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From Xi'an to Morocco: How Sport Helped Create Cultural Connections on the Silk Road

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Abstract

The Silk Road is usually described through trade in silk, horses, spices, metals, and religions. That picture is accurate, but incomplete. Across the routes linking Xi'an to Central Asia, Persia, the Arab lands, and North Africa, sport also moved with merchants, envoys, pilgrims, soldiers, and court elites. This paper argues that sport helped create cultural connections on the Silk Road in four linked ways. First, it provided shared social practices that could be understood across linguistic and religious boundaries. Second, it traveled through the same institutions that carried trade and diplomacy, especially courts, cities, and caravanserais. Third, it encouraged adaptation, as games such as polo, mounted archery, wrestling, and equestrian display were reshaped by local conditions while retaining recognizable forms. Fourth, it served political purposes, allowing rulers to display prestige, military skill, and openness to foreign customs. Using examples from Tang China, Central Asia, Persianate courts, and Moroccan equestrian traditions, this paper shows that sport was not a decorative side note to Silk Road history. It was one of the practical ways people met, watched, copied, admired, and reworked each other's cultures. The result was not a single Silk Road sporting culture, but a chain of connected practices that made distant societies more legible to one another.

Keywords

Silk Road; sport; cultural exchange; polo; equestrian traditions; Xi'an; Morocco; diplomacy

1. Introduction

The Silk Road carried much more than silk. It carried habits. It carried tastes. It carried ways of moving the body in public. From Xi'an, the great eastern hub of the overland routes, to the western Islamic lands and North Africa, people exchanged not only goods and beliefs but also games, martial exercises, riding practices, and public spectacles (Hansen, 2012; UNESCO, 2018).

This matters because sport is often treated as secondary in premodern history, as if it belonged to leisure alone. On the Silk Road, that separation does not hold up well. Many sports were tied to cavalry training, hunting, diplomacy, ritual display, and urban festivity. A polo match could be entertainment, military rehearsal, and elite sociability at the same time. A wrestling contest could be a fairground attraction, a test of masculine reputation, and a meeting point between strangers. An equestrian performance could preserve martial memory while also becoming a public art. Sport was social glue with dust on its boots (Stuart, 2012; The Diplomat, 2017).

This paper explores how sport helped make cultural connections across the Silk Road from Xi'an to Morocco. It argues that sport worked as a medium of contact because it created shared spaces of participation and spectatorship, moved through trade and diplomatic networks, adapted easily to local settings, and linked practical skills with symbolic prestige. The argument does not claim that all Silk Road societies played the same games or understood them

in identical ways. They did not. The point is narrower and stronger: sport helped people recognize patterns in one another's cultures, and that recognition made exchange easier (Zhong & Zhu, 2025; Christian, 2000).

To make that case, the paper first treats the Silk Road as a cultural corridor rather than a single road. It then examines sport as a social language, before turning to horse culture, combat traditions, courts and caravanserais, diplomacy, adaptation, and the long geographic arc from Tang China to Morocco. Throughout, the emphasis stays on connection. Not sport in isolation, but sport in motion.

2. The Silk Road as a Network of Cultural Exchange

Scholars now usually describe the Silk Road as a network rather than a single route. The term itself was coined in the late nineteenth century by Ferdinand von Richthofen, but the historical reality was a web of overland and maritime connections linking East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and parts of Europe (Whitfield, 2004). This network mattered not only because goods moved across it, but because people did. Merchants, monks, diplomats, translators, soldiers, artisans, entertainers, and animal handlers all carried practices that could be copied, admired, or modified elsewhere (UNESCO, 2018; Foltz, 2010).

Xi'an, known in earlier periods as Chang'an, was one of the most important eastern nodes of this system. During the Han and especially the Tang dynasty, it functioned as a cosmopolitan capital with foreign communities, embassies, imported animals, and courtly tastes shaped by contact with Inner Asia and beyond. At its peak in the eighth century, Chang'an was among the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world (China Silk Museum, 2024; Yang, 2024). That urban setting mattered for sport because large capitals concentrate spectators, patrons, and performers. A game becomes easier to spread when it is visible.

