

UNIT 3: GLOBAL EXCHANGE
LESSON 2

Travel Along the Silk Road

Consider how individuals would have traveled along the Silk Road, including the kinds of objects and ideas they brought with them



Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about travel along the Silk Road, considering the different kinds of people who traveled and their reasons for making the journey
- Discuss the ways that travelers from different cultures can share ideas with one another, leading to cultural diffusion, or the spread of different cultural ideas
- Design and construct an object for travel that communicates ideas about the culture of the maker and the owner

VOCABULARY

<u>Caravan</u>	A group of people traveling together on a trade expedition
<u>Coffer</u>	A strongbox or small chest for holding valuables
<u>Lacquer</u>	A liquid, often clear, and made from tree sap, plants, or insects that creates a hard, protective, and glossy finish when applied to a surface and then left to dry
<u>Symbol</u>	An image that stands for or represents something else

REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Cardboard, oaktag paper, or construction paper
- Tape
- Glue
- Drawing implements (markers, colored pencils, crayons)
- Scissors
- Index cards

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- Silk Road map
- Image of Loom Width of Silk Fragment
- The Story of Princess Taihe



Loom Width of Silk Fragment, 13th–14th century. Silk, gilt paper, 18 × 22 in. (45.7 × 55.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1992.81. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

For the Teacher

Background Information

The Silk Road is a four-thousand-mile network of travel routes carved out by caravans (large groups) of travelers, merchants, and scholars between the second century B.C.E. and the fourteenth century C.E. Stretching through East Asia (China), Southeast Asia (India), Persia, East Africa, and Southern Europe, the road and waterways made possible global trade between people from different parts of the world and different cultures and backgrounds. Routes connected major cities and trading ports to one another. Although the Silk Road covered a tremendous geographical area, most people only traveled short distances, so exported goods might change hands many times on their way to their final destinations.

In a time before airplanes and trains, caravans traveled with camels, horses, or mules over mountains and across deserts, or by boats through rivers and seas, in order to trade such materials and goods as textiles, metals, spices, animals, and weapons. Journeys along the Silk Road were sometimes long and often dangerous, requiring travelers to deal with difficult conditions. Wealthy travelers were usually escorted by an entourage, including servants to carry their belongings and guards to protect them. Other travelers, such as merchants and scholars, could not afford these luxuries and therefore had to pack light and travel cautiously.

While the term “Silk Road” refers to the trade of desirable silk from China, often used as a form of currency, many historical, social, and economic factors also reflect the complex network of cultural as well as ideological and technological exchanges that describe the Silk Road during this period. As materials and goods were traded, so was information on how different societies produced them and the ideas they associated with them.

Artwork Description

The *Traveling Coffin*, a kind of suitcase or trunk made for travel, consists of a large, bulbous central compartment and a lid. The compartment has rounded edges, and is slightly larger toward the bottom than at the top. Hinges on the back of the object secure the lid to the compartment, while a scalloped flap allows the trunk to be locked shut. Four handles—two at the front and two at the back—intended to have ropes tied between them, would have been used to secure the coffin to the back of a servant or an animal. The surface of the trunk is intricately decorated with patterns and designs in red, yellow, gold, white, and black, and includes real and mythical animals and floral motifs. The central medallion on the front of the coffin shows a lion chasing a brocaded ball with long trailing ribbons. The top



Traveling Coffin, circa 1250–90. Lacquer over leather, bamboo, and wood with metal mounts, 17¼ × 29 × 16¼ in. (43.8 × 73.7 × 41.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1996.68. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

of the lid shows two phoenixes, one male and one female, and the center of the back panel is ornamented with a flying goose with a long stalk of grass in its beak. An inscription under the lid reads: “*Wenzhou xinhejiejie anningfang xia Ou jia shenghuo*” (made by the Ou family of Wenzhou, Xinhe Street, Anning Ward).

