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Amarasinghe, P.; Kalaycı, T.; Aerde, M. van

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Chapter Fourteen
All Roads Lead to Beijing: Politics, Power, and Profits of the Roads

Punsara Amarasinghe, Tuna Kalaycı, and Marike van Aerde

The Silk Road has produced fascinating stories. It was a favorite topic of many generations of researchers, who unveiled the contributions it made as one of the most important corridors of movement in human history. The narratives that existed among historiographers of the Silk Road took a different direction when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his "One Belt One Road" initiative in 2013. In 2015 China changed the name, adopting the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) as the new title for its ambitious project.

The overwhelming economic growth of modern China has surpassed the prosperity of the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century and even the memories of European industrialization (Shambaugh 2016). The ardent interest of China's state apparatus in succeeding in its mammoth venture of reviving the legacy of the Silk Road reveals the indomitable flare sparking within the nation to become the epitome of a global player. China's rapid economic influence on every continent has given it a greater potential, which is likely to vanquish the hegemony of the United States. It was in 2016 that China displaced the US as Germany's most important trading partner, evincing the rapport between Beijing and Europe. The most important historical reality that cannot be ignored is that Xi Jinping's BRI initiative is not, in fact, China's maiden attempt at expanding its power internationally, as it can claim a long history as a global key player.

It is commonly understood that the Silk Road—in actuality not a single road, but rather a network of myriad routes that spanned continents—was dominated largely by the Chinese presence. The shared narrative is as follows: Chinese influence was at its apex during the Han (206–220 CE) and Tang dynasties (618–907 CE), when it was known as the "Middle Kingdom." The Romans and, later, the Byzantines were eager to acquire the best Chinese silks (hence the name), and silk other commodities arrived via the Silk Road through Central Asia and the Middle East. The archaeological record has left

traces that illustrate the Chinese influence via the ancient Silk Road. Also, the (hi-)stories of legendary figures such as Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and many other ancient travelers who travelled the Silk Road affirm the abundance of power that China held as a global "superpower" in the past.

However, this normative historical reading of the Silk Road is problematic. The first issue is the prevalent belief in the immemorial Chinese domination of the Silk Road. Neither in the archaeological record nor in textual sources is there any evidence of Chinese dominance over Silk Road trade until late antiquity. Several centuries before the Han dynasty joined the trade networks beyond its borders, multiple complex routes had already formed between East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Mediterranean. The archaeological evidence is remarkably scarce; moreover, all the textual sources confirm that China was, in fact, the very last of the ancient empires to join in the trade networks. The Mauryan Empire in India was one of the first, as were Ptolemaic (and then Roman) Egypt, the Kingdom of Aksum, and many pre-Islamic Arabian kingdoms. Simply put, it was actually because Han Wudi, emperor of the Han dynasty, had heard about the trade opportunities outside the walls of the Chinese empire that he opened the Jade Gate Pass (in the Xinjiang region) to allow for trade with international merchants to take place beyond its bounds. Not until later, however, when trade flourished during the Tang dynasty, were foreigners allowed onto Chinese soil.

The second problem is a lack of archaeological evidence to support these grand narratives. There is only one brief textual mention of Roman interest in Chinese silk (by Pliny the Elder)—and no other data thus far confirm this. The lack of hard evidence from antiquity is concerning when it comes to the accurate assessment of the historiography.

Finally, the legendary figures' narratives of the Silk Road all date from the early to late medieval period, much later than antiquity and the Han or even early Tang eras. China did become an important trading power in medieval times—and it was a key partner especially during the Islamic Golden Age (when trade centers stretched from Mali to Samarkand)—but the origin of the networks was not Chinese, and the situation (and power balance) in antiquity was very different.

Thus, our concern is to unpack how and why in much of today's scholarship on the ancient Silk Road we see a shift in focus to China—a projection of the dominance that came to be only in medieval

times—and to discover what is leading scholars to overlook or brush over the important differences between the ancient and medieval Silk Road networks. In fact, a very different picture emerges in antiquity when China is concerned.

The recent revival of nostalgia for the Silk Road under the BRI raises some fundamental questions (Cheng 2016). Furthermore, the BRI produces political ambiguities, since the sovereignty of some nation-states along the corridor is now at greater risk as they face China's ambitious mission. In this paper, we seek to examine the political importance of the Silk Road for the BRI and highlight how and why China (mis)uses history to promote its current BRI policies. In a larger sense, this paper will also attempt to document how a historical space can transform into a contested space that is tethered to modern political and economic motives. Perhaps it is by no means an exaggeration to describe the Silk Road as the most important road in global history; it has influenced—and will continue to influence—nations, states, and entire cultures as a project based on complex political agendas.

