Chapter 6: Silk Road

CONTENTS 5 exercises · 20 questions

6.1	Understanding the Text	10 Q
6.2	Talking about the Text	3 Q
6.3	Thinking about Language	3 Q
6.4	Working with Words	2 Q
6.5	Noticing Form	2 Q

Exercise 6.1 — Understanding the Text

Q1 Give reasons for the following statement: The article has been titled 'Silk Road.'

SOLUTION

The article is titled 'Silk Road' because the journey Nick Middleton undertakes broadly follows the route of the ancient Silk Road — the historic network of trade routes linking China to Central Asia, India, and beyond. The narrative passes through the Tibetan plateau, reaching Hor on 'the main east-west highway that followed the old trade route from Lhasa to Kashmir.'

The author also references the Silk Road explicitly when noting that Tibetan mastiffs were 'brought along the Silk Road in ancient times as tribute from Tibet' to China's imperial courts. He further observes that multi-coloured plastic shopping bags, sold across China, Asia and Europe, make plastic 'one of China's most successful exports along the Silk Road today.' The title thus connects the ancient trade highway with the author's contemporary journey across the same terrain.

Answer: The journey follows the ancient Silk Road trade route from Tibet towards Kashmir; the text explicitly references the route twice — for mastiffs carried as tribute in ancient times, and for modern plastic goods — linking past and present trade.

Q2 Give reasons for the following statement: Tibetan mastiffs were popular in China's imperial courts.

SOLUTION

Tibetan mastiffs were immensely powerful, fearless, and ferocious dogs. The narrative describes them as 'shaggy monsters, blacker than the darkest night,' completely unafraid of the moving vehicle, shooting straight into its path and forcing Tsetan to brake and swerve. Their combination of fierce protective instinct, great size, and formidable strength made them prized as hunting dogs.

Because of these qualities, they were brought along the Silk Road in ancient times as tribute from Tibet to China's imperial courts, where their hunting ability and imposing presence made

them a valued gift for royalty.

Answer: Their ferocity, fearlessness, and enormous strength made them ideal hunting dogs; they were therefore sent as tribute gifts to China's imperial courts via the Silk Road.

Q3 Give reasons for the following statement: The author's experience at Hor was in stark contrast to earlier accounts of the place.

SOLUTION

Earlier travellers had responded to Lake Manasarovar — on whose shore Hor sits — with deep spiritual emotion. Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk who arrived in 1900, 'was so moved by the sanctity of the lake that he burst into tears.' A few years later, Sven Hedin, a Swede 'who wasn't prone to sentimental outbursts,' was similarly moved.

The author's own experience, however, was entirely different. He found Hor a 'grim, miserable place' with 'no vegetation whatsoever, just dust and rocks, liberally scattered with years of accumulated refuse.' The café had broken windows, a dirty table, and indifferent service. Far from feeling spiritual elevation beside the sacred lake, the author felt only discomfort and waited to leave. The contrast between the hallowed reputation of the site and the squalid reality of the town was stark.

Answer: Earlier travellers like Kawaguchi and Hedin were moved to tears by the sanctity of Lake Manasarovar; the author found Hor a grim, refuse-littered town with no redeeming atmosphere, making his experience the opposite of theirs.

Q4 Give reasons for the following statement: The author was disappointed with Darchen.

SOLUTION

The author had come to Darchen specifically to begin the kora around Mount Kailash. However, when he arrived he found the town partially derelict, dusty, and scattered with rubble and refuse. More importantly, there were no pilgrims — and the author did not want to undertake the kora alone.

He had timed his arrival for the start of the pilgrimage season but found he was too early. The pilgrimage trail could be blocked by snow and he had no way of knowing whether it had cleared, since he could not find anyone in Darchen with enough English to answer even that basic question. His options were 'severely limited' — he could only wait. This inability to move forward with his primary purpose left him frustrated and disappointed.

Answer: Darchen was dusty and derelict, but more crucially there were no fellow pilgrims, the kora trail might still be snow-blocked, and the author had no one to guide him — leaving him stranded and unable to begin his journey.

Q5 Give reasons for the following statement: The author thought that his positive thinking strategy worked well after all.

SOLUTION

The author had been sitting in Darchen's café, feeling thoroughly dispirited about his limited options and his inability to start the kora. He had been working on a 'self-help programme on positive thinking,' but admitted he hadn't made much progress with it.

At this lowest point, Norbu walked into the café and asked to sit at his table. Norbu was also a Tibetan who had come specifically to do the kora, and he was eager to find a companion. He proposed that they travel together: 'We could be a team — two academics who have escaped from the library.' The unexpected arrival of the perfect travel companion, just when the author most needed one, struck him as vindication of his positive thinking — perhaps his optimism had brought good fortune after all.

