

By Sachin 2008, Science Editor

## [The Sea Silk Road](#)

### *The Chinese sea civilization*

Silk, the highly sought-for item in the ancient Rome, was brought from China by caravans that had to cross thousands of kilometers of deserts, rough terrain and abrupt mountains. To all these, the frequent attacks of the bandits added, in the wild passes of the mountains, on the road whose end was on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. No wonder people looked after a "Sea Silk Road". Even so, the dangers were not eliminated: powerful storms and pirate attacks. The oldest records of a sea silk road are from the time of Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 BC). In 1121 BC, during the rule of king Wu, silk thread rolls started to reach Korea. After the military unification of the Chinese kingdoms by Qin Shihuang, in 221 BC (the famous emperor with the tomb filled by the army of terracotta soldiers), many inhabitants of the defeated kingdoms of Qi, Yan and Zhao took refuge in Korea, crossing the Bohai Bay. They introduced the techniques of silk worm growing and rolling the silk threads in Korea. Chinese silk subsequently reached Japan. The oldest sea connection between China and Japan had its start point in the Shandong Peninsula. The ships crossed the Yellow Sea to reach a place close to the modern Osaka. On the other hand, ships coming from Japan could navigate southward, along the Chinese coast, then to ascend on the Yangtze River to Nanjing. In the Chinese-Japanese relation, silk was used first for diplomatic purposes. During the Sui Dynasty, a real diplomacy of the silk was maintained. Silk worms were brought to Japan in 199 AD. In this country, the silk processing developed after 4 weaver women were sent here by the Chinese authorities of the time. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), the silk trade started to be practiced by persons that did not belong to the governmental circles. During this epoch, many traders started to go to Japan on their own ships to sell silk and porcelain. During the emperor Wu Di (140-87 BC) of the Han Dynasty, Chinese ships loaded with silk started from the zone of Leizhou Peninsula to India, navigating along the coasts of Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar. In India, silk was exchanged for pearls and gemstones. At the return, the Chinese ships also passed along the Ceylon coasts. Gradually, the Chinese ships went farther westwards. As bandit bands started to control the terrestrial silk road, both China and ancient Rome were eager to exploit a sea silk road. In 97 AD, Chinese sent Gan Ying, a messenger, to Rome. The difficulties of the voyage impeded him to achieve his goal, being forced to turn back home. In his turn, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius sent, in 166 AD, a messenger that reached China. He offered ivory, rhino horns and sea turtle shells as gifts to the Chinese emperor. The sea route used by the Roman messenger was subsequently employed for the sea transport of the silk between China and Rome. During the Song Dynasty, Chinese ships reached Basra (in Iraq), Oman and the eastern coasts of Africa. In 1219, the Imperial Chinese Court decided, due to the increasing outside flow of copper coins, that the foreign goods would be paid only in silk and porcelain. During the Song Dynasty, many important Chinese inventions - the compass, the gun powder, the paper and the printing press - reached Europe via Arabs and Persians. The navigator Xheng He, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), made 7 journeys on the eastern coasts of Africa, half century before the Portuguese Vasco da Gama. In one journey, the 200 ships of his fleet (of which 60 were of large capacity) comprised 27,800 people, including numerous traders. This was the peak of the Sea Silk Road. In time, other silk ways were opened towards Philippines and Americas. At a certain point in time, due to the intense silk trade, the silver Mexican coins were so numerous in China that they were used as standard coins together with the Chinese ones.