In the Beginning

As with any emergent communication and transportation network, there is no single origin story of the Silk Road. About 5,500 years ago, Eurasian steppe nomads domesticated the horse and thereby drastically altered the course of human history (Outram et al. 2009). The Bactrian camel soon followed the same fate, bearing the bulk of transportation between eastern and western civilizations for centuries (Potts 2005). People who utilized these animals naturally contributed to the formation of roads throughout Central Asia. The archaeological evidence suggests that the road network was functioning as early as the third millennium BCE, with further intensification in the second millennium BCE (Kuzmina 2008:108). While these organically developed road networks can be considered the precursors of the Silk Road, two key periods can be associated with its top-down foundation: the Achaemenid period (500–330 BCE) and the expansion of Greek power into Central Asia (329 BCE–10 CE) initiated by the Alexander the Great. The Achaemenid Empire maintained an extensive road network mainly connecting Susa with Sardis to the west, as well as extending further east to Bactra, Kandahar, and India (Colburn 2013:31). An efficient road network was necessary for sustaining this vast empire. The imperial roads were maintained and guarded, and an efficient postal system was established for high-speed communication

(Colburn 2017:875). The second major phase started with Alexander's march, which extended as far east as the Hyphasis River in India (Howe and Müller 2012): "[a] new network of communication connecting West and East emerged in the Hellenistic world and its neighboring areas" (Juping 2009:16). In 43 CE, the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela mentioned the people of "the Silk country" (Kuzmina 2008:2), suggesting that an effective road was already in use and that silk was considered a commodity. But, one should note here the continuous absence of a given name for the road.

According to the current historiography, Zhang Qian's visit to the West in the second century BCE prompted emperor Han Wudi to issue a decree officially opening the Silk Road (Kuzmina 2008:2); yet, this traditional interpretation is open to debate. The decree marked the moment when China opened up to international trade and joined an already-centuries-old network of trade. This was not the beginning of the Silk Road, but rather the moment when China realized its potential and decided to join it. Furthermore, the term itself was coined two millennia later by German geographer Baron Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen in 1877. The term appeared in the first of several volumes he published about his stay in China between 1868 and 1872. Although von Richthofen had originally called the road *Seidenstrasse*, it was the English translation (Silk Road) that was adopted in the scholarship (Nobis 2018:723). This European-invented term was deceiving and misleading because none of the textual narratives written by the travelers of this route used it; nevertheless, it became a cultural phenomenon that fed the fashionable nostalgia of globalization (Thorsten 2005:301). As a matter of fact, the Silk Road was not a single road that led from one destination to another. It was rather a network of many unmarked paths connecting across rough geographical regions, such as mountains and deadly deserts. In addition to the famous overland network, the maritime Silk Road, which connected China with different continents beyond its shores, was expanded through many avenues.

The core of the Silk Road, known in medieval times (but not in antiquity) as the Middle Silk Road, connected three cultural, political, and economic superpowers: Iran, India, and China. Eastern Iran happened to be the starting point of the Middle Silk Road, continuing east through Merw and onward to the Gobi Desert. The road connected with the city of Dunhuang in the east and Kashmir in the south, creating a unique blend of geopolitical cultures. Following the Middle Silk Road, the Eastern Silk Road connected to Chinese trade

Figure 1. It is impossible to draw a conclusive map of the Silk Road(s); the networks were inherently complex and flexible, including both land caravan tracks and multiple sea routes across the Indian Ocean. To present this system as a linear map made up of primary arteries is rather misleading. Nevertheless, we follow scholarship and present a depiction of the roads.

towns: from Dunhuang to Anxi, and from Baoji and Tianshui to Chang'an. The Western Silk Road extended to the major trade ports in the Mediterranean Sea. From Merw it connected to Mashhad, Tehran, Baghdad, and Palmyra. From there it was again divided into two sub-routes: one led to Constantinople through Aleppo, Antioch, and Tyre, whereas the other route took a southwest direction to reach Cairo and Alexandria via Damascus and Gaza (Figure 1).

The salient feature that prevailed throughout the expansion of the Silk Road was not necessarily, as has been always depicted, trade relations. The Silk Road also paved the path for cultural connections between major political powers (Beckwith 2009:17). Still, it is essential to remember that this connectivity was not always rooted in peaceful engagements; confrontations among the major powers were a frequent occurrence that disrupted interactions along the Silk Road.