Answer: When the author was at his most despondent, Norbu — another kora pilgrim looking for a companion — walked in and proposed they team up, making it seem as if the positive-thinking strategy had delivered results after all.

Q6 Briefly comment on the purpose of the author's journey to Mount Kailash.

SOLUTION

The author, Nick Middleton, travelled to Mount Kailash to complete the kora — a ritual circumambulation of the mountain that is a sacred pilgrimage for both Hindus and Buddhists. He had informed Lhamo at Ravu that he was 'heading towards Mount Kailash to complete the kora,' and Lhamo had given him a sheepskin coat in preparation for the cold journey.

The kora is a clockwise walk around the mountain, as the author and his companions demonstrate at the mountain pass cairn. While the author also has an evident interest in the landscape, culture, and people of the Tibetan plateau, the primary destination and goal of his journey is the completion of this religious circuit around Mount Kailash.

Answer: The author travelled to Mount Kailash specifically to complete the kora — the sacred clockwise circumambulation of the mountain revered in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Q7 Briefly comment on the author's physical condition in Darchen.

SOLUTION

By the time the author reached Darchen, his physical condition was poor. The cold he had been struggling with through the journey had flared up again after he spent time in the dusty, open-air refuse dump at Hor. One nostril was blocked, and he was troubled by breathing difficulties at the altitude of 4,760 metres.

His nights were particularly difficult. He found he could not lie down without his sinuses filling and his chest feeling strange and heavy. A 'little voice' told him not to fall asleep for fear he might not wake up. He spent an entire night sitting upright, unable to sleep. The following

morning, Tsetan took him to the Darchen medical college, where a Tibetan doctor diagnosed a cold combined with the effects of altitude and prescribed a five-day course of Tibetan medicine. After taking it, the author slept soundly — 'like a log, not a dead man.'

Answer: The author arrived in Darchen suffering from a worsening cold and severe altitude-related breathing difficulties that prevented him from lying down; after a sleepless night, a Tibetan doctor prescribed traditional medicine, which quickly restored his health.

Q8 Briefly comment on the author's meeting with Norbu.

SOLUTION

The author met Norbu in Darchen's only café, where he had gone to ponder his limited options over tea. Norbu, a Tibetan who worked at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, noticed the author's book and asked to share his table. He was dressed in Western-style clothing — a windcheater and metal-rimmed spectacles — so the author initially thought he was from outside the region.

The meeting proved to be a turning point. Norbu revealed that he had come to do the kora, having written about it academically for years without ever undertaking it. Both men were in a similar position — eager but without a companion. Norbu enthusiastically proposed that they team up: 'two academics who have escaped from the library.' Though Norbu was admittedly unfit and not a practising Buddhist, his enthusiasm, his Tibetan identity, and his practical suggestion of hiring yaks to carry luggage made him, in the author's view, an ideal companion.

Answer: The author met Norbu — a Beijing-based Tibetan academic — by chance in the café; both had come to do the kora alone, and Norbu's proposal that they travel as a team resolved the author's main problem of finding a companion.

Q9 Briefly comment on Tsetan's support to the author during the journey.

SOLUTION

Tsetan was the author's driver and proved indispensable throughout the journey. He navigated the dangerous mountain passes with confidence and skill, scouting snow patches on foot, spreading soil on icy surfaces to improve traction, and manoeuvring his four-wheel-drive vehicle around snow blockages on steep, rock-studded slopes. His calm reassurance — 'But no problem, sir, if there is no snow' — helped steady the author's nerves.

When the author fell ill in Darchen, Tsetan took him to the medical college the very next morning, facilitating communication with the Tibetan doctor. He also served as the author's interpreter throughout the journey, relaying conversations with locals. His practical competence, local knowledge, and quiet care made the journey possible. He stayed until he was sure the author was recovering, and only then returned to Lhasa.

Answer: Tsetan served as driver, navigator, interpreter, and caretaker — safely negotiating snow-blocked mountain passes, translating for the Tibetan doctor, and staying with the author in Darchen until he recovered before returning to Lhasa.

Q10 Briefly comment on the statement: "As a Buddhist, he told me, he knew that it didn't really matter if I passed away, but he thought it would be bad for business."

SOLUTION

This remark by Tsetan is gently humorous and reveals his character. As a Buddhist, he holds the belief that death is a natural part of existence and the soul's cycle continues — so the passing of one individual is not cause for grief from a spiritual standpoint. Hence he says he 'knew it didn't really matter' if the author died.

