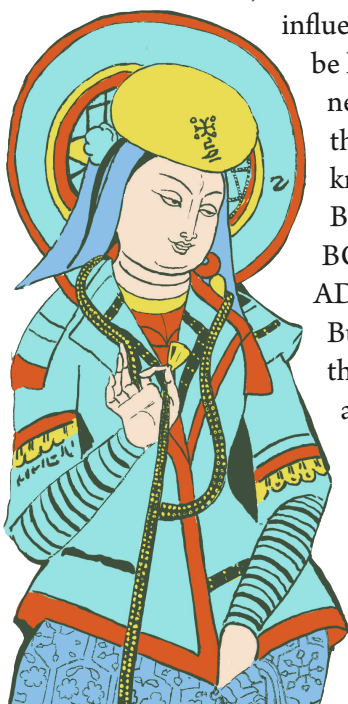




Buddhism originated in India during the fifth century BC, but its rapid spread and huge influence on world culture can be largely attributed to the network of trading routes through Asia that we now know as the Silk Road. Between the first century BC and the seventh century AD, different strands of Buddhism travelled across the Silk Road from India along several different routes through Central Asia to China.



The Silk Road linked Europe by land to all

the major Asian civilizations and as such acted as a conduit for the transmission of all sorts of ideas, traditions and beliefs. They were spread partly by missionaries and monks, partly by those expanding and invading empires that had adopted the religion, and partly by travelling merchants, artisans, pilgrims and nomadic people who travelled the Silk Roads to make their fortune.

From the fourth century AD, Chinese Buddhist monks had begun to travel in the other direction towards India to discover Buddhism first-hand. Buddhism quickly became the dominant religion of the Silk Road, and its decline there only came as Mongolian and Turkic influence in China increased towards the end of the first millennium AD, and Islam overtook it as the dominant faith. With the eventual fall of the Tangut Empire to Genghis Khan in 1227, Buddhism gradually disappeared from the Silk Road altogether.

Activity:

By looking at objects found on the Silk Road, we can learn much about the ways in which ideas and beliefs may have spread.

Look at the painting below from the British Museum. Can you guess who this character is or what he may be doing?

Look at the pack of scrolls on his back. What might these have been used for?



An itinerant storyteller or monk. 1919,0101,0.168
© The British Museum

This painting shows a monk with a pack full of scrolls, a staff and a tiger. It is possible that the character could be a pilgrim monk like the famous Xuanzang who had a dream that convinced him to journey to India on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Buddhism, preaching his

faith and collecting sutras as he went. The journey took him over seventeen years and was immortalized in the famous Chinese novel *Journey to the West* and the 1970s television series *Monkey*.

Alternatively the image could depict a travelling storyteller, carrying illustrations for his public recitals. Characters such as this would have travelled the Silk Road telling popular Buddhist tales, illustrated by painted scrolls.

After about the first century AD, the spread of Buddhism among learned people was helped by the practice of writing down and translating Buddhist Scriptures or Sutra into different languages. In fact, much of the knowledge we have today about the spread of Buddhism comes from documents that have survived at sites such as Dunhuang on the Silk Road. Originally however, knowledge was passed largely by word of mouth and this allowed ideas to spread far more easily to ordinary and illiterate people.

Both storytellers and travelling pilgrim monks such as these would therefore have played a vital part in spreading Buddhist ideas and imagery upon their travels.