Central Asia was the hinge. Sogdian merchants, among the most active intermediaries on the Silk Roads for centuries, linked Chinese, Iranian, Indian, and West Asian worlds through trade, translation, and travel (De la Vaissière, 2005). Their role is often discussed in relation to religion and commerce, but the same mobility that carried scripts, textiles, and stories also carried habits of recreation and elite display. Merchants do not travel as blank economic units. They bring songs, food, jokes, and games. They also notice what local elites enjoy and what foreign visitors admire.

Further west, Persianate courts and Islamic urban centers became major sites of sporting transmission. Equestrian games, hunting culture, and martial exercises circulated widely across these zones (Eaton, 2018). By the time one reaches North Africa and Morocco, the exact forms have changed, but the broader culture of horsemanship, martial display, and public performance remains visible. Moroccan "tbourida", for example, is not a copy of Tang polo, nor should anyone pretend otherwise. Yet it belongs to a connected

Afro-Eurasian history in which horses, cavalry skills, ceremonial display, and public spectatorship formed a recognizable family of practices (UNESCO, 2021).

This wider framing helps avoid a common mistake. The Silk Road was not a conveyor belt moving finished cultural products unchanged from east to west. It was a contact zone. Things moved, but they also changed. Sport is especially useful for studying this process because games are portable, visible, and adaptable. Rules can shift. Equipment can be improvised. Meanings can multiply. A mounted game can be military training in one court, aristocratic leisure in another, and heritage performance centuries later.

3. Sport as a Social Language

Sport helped connect cultures because it could be understood before it could be translated. That is not a romantic claim that games erase all difference. They don't. But physical contests and performances often make sense at first sight. A rider controlling a horse at speed, an archer hitting a target, two wrestlers testing balance and strength, a team coordinating movement in front of a crowd, these actions are legible even when the spoken language is not (Stuart, 2012; Guttmann, 2004).

This legibility mattered on the Silk Road, where many encounters were brief and multilingual. A caravan arriving at a city gate, a diplomatic mission received at court, or travelers resting at a caravanserai did not always share a common tongue. Yet they could watch, imitate, wager, applaud, and compare. Sport created low-threshold contact. One did not need theological agreement or literary education to appreciate skill.

The social function of sport also deserves attention. Sporting events gathered crowds and structured hospitality. They gave rulers occasions to entertain guests, urban communities reasons to assemble, and travelers opportunities

to observe local customs without entering formal institutions (Burke, 1997). In this sense, sport worked like music and food, but with one extra feature: it displayed disciplined bodies. That made it useful for reading another society's values. A culture that prized mounted coordination, synchronized firing, or ritualized wrestling was showing something about hierarchy, training, masculinity, and public order.

There is a counterargument worth taking seriously. One might say that sport was too local, too informal, or too poorly documented to have played a real role in long-distance cultural connection. Trade, religion, and diplomacy, on this view, did the heavy lifting, while sport remained background noise. The objection has force, especially because written sources often privilege courts, wars, and doctrines over recreation. But the evidence we do have points the other way. Sports appear in court records, visual art, archaeological finds, heritage traditions, and descriptions of elite and popular life across Eurasia (The Diplomat, 2017; Hübner, 2016). More importantly, sport often sat inside the very institutions that the counterargument treats as primary. It was part of diplomacy, part of military culture, part of urban festivity. Background noise does not usually get buried with noblewomen.

That last point is not a joke, though it sounds like one. Archaeologists studying the tomb of a Tang noblewoman in Xi'an identified donkey remains as evidence connected to donkey polo, providing the first physical evidence of the sport in imperial China and showing the place of equestrian play in elite female life (Hu et al., 2020). This is niche evidence, but useful. It shows that sport was not merely textual ornament. It left material traces, and those traces reveal how deeply games could matter in social identity.