However, the second half of the sentence brings him back to practical reality: a tourist dying in his car would obviously be very bad for his livelihood as a driver. The joke lies in the contrast between profound Buddhist philosophy and the mundane concern about his business reputation. It also shows Tsetan's warmth — he is not being callous but is lightening a moment of genuine concern for the author with self-deprecating humour. The remark affectionately acknowledges that his care for the author is both human and practical.

Answer: Tsetan humorously balances Buddhist equanimity about death with a practical concern for his livelihood — the joke reveals his warmth and wit while showing he genuinely cared enough to stay until the author recovered.

Exercise 6.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 Discuss in groups of four: The sensitive behaviour of hill-folk.

SOLUTION

The text provides several examples of the quiet sensitivity of people who live in this high-altitude, remote terrain. Lhamo, the woman at Ravu, listened carefully when the author mentioned his plans and, without being asked, gifted him a warm sheepskin coat — recognising that he would need it for the cold mountain journey. This act of practical generosity towards a stranger is deeply considerate.

The nomadic drokbas tending their flocks on the open plains would 'pause and stare' at the passing vehicle and 'occasionally wave' — a simple but friendly acknowledgement of travellers passing through their isolated world. The Tibetan doctor at Darchen medical college, though working in a cold, dark room without the expected trappings of a clinic, listened carefully to the author's symptoms and offered reassurance along with medicine.

Tsetan throughout exemplifies this sensitivity: he is alert to danger, proactive in finding solutions, and attentive to the author's health — staying on until he was sure the author would recover. The hill-folk in this narrative are consistently portrayed as perceptive, generous, and responsive to the needs of others without making a show of it.

Answer: The hill-folk in the text — Lhamo, Tsetan, the Tibetan doctor, the nomadic drokbas — all show quiet, practical sensitivity: anticipating needs, offering help without fuss, and responding with warmth to travellers in a harsh environment.

Q2 Discuss in groups of four: The reasons why people willingly undergo the travails of difficult journeys.

SOLUTION

People undertake difficult journeys for a variety of deep and overlapping reasons. Religious faith is one of the most powerful motivators: pilgrims travel to Mount Kailash to complete the kora because the circumambulation is considered a sacred act that confers spiritual merit and brings one closer to liberation. Even Norbu, who admits he is not a practising Buddhist, feels compelled to do it because of its significance in Buddhist literature that he has spent years studying.

The author himself is driven partly by curiosity and a traveller's desire to see legendary places for himself — he is eager to 'forge ahead' to the great mountain despite physical difficulties. There is also the human attraction to challenge and discovery: completing a route across high passes, through extreme weather and altitude, generates a sense of achievement that cannot be found in ordinary experience.

Earlier travellers like Kawaguchi and Hedin were drawn by the spiritual reputation of Lake Manasarovar. In each case, what motivates the journey is a combination of the sacred, the personal, and the human need to experience the world beyond the familiar — to test oneself

against the unknown.

Answer: People undertake difficult journeys for religious devotion, personal curiosity, the desire for challenge and discovery, and the pull of legendary or sacred places — as the text shows through the author, Norbu, and earlier travellers like Kawaguchi and Hedin.

Q3 Discuss in groups of four: The accounts of exotic places in legends and the reality.

SOLUTION

The text offers a striking example of the gap between legend and reality in the case of Hor and Lake Manasarovar. In legend and in the accounts of earlier travellers, Manasarovar is one of the most sacred and beautiful places in the world. Ancient Hindu and Buddhist cosmology identifies it as the source of four great Indian rivers; monks like Kawaguchi wept at its sanctity; the Swede Sven Hedin, not given to sentimentality, was deeply moved.

The reality that the author encounters is far less elevated: the town of Hor is 'grim' and 'miserable,' strewn with rubbish, dusty, and devoid of vegetation. The café has broken windows and dirty tables. The sacred lake is there, but it is overshadowed by the squalor of the settlement around it.

This contrast is a recurring feature of travel writing: places made famous by legend, literature, or the accounts of earlier travellers often carry an aura that real visits cannot match — or they may have changed over time due to development, tourism, or neglect. The reader is left to consider whether it is the place itself or the expectation brought to it that creates the experience.

Answer: The text shows a sharp gap between legend and reality at Hor: travellers' accounts made Manasarovar sacred and sublime, but the author finds a grim, refuse-littered town — illustrating how legendary reputations of exotic places often exceed the reality a modern visitor encounters.

Exercise 6.3 — Thinking about Language

Q1 Notice the kind of English Tsetan uses while talking to the author. How do you think he picked it up?

