

# Message for Covid Times, From 130 BCE

## Why the ancient Silk Road is a metaphor for govts to keep borders open in a crisis

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The term 'Silk Road' can mean different things to different people. In 2013, someone called Ross Ulbricht was arrested by the FBI for narcotics trafficking. Ulbricht was the owner of Silk Road, the first online market for drugs on the dark web. Users could anonymously order any illicit drug they wanted and pay using untraceable cryptocurrencies.

In that same year, President Xi Jinping announced the arrival of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Eventually called BRI, it was to be the centrepiece of China's foreign policy, a vast web of highways, railway lines, border crossings, shipping routes, ports, power plants and energy pipelines whose motives, viability and implications are still a matter of intense global debate.

But for any student of history, the term Silk Road must necessarily mean the web of ancient trade routes that connected China and the Far East with the Middle East and Europe. These were lanes that ran through what is today's Central Asia. These routes also extended southwards into India and westwards into Europe.

### Kings grew it for global commerce

Chinese Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty is credited for having sparked the trade boom along these routes, with China opening up to global commerce from around 130 BCE onwards. But several parts of the Silk Road were in existence well before then. For instance, the Royal Road, which ran 2,500 km from Susa (in modern Iran) to Sardis (in modern Turkey) had already been built by the Achaemenid king Darius I almost three centuries earlier.

Of course, the travellers along the Silk Road did not know it by that name. German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term only in 1877. He used it to describe a vast network of roads, pathways, mountain passes, trading posts, caravanserais and markets that covered 6,437 km across some of the world's most inhospitable landscapes, including the Gobi desert and the Pamir mountains. His description was not off the mark because



In the footsteps of prosperity

the much-valued silk was often used as currency.

### Quite the ancient internet

The Silk Road network remained the engine of global trade until 1453 CE when the Ottoman Empire boycotted trade with China. But more importantly, it was the ancient-day internet through which language and ideas – in philosophy, religion, culture and science – were transmitted and shared.

It was the Silk Road that allowed Buddhism to travel from India to China and then further east. The ancient teachings of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Nestorianism and Manicheism reached Central Asia through this network while Arab traders – and warriors – carried Islam eastwards.

### Transporter of Black Death

For more than a millennium, the Silk Road was the arterial system that shared goods and ideas globally. But the movement of people and animals also spurred the spread of infectious diseases. The Silk Road enabled the Black Death to reach Europe, where it killed more than 50 million people between 1346 and 1352.

It even led to a term that is ubiquitous these days – quarantine. The word is derived from the Italian 'quarantena' that translates to 40 days – the period that crews were isolated at Venetian ports before being allowed ashore.

### And smallpox

Similarly, there is evidence to indicate that smallpox, an infectious disease caused by the Variola virus, was present in ancient Egypt. As trade along the Silk Road increased, smallpox travelled east to India and then further on to Japan and Korea with devastating results.

The ancient Silk Road brought economic prosperity but also brought disease. The jet engine transformed international air travel but also became a tool for terrorists. The internet revolutionised information sharing but also furthered child pornography.

It is thus easy to look at the world's Covid-19 pandemic as a repeat of the Silk Road experience. Who needs open borders if people die from them? Let's throw the baby out with the bathwater.

### But also remedies and tika

What is forgotten is that the Silk Road also furnished several remedies for the diseases it brought. For example, Indian mendicants popularised the practice of *tika*, a precursor to vaccination. Matter from the sores of a smallpox patient would be applied to a small cut on a healthy individual who would develop a mild pox and eventually become immune to it.

China taught the world that the best healthcare providers for smallpox patients were survivors because they had immunity. By the sixteenth century these had become standard healthcare practices across the kingdoms of the Silk Road.

The American novelist Herman Melville said, "We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along those sympathetic fibres, our actions run as causes and return to us as results." The world would be wise to remember that.

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