4. Horse Culture and Equestrian Sports Across the Silk Road

If one sporting theme ties Xi'an to Morocco most clearly, it is horse culture. Horses were central to transport, warfare, diplomacy, hunting, and status across much of the Silk Road world. They were traded, gifted, bred, admired, painted, and mythologized (Beckwith, 2009). Where horses matter this much, equestrian sport is never far behind.

The Chinese demand for strong Central Asian horses helped shape early Silk Road history. During the Han dynasty, Emperor Wu sought the famed Ferghana horses, later celebrated as "Heavenly Horses," and military expeditions were launched to secure access to them. This episode is usually told as a story of military logistics and imperial ambition, which it was. But it also had cultural consequences. Imported horses changed cavalry capacity, elite taste, and the possibilities of mounted sport. Better horses do not remain confined to battlefields. They enter hunting parks, ceremonial processions, and games.

By the Tang dynasty, equestrian culture in China had become visibly entangled with Inner Asian and western influences. Polo is the clearest example. Most scholarship places the origins of polo in ancient Iran or the wider Iranian-Central Asian zone, with diffusion eastward into China by the Tang era through Central Asian contacts (Bi, 2021). Tang China did not passively receive the game. It made polo fashionable at court and among elites, and visual and textual evidence suggests that it became embedded in aristocratic culture (Schafer, 1963). The game's appeal is easy to see. It combined speed, teamwork, riding skill, and prestige. It also looked good in public, which never hurts a court sport.

The Tang case is especially revealing because it shows several layers of exchange at once. First, the game itself moved. Second, the horses and riding techniques that made the game possible moved. Third, the social meaning of the game shifted as it entered a new courtly environment. Fourth, the game became local enough to generate distinctive practices, including the use of donkeys in some elite contexts, likely because they were less dangerous and more manageable than full-sized polo horses for certain riders (Hu et al.,2020). That is adaptation in action.

Across Central Asia and the Persianate world, polo, often known as "chovgan" or related forms, had long associations with nobility and military training. The game appears in Persian literary and artistic traditions and was linked to courtly ideals of skill, discipline, and rulership (Oxford University Press, 2018; Suren, 1998). It was not only a pastime. It was a way of displaying command over horse, body, and team. Those are political virtues in mounted empires.

Mounted archery and horse racing also formed part of this wider equestrian zone. Steppe and Inner Asian societies prized riding and archery as practical necessities, and neighboring sedentary states often borrowed or adapted these skills (Sinor, 1981). The Silk Road did not erase the difference between nomadic and sedentary cultures, but it made their techniques mutually visible. Chinese courts admired and adopted some Inner Asian riding practices. Persian and Turkic polities integrated cavalry sports into elite culture. Islamic lands westward preserved and reshaped equestrian arts through hunting, military drill, and ceremonial display (Berriah, 2020).

By the time we reach Morocco, the sporting form has changed again, but the horse remains central. "Tbourida",

inscribed by UNESCO in 2021 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is a Moroccan equestrian performance dating to the sixteenth century in its documented form. It involves teams of 15 to 25 riders performing a coordinated parade and then a synchronized charge ending with the simultaneous firing of blank shots (UNESCO, 2021). This is not a Silk Road sport in the narrow sense of having traveled unchanged from Xi'an. It is better understood as a western expression of a broader Afro-Eurasian equestrian culture shaped by cavalry memory, public display, and the symbolic bond between rider, weapon, and horse (Talley, 2022).

That distinction matters. A weak essay would claim direct linear transmission from Tang polo to Moroccan tbourida. The evidence does not support that. A stronger argument is that the Silk Road and connected Islamic networks helped sustain a transregional prestige of horsemanship, cavalry arts, and mounted spectacle. Within that large zone, local traditions developed their own forms. Morocco's equestrian culture belongs to that connected history even when the route is indirect and the adaptation is deep.

5. Martial Arts, Wrestling, and Combat Traditions

Sport on the Silk Road was not limited to horses. Combat traditions also traveled well because they sat at the intersection of military training, ritual display, and public entertainment. Wrestling is the clearest example. It appears in many Silk Road societies, from East Asia through Central Asia and the Islamic world, often with local rules but shared emphasis on balance, grip, strength, and honor (Kylasov, 2019).