SOLUTION

Tsetan's English is functional but non-standard. He uses simple constructions and polite formulaic phrases: 'But no problem, sir, if there is no snow'; 'Not knowing, sir, until we get there'; 'Not good, sir'; 'Maybe, sir, but no smoking.' His speech is characterised by the omission of articles and auxiliary verbs, and the repeated use of 'sir' as a courtesy marker.

This kind of English is typical of someone who has learned the language not through formal schooling but through practical contact with English-speaking tourists and travellers. As a driver who regularly takes foreign visitors across the Tibetan plateau to sacred sites like Mount Kailash, Tsetan would have picked up the phrases and vocabulary most useful for his work — directions, safety warnings, reassurances, and polite responses. His English is essentially a working, transactional variety shaped entirely by professional necessity and oral exposure rather than grammar instruction.

Answer: Tsetan uses a simple, phrase-based English with omitted articles and the repeated courtesy term 'sir' — the variety of English picked up through regular contact with English-speaking tourists, learned orally and practically for his work as a driver, not through formal study.

Q2 What do the following utterances indicate? (i) "I told her, through Daniel …" (ii) "It's a cold," he said finally through Tsetan.

SOLUTION

(i) 'I told her, through Daniel…': This indicates that the author and Lhamo did not share a common language. Daniel acted as an interpreter, translating the author's words into a language Lhamo could understand. It highlights the multilingual reality of travel in this region — a chain of translation was needed for even simple conversations.

(ii) 'It's a cold, he said finally through Tsetan': Similarly, this shows that the author and the Tibetan doctor at Darchen did not share a language. Tsetan interpreted the doctor's diagnosis from Tibetan into English for the author. It again illustrates the crucial role of an interpreter in bridging communication across language barriers, and it also shows how Tsetan's role extended well beyond just driving.

Answer: (i) The author could not speak Lhamo's language and relied on Daniel as interpreter; (ii) the Tibetan doctor could not speak English and Tsetan interpreted his diagnosis — both utterances show how communication in this journey depended on a chain of human interpreters.

Q3 Guess the meaning of the following words: kora, drokba, kyang. In which language are these words found?

SOLUTION

These words are from Tibetan.

Kora: From the context — 'I was heading towards Mount Kailash to complete the kora' and the description of taking 'a turn round the cairn, in a clockwise direction as is the tradition' — kora means the ritual circumambulation or circular pilgrimage walk around a sacred site (here, Mount Kailash), performed clockwise.

Drokba: When Tsetan sizes the author up in his new sheepskin coat and says 'drokba, sir,' the coat is the same as those worn by nomadic herders on the plains. The solitary figures tending flocks on the plateau are later described using the same word. Drokba therefore means a nomadic herdsman or pastoralist of the Tibetan plateau.

Kyang: Tsetan points towards a distant cloud of dust and says 'kyang,' and the author then sees a great herd of wild ass galloping in formation. Kyang therefore means the Tibetan wild ass (Equus kiang).

Answer: These are Tibetan words. Kora = the sacred clockwise circumambulation of a holy site; drokba = a Tibetan nomadic herdsman; kyang = the Tibetan wild ass.

Exercise 6.4 — Working with Words

Q1 The narrative has many phrases to describe the scenic beauty of the mountainside like 'A flawless half-moon floated in a perfect blue sky.' Scan the text to locate other such picturesque phrases.

SOLUTION

The text is rich with vivid, picturesque phrases describing the landscape. Some of the most striking include:

'Extended banks of cloud like long French loaves glowed pink as the sun emerged to splash the distant mountain tops with a rose-tinted blush' — a sensory description of dawn light.

'Plumes of dust billowed into the crisp, clean air' — capturing the movement of the wild ass herd across the plateau.

'The river was wide and mostly clogged with ice, brilliant white and glinting in the sunshine' — a vivid picture of the frozen valley river.

'A large cairn of rocks festooned with white silk scarves and ragged prayer flags' — describing the mountain pass marker.

'A huge, snow-capped mountain, Gurla Mandhata, with just a wisp of cloud suspended over its summit' — the view from Darchen after recovery.

'The sun shone brilliantly in a clear blue sky' — simple but effective after the bleakness of illness.

These phrases use colour, light, movement, and precise sensory detail to create a vivid panoramic picture of the Tibetan landscape.

Answer: Notable picturesque phrases include: 'Extended banks of cloud like long French loaves glowed pink'; 'Plumes of dust billowed into the crisp, clean air'; 'the river was wide and mostly clogged with ice, brilliant white and glinting in the sunshine'; and 'Gurla Mandhata, with just a wisp of cloud suspended over its summit.'