About the Artwork

The city and port of Wenzhou in southeastern China lies along the bank of the Ou River. Its proximity to the mouth of the river makes it easily accessible to trade. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), Wenzhou became a prosperous foreign-trading port, and a center of papermaking and lacquerware production. Lacquerware refers to decorative objects coated in lacquer, a clear liquid that, when applied to a surface and dried, creates a hard, protective, and glossy finish. Chinese lacquerware objects like this one were exported to Egypt, eastern Iran, and Central Asia as luxury goods beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, and reflect the exchange of motifs and techniques on the global-trade routes of the Silk Road.

The coffer is decorated using the techniques of engraved gold (*qiangjin*) and engraved color (*qiangcai*), in which gold-leaf powder or pigmented lacquer is placed into lines engraved in the lacquer. These labor-intensive practices, as well as its elaborate decoration, indicate that the coffer was a luxury object. The engraved patterns on it appear to have been influenced by Middle Eastern designs, such as those seen in the Brooklyn Museum’s *Loom Width of Silk Fragment*, while other elements of the work, such as the animal motifs and color choices, relate more closely to Chinese sources: lions, for example, represent safety in Chinese culture, while geese represent marital fidelity.

Small indentations around the handles, most likely from ropes tied around them, indicate that at some point the trunk was carried while full of heavy objects, possibly along the Silk Road. Such a luxurious, heavy carrying case would have been used by an elite member of society, perhaps a bride moving to her new husband’s kingdom, or by a government official bringing diplomatic gifts to a foreign ruler. Other travelers, such as merchants or monks, would have carried simpler coffers or trunks and—without an entourage to haul their belongings—were forced to travel lighter.

Lesson

STEP 1: 15 MINUTES

Introduction

Show students the [Silk Road map](#) and explain: The Silk Road was a network of trade routes spanning more than four thousand miles and dating back more than two thousand years. Many different kinds of people traveled along the Silk Road for various reasons. One of the main ones was to sell materials and goods.

Ask students to imagine someone traveling along the Silk Road one thousand years ago, then ask:

- How do you think they traveled along the Silk Road back then?
- What challenges do you think they faced?

Read students [The Story of Princess Taihe](#), explaining that she was a real person who traveled along the Silk Road. Point out different locations from the story on the Silk Road map while you read.

After reading, ask: What details did you notice about her journey?

STEP 2: 15 MINUTES

Artwork Discussion

Tell students that you are going to look at a work of art from China made more than seven hundred years ago, and think about what it can tell us about travel along the Silk Road.

Show students the [Traveling Coffin](#) and ask:

- What details do you notice?
- What colors, textures, or patterns do you see?
- What do you think this object might be?

Explain that this object is a traveling trunk, which would have been used like a suitcase. It is lacquered, which means a hard, shiny finish has been applied to its surface. Pass around the lacquer sample for students to touch.

Explain that a highly decorated trunk like this one would have been time-consuming to create, and would have been very expensive to purchase. It would have been owned by a wealthy person, maybe someone like Princess Taihe, and we think it



Traveling Coffin, circa 1250–90. Lacquer over leather, bamboo, and wood with metal mounts, 17¼ × 29 × 16¼ in. (43.8 × 73.7 × 41.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1996.68. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

was used for travel along the Silk Road. Ropes would have been tied to the handles of the trunk, and servants, camels, or mules would have carried it.

Ask: What kinds of things do you think someone would have put in this trunk? Show students the [detail image](#) of the front of the *Traveling Coffin* and point out the lion. Explain that the artwork is decorated with many different animals that are symbolic in Chinese culture. For example, lions are guardians that represent protection.

Ask: Why do you think a traveler along the Silk Road might want to have a lion on their traveling case?

Tell students that people did not just exchange goods along the Silk Road, they also exchanged ideas. This is called *cultural diffusion*, which means the spread of a culture's ideas or beliefs.