The value of wrestling for cultural connection lies partly in its simplicity. It requires little equipment, can be staged almost anywhere, and is easy for outsiders to understand. A traveler may not know the local language, but can still grasp who threw whom. That made wrestling a practical medium of encounter in markets, festivals, military camps, and caravan stops (Guttmann, 2004).

Chinese martial traditions also interacted with wider Eurasian currents, though claims here need care. Popular writing often overstates direct transmission, especially when it tries to draw straight lines from Chinese martial arts to every combat practice in Central Asia. The evidence is patchier than that. Still, the Silk Road did facilitate exchanges in military techniques, bodily disciplines, and ideas about physical cultivation. Monks, guards, caravan personnel, and soldiers moved through the same routes that carried texts and goods (Henning, 1981; Bowman, 2021). Even when specific lineages cannot be proven, the conditions for observation and borrowing were present.

In Central Asia and the Persianate world, combat sports and martial exercises were often tied to courtly and military ideals. Persian and Turkic traditions valued riding, archery, hunting, and forms of bodily training that prepared men for war while also serving as public display. In Islamic societies, **furusiyya**, the culture of horsemanship and martial skill, linked practical training with ethical and elite identity (Schiettecatte, 2017). This is relevant because sport often moved not as isolated play but as part of a package of martial values.

North Africa offers another useful case. Moroccan and wider Maghrebi equestrian and martial performances preserved memories of cavalry technique and collective discipline (UNESCO, 2021; Talley, 2022). Wrestling and strength contests also existed in local festive culture, though the documentation is less continuous than for courtly equestrian display. The broader point remains: combat sports and martial games created recognizable forms of embodied skill across regions that otherwise differed in language, law, and ritual.

A possible objection is that martial practices may divide as much as they connect, since they are tied to war and hierarchy. That is true up to a point. Yet the same practices can connect through admiration, imitation, and ceremonial exchange. A foreign envoy watching mounted archery at court is not being attacked. He is being shown a political language of skill. A wrestler from one region facing another in a festival contest is competing, but also participating in a shared grammar of rules and spectatorship. Conflict and connection are not opposites here. On the Silk Road, they often traveled together.

6. Courts, Cities, and Caravanserais as Sporting Contact Zones

Sport spread because it had places to spread in. Three settings matter most: courts, cities, and caravanserais.

Royal courts were engines of imitation. When a ruler adopted a foreign game, the court gave it visibility, patronage, and prestige. Tang enthusiasm for polo is a textbook case. Once a game enters elite culture, it attracts artisans who make equipment, painters who depict it, poets who mention it, and ambitious courtiers who learn it (Schafer, 1963). Courts also hosted foreign envoys, making them ideal sites for sporting display as a form of diplomatic theater.

Cities mattered for different reasons. Large urban centers such as Chang'an, Samarkand, Isfahan, Cairo, and cities

of the Maghreb concentrated diverse populations and recurring festivals (China Silk Museum, 2024; Allen, 2018). Urban life creates spectators. It also creates markets for animals, tack, weapons, textiles, and performance. A sport becomes culturally sticky when it is not confined to a palace but spills into urban routines, seasonal celebrations, and public memory.

Caravanserais are especially interesting because they were not only inns. They were social and cultural contact zones built at intervals along major trade routes to shelter merchants, animals, and goods. As traffic increased, caravanserais became hubs for exchange in the broad sense, not just commerce (Dabanlı & Şimşek, 2023). Travelers resting together shared stories, techniques, and amusements. One should not picture formal tournaments breaking out every evening in every caravanserai. That would be too tidy. But informal contests, demonstrations of riding or archery skill, and the circulation of sporting talk and equipment are entirely plausible in such spaces.

