

From Ancient Silk Road to OBOR Initiative



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

During a state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, Chairman Xi Jinping of China first brought up the idea of an economic belt along the old Silk Road. One month later, when he was addressing the Indonesian parliament, he proposed the formation of a maritime silk road of the 21st Century.

Thus was born China's "Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" Initiative, also known as the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR). In just 4 short years, this has received extremely good response from countries from Southeast Asia to Africa. So many countries are benefitting from it that China has decided to extend the initiative to cover Latin America and to create a Silk Road on Ice. OBOR has become one of the hottest topics among politicians, economists, engineers and even ordinary folks worldwide.

The ancient Silk Road, on the other hand, remains just a name in most people's mind. Most historians regard the ancient Silk Road to begin in the city of Chang-an (Xian today) in central China and end in Rome in Italy. Contrary to popular belief, what linked these two great cities was not just a single road but a network of roads with branches extending north and south to various countries.

Such a dense network of roads had to have evolved over a long period of time. It was generally believed that the

roads started to appear in the western part of Asia in present-day Syria, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the West Han Dynasty (202BC – 8AD)



of China, the Chinese Emperor sent his envoy, Zhang Qian, to establish diplomatic relations with states in the west. Zhang was away for 13 years and came back with many interesting stories about the places he visited. Subsequent envoys went as far as Persia and Egypt. The eastern section of the Silk Road network was thus established and Zhang Qian was often dubbed "Father of the Silk Road".

The Silk Road network played a very important role in facilitating international trade, but most traders carried out businesses only within a few hundred kilometres radius. Difficult road and climate conditions as well as bandits made the transporting of valuable commodities over long distances a highly risky venture. Goods usually changed many hands on

their way from China to Europe and vice versa; yet technologies, ideas and religions managed to spread via this network of roads. Marco Polo travelled from Venice to Chang-an in the 13th Century, and the great Tang Dynasty monk Xuanzang travelled from Chang-an to India in the 7th Century to study Buddhism and bring back the holy scriptures. They were among the few people who managed to cover very long distances on the Silk Road.

German Ferdinand von Richthofen first coined the term "Silk Road" in mid-19th Century to describe this vast network of roads but silk, though expensive, was not the most valuable item traded. Even more valuable were gold, jewellery and ivory. Before the secret of silk making was leaked to the outside world, silk was one of China's most precious exports and it garnered great admiration from the Europeans.

Today China is exporting its technologies and finance to developing countries along the old Silk Road, helping to speed up infrastructure development essential for economic growth. This creates a win-win situation in which China can channel its surplus construction capacity and financial prowess for good investments abroad while recipient countries can enjoy the basic infrastructures which they can hardly afford otherwise. ■