August 2006.



Traditional and Contemporary Korean Popular Culture

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

YONG JIN CHOI: PROJECT DIRECTOR

NEW YORK: KOREA SOCIETY, 2006
194 PAGES, ISBN0-9720704-1-X, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Alan Whitehead

Silla Korea and the Silk Road, Golden Age, Golden Threads, a curriculum guide designed for world history, geography, and Asian studies high school courses, lucidly demonstrates the normally neglected role of Korea in the history of the Silk Road. The Korea Society has a well-deserved reputation for the very high quality of everything it sponsors and publishes. This guide is no exception. The work focuses on, but is not limited to, the Unified Silla Kingdom period (668–935 CE) usually referred to as Korea's Golden Age.

Content and activities in the guide make clear that Silla Korea's trade in products and ideas both shaped Korean culture and influenced other parts of Asia as well. Korean livestock, silk, wool, medicine, ginseng, and superbly crafted gold and silver ornaments and utensils reached China and Central Asia. Products ranging from calendars, clocks, and paper—to Central Asian and Mediterranean art objects—reached Silla from the Silk Road and related maritime trade. Architectural and artistic styles from foreign cultures, most notably Buddhist inspired works, also reached Silla through the Silk Road, and then were transmitted to Japan.

A complete copy of the guide, 194 glossy pages full of excellent photographs, handouts, drawings, maps and text, in pdf format, is also included on a CD which accompanies the guide. A pdf version of the guide is also available online on the Korea Society Web site at <http://www.koreasociety.org>.

This work consists of seven major parts. In Part One, "Was Silla Part of the Silk Road?" a convincing historical case is made that Koreans participated in trading a variety of products and ideas via the Silk Road. Part Two, "Did the Silk Road Create Silla's Golden Age?" provides an overview of six major elements of the Golden Age that reflect Silk Road influences. The third major topic consists of biographical sketches of twelve individuals whose lives and achievements represent the Silk Road legacy of Silla Korea.

The remaining four sections of the book include Part Four, a concluding exercise where students debate the question, "Does international trade hurt or help a culture?" Ten statements supporting each side of the question are furnished and three suggestions are given as to how a class might address the question. This thought provoking exercise guides students through a systematic examination of both the intended and unintended consequences of international economic interactions using Silla as a historical case study.

Part Five is a collection of five articles for advanced readers. This section includes important related events in northern and western China. While Part 5 is intended to be an entire unit, each of the articles within the unit could be addressed separately. (Early Japan's Korean connection is particularly interesting.) Also in Part Five, discussion of

Buddhist Statue Exported to Japan



- Left: The Maitreya (Buddha-of-the-Future), Koryu-ji, Japan. Records indicate that it was exported from Korea in the 7th century.
- This Maitreya is slightly larger than its "almost twin" at the National Museum in Seoul and is definitely Silla in style.

Slide number 42 of the online PDF version at http://www.koreasociety.org/k-12_resources/.

**Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Age,
Golden Threads is an invaluable
resource for world history instructors
in grades nine through twelve.**

the annotated timeline for important events in northern and western China may be used as an excellent enrichment activity.

Part Six "Teaching the History and Significance of the Silk Road in the Post Classical Era," by high school teacher Ane Lintvedt, addresses trade in goods as well as the spread of Buddhism and Confucianism, while making the case that it is easy and important to include Korea in the history of the Silk Road in world history.

The seventh part of the guide consists of the alignment of the included material with national history standards and standards for the states of California, Michigan, and New York. An easy to use pronunciation guide for the Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Sanskrit words found in the text and a bibliography conclude the book.

In total there are twenty-six classroom exercises in the guide. Examples of lessons include, "Silk as a Medium of Exchange," "What can archeology reveal about trade goods?", and "How does an era become known as a Golden Age?" Well thought-out handouts accompany each lesson and go far beyond the pedestrian "fill in the blank" exercises so common in high school. Many include advanced readings or visuals. Several of the lessons have well constructed "Points to Consider" questions. These are excellent higher level thinking skill questions that are thought/discussion provoking and help students draw global connections.

Silla Korea and the Silk Road: Golden Age, Golden Threads is an invaluable resource for world history instructors in grades nine through twelve.

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