This setting helps explain how sport crossed social classes. Courts could sponsor elite forms, but caravanserais and market towns allowed diffusion downward and sideways. A groom learns a new way to handle a horse. A guard sees a foreign saddle design. A merchant's servant watches a wrestling hold. A local youth imitates a mounted game seen during a festival. Cultural transmission often works through these small acts rather than grand declarations.

There is also a material side to this process. Sporting exchange depended on objects: saddles, stirrups, bridles, mallets, bows, protective clothing, and trained animals. The Silk Road moved all of these (Beckwith, 2009; Whitfield, 2004). The spread of a game is easier when the tools of the game travel with it. Even when the exact rules do not move intact, equipment can invite experimentation. A horse imported for war may end up changing leisure. A saddle designed for one riding style may make another style possible.

7. Diplomacy, Prestige, and Political Relationships

Sport helped create cultural connections because rulers used it politically. This was not modern "sports diplomacy" in the institutional sense, but the underlying logic is familiar. Sporting display could impress visitors, signal refinement, demonstrate military readiness, and stage controlled interaction between insiders and outsiders (Murray & Pigman, 2014).

On the Silk Road, diplomacy often involved gifts, ceremonies, banquets, and spectacles. Horses were among the most valued diplomatic goods across Eurasia. They were expensive, mobile, and symbolically dense. To gift a horse was to gift speed, status, and martial potential. To display mastery over horses in sport was to show that one's court possessed not only wealth but disciplined power.

Polo at court fits this pattern well. In Persianate settings, the game had associations with nobility and rulership (Oxford University Press, 2018). In Tang China, its adoption signaled openness to prestigious foreign practices while also domesticating them within imperial culture (Schafer, 1963). A court that could host polo was showing access to fine horses, trained riders, and a cosmopolitan taste for elite recreation. That is politics in sporting clothes.

Hunting displays and mounted archery demonstrations worked similarly. They dramatized command over landscape, animals, and armed bodies (Schiettecatte, 2017). Such performances could accompany diplomatic receptions or seasonal ceremonies, allowing foreign observers to read the host polity through embodied spectacle. One might say that sport translated power into movement.

This political use of sport also created channels of imitation. Elites often copied what they admired in rival or neighboring courts. If a prestigious dynasty favored a certain game or riding style, others had reason to adopt it. Cultural borrowing here was not passive. It was competitive. Courts borrowed to keep up, to signal parity, or to claim participation in a wider civilized order.

A counterpoint is worth noting. Sport could also mark exclusion. Court games were often aristocratic, expensive, and gendered. Polo required horses, space, and training. Equestrian display was not open to everyone. True enough. Yet exclusivity does not cancel connectivity. In fact, elite exclusivity often accelerated long-distance transmission because courts were linked by diplomacy and imitation more tightly than villages were. What began as elite fashion could later diffuse more widely or leave traces in popular memory and heritage performance.

8. The Spread and Adaptation of Games

The most useful way to think about sport on the Silk Road is not diffusion alone, but diffusion plus adaptation. Games moved because they were flexible. They could be translated into local materials, climates, social hierarchies, and moral codes (Christian, 2000).

Polo again offers the clearest case. Originating in the Iranian-Central Asian world according to the strongest evidence, it spread eastward and westward through elite networks (Oxford University Press, 2018). Yet it did not remain identical everywhere. Courtly settings changed who played it, what animals were used, how dangerous it was allowed to be, and what symbolic meanings it carried. In Tang China, the game became part of aristocratic culture and appears to have included women participants in some contexts, as the Xi'an donkey-polo evidence suggests (Hu et al., 2020). That is not a trivial local variation. It changes the social profile of the sport.

Equestrian traditions in the Islamic west show even deeper adaptation. Moroccan tbourida preserves cavalry memory and collective riding discipline, but it is structured as a ceremonial performance with synchronized gunfire,religious symbolism, and troupe organization specific to Moroccan history (UNESCO, 2021; Talley, 2022). It belongs to a broad family of mounted martial display, yet its local form is unmistakable. This is what cultural connection often looks like in practice. Not sameness, but family resemblance.