Q2 Explain the use of the adjectives in the following phrases: (i) shaggy monsters (ii) brackish lakes (iii) rickety table (iv) hairpin bend (v) rudimentary general stores.

SOLUTION

(i) Shaggy monsters: 'Shaggy' literally means having long, rough, unkempt hair or fur. Applied to the Tibetan mastiffs, it vividly describes their thick, wild, uncombed coats. 'Monsters' is used hyperbolically to convey their enormous size and terrifying behaviour. Together, the phrase creates a menacing image of powerful, wild-looking beasts.

(ii) Brackish lakes: 'Brackish' means slightly salty — less salty than seawater but not fresh. These are the salt lakes pockmarking the Tibetan plateau, vestiges of the ancient Tethys Ocean. The adjective precisely describes the water quality and explains why the lakes are not usable for drinking.

(iii) Rickety table: 'Rickety' means poorly constructed, unsteady, likely to collapse — here describing the small table in Darchen's café. The adjective instantly conveys the rundown, makeshift quality of the café and contributes to the overall picture of Darchen's dilapidated state.

(iv) Hairpin bend: A 'hairpin bend' is an extremely sharp U-shaped curve in a road, resembling the shape of a hairpin. The adjective 'hairpin' describes both the geometry and the danger of the mountain road. When Tsetan drives around the snow blockage, he 'cut off one of the hairpin bends' — showing the severity of the bends on the steep pass.

(v) Rudimentary general stores: 'Rudimentary' means basic, undeveloped, offering only the most elementary facilities or goods. The stores in Darchen stocked only Chinese cigarettes, soap, and other basic provisions — nothing elaborate. The adjective reinforces the isolation and austerity of the small mountain town.

Answer: (i) Shaggy = long rough fur, 'monsters' is hyperbolic for their size and ferocity; (ii) brackish = slightly salty, remnants of the Tethys Ocean; (iii) rickety = unsteady, conveying the café's dilapidated state; (iv) hairpin = extremely sharp U-shaped curve on a steep mountain road; (v) rudimentary = basic, minimal, stocking only essential provisions.

Exercise 6.5 — Noticing Form

Q1 The account has only a few passive voice sentences. Locate them. In what way does the use of active voice contribute to the style of the narrative?

SOLUTION

A few passive constructions in the text include: 'the track was marked by a large cairn of rocks festooned with white silk scarves' (implied passive in 'festooned'); 'the plateau is pockmarked with salt flats and brackish lakes'; 'brought along the Silk Road in ancient times as tribute from Tibet'; 'I was served by a Chinese youth'; 'I was at 5,210 metres above sea level' (passive construction with 'at'); and 'I wasn't convinced that the other would provide me with sufficient oxygen.'

The overwhelming majority of the narrative, however, uses active voice. This choice is central to the style and effect of the travelogue. Active voice creates a sense of immediacy and forward momentum — events happen as you read them, with a clear agent acting. Phrases like 'Tsetan stopped,' 'he had opened his door and jumped out,' 'the dog would explode into action,' and 'We all took a turn round the cairn' make the reader feel present in the action.

Active voice also suits the first-person travelogue form: the author is always at the centre, experiencing and responding to events. The directness of active constructions keeps the pacing brisk and the narration energetic, which is appropriate for an account of a physically demanding journey through dramatic landscapes.

Answer: Passive constructions include 'the plateau is pockmarked,' 'brought along the Silk Road as tribute,' and 'I was served by a Chinese youth.' The dominant active voice creates immediacy and energy, placing the author at the centre of a fast-moving narrative and making the reader feel present in the journey.

Q2 Notice this construction: 'Tsetan was eager to have them fixed.' Write five sentences with a similar structure.

SOLUTION

The construction is: subject + was/were + adjective + to + have + object + past participle (causative structure indicating that the subject wants/arranges for someone else to perform the action on the object).

Five sentences with a similar structure:

1. The traveller was anxious to have his passport renewed before the journey.
2. She was determined to have the broken window replaced before winter.
3. The doctor was keen to have the test results checked by a specialist.
4. My father was relieved to have the car serviced before the long drive.
5. The principal was happy to have the school building repainted during the holidays.

Answer: The structure is: subject + be + adjective + to have + object + past participle. Five model sentences: (1) The traveller was anxious to have his passport renewed. (2) She was determined to have the broken window replaced. (3) The doctor was keen to have the results checked. (4) My father was relieved to have the car serviced. (5) The principal was happy to have the building repainted.