Show students the [full image](#) of the *Traveling Coffin* alongside the [image](#) of the *Loom Width of Silk Fragment*, explaining that the silk fragment is a piece of fabric from Central Asia. Ask: What similarities do you notice between the decoration on the silk fragment and the decoration on the *Traveling Coffin*?

Tell students that we know the *Traveling Coffin* was made in China, but through cultural diffusion, China was influenced by Central Asia and Central Asia by China. The decoration on the coffin shows influences from Chinese culture, such as the colors and animals, as well as from other regions.



Loom Width of Silk Fragment, 13th–14th century. Silk, gilt paper, 18 × 22 in. (45.7 × 55.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1992.81. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

STEP 3: 20 MINUTES

Activity: Getting Ready for a Trip

Tell students to imagine they are going on a trip and need to design a coffin to carry their items with them. Students should consider:

- Who are they, and what would they want to carry on this trip?
- How will they design the coffin so that it is easy to carry and able to fit their belongings?
- How will the coffin showcase or represent who they are and where they are from?
- How will the coffin include references, symbols, or text related to their local town or city, family origin, nationality, or cultural, religious, or ethnic background, likes, interests, or goals?

Provide students with available materials: cardboard and shoe boxes, oaktag paper, construction paper, markers, tape or glue, and/or colored pencils to design and construct a piece of luggage.

Provide each student with three index cards and ask them to number the cards from 1 to 3. Students will draw or list the following on the index cards and place them in their traveling containers:

- Index card 1 What personal items needed for comfort and survival will they include in their coffer? Make sure to consider various weather and geographical conditions.
- Index card 2 What items or ideas will they share with others once they arrive?
- Index card 3 What items or ideas would they like to learn more about or purchase from others?

Ask students to share what they have designed and why, and what they have included in their coffers.

Lesson Extensions

ELA CONNECTION—DESCRIBING A JOURNEY

Reread *The Story of Princess Taihe*, and explain that we know about her journey along the Silk Road because she kept a diary describing her travels. Ask students to think about a journey they have taken—it might be a short trip, like going to school, or a longer one, like traveling to a different part of the city or the world—and then write a diary entry describing the journey. While they are writing, suggest they think about details like: What kinds of things did they see? What challenges did they face? What happened when they got to their destination?

ARTS CONNECTION—FELLOW TRAVELERS

Divide the students into small groups. Using their travel coffers and designs, students should identify at least three things (interests, beliefs, possessions, etc.) that the travelers in their group have in common and that they would like to share with the world. Working as a group, they can use tablets or smartphones to create a set of photographs or a video highlighting the cultural values of their travelers' group. Students can take turns presenting to the class, or post their work on an online platform such as Google Classroom. If time allows, students can imagine and discuss how their groups might react to and trade with one another.

Worksheets and Additional Materials

The Story of Princess Taihe¹

Adapted for children by Pearl Lau, from *Life Along the Silk Road*
by Susan Whitfield

In the fall of 821, Princess Taihe found out she was going to be sent off to live in western China. It was a journey of more than a thousand miles. She would be traveling on a *howdah*, which is a seat used for riding on top of a camel or an elephant. The journey would take close to a year because the huge caravan in which she traveled was loaded with gifts for her new husband, the *Khagan*, or king, of the Uygurs [wee-gers]. She had never met him, and she realized she would probably never see her home or family again.

As the princess was leaving, the emperor (her brother) and all the people in the court lined up according to their rank to bid her farewell. All the tributes they offered her of silks and ponies delayed things; it took hours for the caravan to get through the town and out onto the Silk Road.

The princess had no choice but to go. Her brother was the emperor, and in those days women of high social status were sometimes sent off to marry in order to strengthen relationships between kingdoms or other territories. The princess was meant to be the “tribute” to the Uygurs. She was richly covered in silks. She wore translucent jade pins in her hair, and gold necklaces with pearls and jewels; her crown incorporated ivories from India and lapis lazuli (a valuable, richly colored blue stone) from Khotan. The princess’s clothes and perfumes were carried by the horses and camels in her caravan. Her ladies-in-waiting also wore silks, including silk pants, and rode astride the horses like men, not side-saddle as ladies did in Europe. Princess Taihe was a very accomplished horsewoman herself. She even played polo, a sport originating in Central Asia. The Chinese prized horses and the Uygurs charged around forty or fifty bolts of silk per horse. The best ones came from Western Asia; it was said that these creatures were half dragon and could transport their owners to heaven. Some horses were actually trained to dance for the emperor on his birthday.