Wrestling and combat sports followed similar patterns. Basic bodily contests are widely portable, but local rules, ritual framing, and social meanings vary. One region prizes throws, another grips, another ceremonial costume, another festival timing (Kylasov, 2019). The Silk Road did not flatten these differences. It gave them opportunities to meet.

This adaptive process also rebuts a simplistic east-to-west or west-to-east model. Cultural exchange on the Silk Road was many-directional. China borrowed from Central Asia. Central Asian intermediaries borrowed from both east and west. Persianate courts shaped practices that traveled onward. Islamic networks connected West Asia and North Africa in ways that cannot bereduced to a single overland line from Xi'an (Eaton, 2018). If one insists on a straight arrow, one misses the actual pattern, which is braided.

9. From Xi'an to Morocco: A Connected Geography of Sport

A broad view now becomes possible. From Xi'an in the east to Morocco in the west, sport helped create cultural connections not because every region shared the same games, but because many regions shared overlapping cultures of competition, horsemanship, martial display, and public spectatorship.

Xi'an, especially as Tang Chang'an, shows how a major eastern capital absorbed and reworked foreign equestrian practices within a cosmopolitan court culture (China Silk Museum, 2024; Schafer, 1963). Central Asia shows how intermediaries, horses, and mobile elites carried games and techniques across linguistic frontiers (De la Vaissière, 2005). Persia and the wider Persianate world show how courtly sports such as polo could become markers of refinement and rulership with long literary afterlives (Oxford University Press, 2018). Islamic urban and military cultures show how horsemanship and martial exercise remained socially valued across connected regions. Morocco shows how western Islamic equestrian traditions preserved and transformed this larger heritage into forms such as tbourida, where collective riding, martial memory, and ceremonial display still bind community and performance together (UNESCO, 2021).

The connective tissue across this geography is not a single sport. It is a set of functions. Sport created occasions for meeting. It made foreign skill visible. It allowed imitation without full assimilation. It linked elite prestige with popular spectatorship. It moved through animals, equipment, and trained bodies as much as through texts. It also gave distant societies a way to recognize one another through action.

There is a final counterargument to address. One might say that these similarities are too broad to prove Silk Road connection specifically. After all, many societies independently develop horse sports or wrestling. That is fair. Independent development certainly occurred. The answer is not to deny that possibility, but to note that in the Silk Road world we have more than parallel invention. We have documented movement of horses, diplomatic contact, merchant intermediaries, cosmopolitan courts, and specific games such as polo crossing regions through identifiable channels (Bi, 2021; De la Vaissière, 2005). The case for connection is strongest when broad structural similarity is paired with concrete transmission evidence. On that standard, equestrian sport along the Silk Road is well placed.

10. Conclusion

Sport helped make cultural connections on the Silk Road because it turned contact into practice. Trade could bring strangers together, but sport gave them something to do, watch, compare, and remember. From Xi'an to Morocco, games and martial performances created shared social spaces in courts, cities, festivals, and roadside inns. They traveled with horses, merchants, envoys, and soldiers. They crossed boundaries because bodies in motion are often

easier to read than words on a page.

The strongest examples come from equestrian culture. The Chinese pursuit of Ferghana horses, the spread of polo into Tang court life, the prestige of Persianate mounted games, and the later western Islamic traditions of ceremonial horsemanship all show that sport was woven into the same networks that carried diplomacy and exchange (UNESCO, 2021). Combat sports and wrestling added another layer, offering portable forms of contest that could be staged almost anywhere and understood by almost anyone.

The Silk Road did not produce one uniform sporting culture. It produced connected sporting worlds. That is the better phrase. Games changed as they moved, and those changes are part of the story, not a problem for it. Adaptation showed that cultural exchange was active, local, and many-sided.

Finally, sport matters here because it reminds us that cultural history is not built only from doctrines, treaties, and cargo lists. It is also built from applause, imitation, rivalry, and play. Along the Silk Road, people did not only trade with one another. They watched one another ride. They tested one another's strength. They borrowed one another's games. That is how distant places became a little less distant.

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