Princess Taihe had practiced how to dance in the Western style like the Uygurs and had also brought her musical instrument with her, a gold-inlaid zither. With such preparations, she hoped to make her new husband, the *Khagan*, happy. Before her departure, her brother had already received gifts from the *Khagan*—soft cloth made from camel hair, brocades, furs, jades, fifty camels, and a thousand ponies.

Princess Taihe’s marriage was intended to help establish peace between the Chinese emperor and the *Khagan* of the Uygurs. The Chinese were very powerful. Their military had crossbows, armor, steel swords, gunpowder, and mechanical catapults, and they could ride and shoot at the same time like nomads. But they had never been able to dominate the tribes at the borders. They therefore offered tribute brides in order to achieve the same result. Princess Taihe was to succeed where warriors armed with all that weaponry had failed.

It took Princess Taihe’s caravan almost a year to travel the one thousand miles of the journey. A few horses and riders might have made it in a few months

but the caravan moved slowly. It did not travel all day because the servants had to set up tents for the princess and her ladies to rest in. They had to stop and cook meals, and they had to let the horses graze. If they had brought grass and straw with them for the animals to eat, they would have needed to bring even more pack animals. As it traveled, the caravan left the grassy areas and began to pass through rocky land without trees or waterways. It must have been quite lonely at times for Princess Taihe. She had really never been out of her palace before—except to travel to her other palace.

The thrill of adventure must have disappeared very quickly as one monotonous day rolled into another. Since she was a princess, however, Taihe was lucky that by the time her camel arrived at each stop, the tent was already set up with rugs, and silks hanging on the walls, and her tea was hot and ready.

Finally the day came when Princess Taihe arrived at the *Khagan's* walled city of Ordu-Balik. It was winter and the river was frozen. It was so easy to cross. The *Khagan's* tent was set up on the roof of his palace. It was completely covered in gold! Thick wool rugs covered everything. On top of them was another layer of fine silk rugs. There were large cushions everywhere, covered in beautiful silk brocades of green, red, blue, and gold.

Furs were heaped all over too. The princess was offered a glass of wine in a crystal cup decorated with purple grapes. She did not have anything this lovely back in China.

Now Princess Taihe had to become Uyгур. Her Chinese clothes consisted of an underrobe and baggy trousers made of thin silk. Over this she wore a richly woven outerrobe. Embroidered slippers of red silk peeked out from under her clothes. Her hair was piled high in a bun. On the day of her ceremony, a Uyгур servant got her ready. She changed into an undergown of red silk with a plain round neck. Over it she put on a long, red-embroidered robe decorated with red-and-white braid. The sleeves were narrow, very unlike the enormous sleeves of her Chinese robes. Her hair was styled with huge loops on either side of her head and ornamented with animal-motif pins in gold and lapis. She wore a wide, red scarf tied around her head, its ends trailing down her back. The final touches to this outfit were provided by long, gold earrings and a narrow, gold crown that looked like a small boat.

Princess Taihe was carried in a sedan chair to the *Khagan*. After only two years, however, he died, and Princess Taihe tried to return to China, her home. During this period, there were numerous clashes between the two armies, during one of which she had to hide in a cart for safety. After twenty years away, the princess finally reached China. Her Central Asian life was over.

Cover:
Traveling Coffer, circa 1250–90. Lacquer over leather, bamboo, and wood with metal mounts, 17¼ × 29 × 16¼ in. (43.8 × 73.7 × 41.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1996.68. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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