For both the Romans and the Chinese, the power politics of the Silk Road were a major obstacle to accomplishing their trade interests, and the Parthians were their primary adversary. In 97 CE, the Chinese ambassador Gan Ying commenced a journey along the Silk Road with the expectation of reaching Rome. The Parthians cut his journey

short in Mesopotamia (Whitefield 2019), where he had anticipated embarking for Europe. They did not want the Chinese and Romans to be in direct contact because they were reluctant to undermine their position as middlemen in the Silk Road trade between the two powers, a position from which they garnered massive profits (Beckwith 2009:137). We should note that the *Hou Hanshu [Book of the Later Han]* casts doubt on the accuracy of claims about Parthian motivations.

It was in 115 BCE that Mithridates II, king of Parthia, made a pact with emperor Han Wudi to facilitate trade along the Silk Road. This political alliance guaranteed Parthian prosperity for over two hundred years; their defeat in 117 CE by the Roman emperor Trajan led to the decline of Parthian influence over Silk Road trade. The long-delayed direct contact between the Roman and Chinese empires was eventually accomplished in 166 CE, when Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius dispatched an envoy to China.

The Revival of the Silk Road and China's Ambition of Global Governance

The nostalgia for the old Silk Road and its heyday was revived after Xi Jinping became the Chinese president. His vision of increasing China's participation in the global governance was a notable factor even before he assumed power from his predecessor. In his own words, "China will work with people of all countries to push the world order and global governance system toward a more just and reasonable direction" (Berlie 2020:42). In pursuit of a new global governance, China needed an ideology and a palpable vision, but the Maoist ideology that had reigned within China was not suitable for aggrandizing its global image.

The revival of the Silk Road legacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears to be China's new narrative. On the one hand, it appears as a pacific project reviving the old tradition of uniting civilizations through trade following the same historic destinations of the old Silk Road; but on the other hand, it challenges the national integrities of the states affected by the BRI in the same way that politics erupted along the old Silk Road. The juxtaposition of these two aspects of the BRI has rendered a sense of skepticism toward the implementation of this project. The skepticism also stems from China's plans for domestic policy: the country aims to circumvent Russia to reach European markets (but see Cheng 2016), to cut commodity transportation times,

to reduce its energy dependency by establishing political connections with Central Asian countries, and to politically stabilize its western provinces (Brugier 2014).

Current Reality

The political discontent that looms before the Chinese project of reviving the Silk Road is a reminder of the chaotic political order that used to be prevalent throughout the Silk Road of the past. The nomadic tribes who persistently sabotaged trade and the Parthian rivalry with the Romans are just two reminders of the volatile nature of the politics of the Silk Road. The ambivalence of many states about becoming partners of the BRI has clearly hindered the Chinese dream of a new globalization through its Silk Road legacy. Thus far, India has been a strong opponent to the BRI despite its intertwined history with the old Silk Road; its hesitation to becoming a part of the BRI is rooted in its long political conflict with China ever since the Sino-Indian War of 1962. But the most compelling cause of India's boycotting the BRI is a mistrust of Beijing and a belief that it is an indomitable threat to its reginal hegemony (Thaliyakkattil 2019:50). India showed disinclination for the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, as it was a clear threat to Indian territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, the Chinese presence in the Himalayan territory—mainly in the landlocked country of Nepal—has increased India's suspicion dramatically. Hemmed by Indian influence at large, Nepal has welcomed the Chinese promise of infrastructure development and other benefits as a geopolitical blessing. Given these circumstances, Nepal joined the BRI via the China–Nepal Economic Corridor in 2017. This collaboration raised concerns as India has viewed both the China–Pakistan and China–Nepal Economic Corridors as China's new strategic tools for encircling the country (Schwemlein 2019)

India's antagonism toward the implementation of the BRI in South Asia is a stunning example of the power politics of the roads. Ironically, the old Silk Road had extended its path along the Indian subcontinent, which served as a decisive location for political and economic interests of the time. Ancient Indian cities like Varanasi and Pataliputra flourished along the Silk Road, but at that time India did not have a monolithic political identity to maintain (Frankopan 2015:89). As an alternative viewpoint, one can also suggest that Pataliputra was the main capital of a uniform Indian empire around 300 BCE, at the time of the Mauryan Empire. Under the Gupta

Empire (which mostly coincides with the early Tang era), we also see such a unified identity across most of the Indian subcontinent. And it was especially during these unified periods that trade in India flourished and expanded enormously (Avari 2016; van Aerde 2018). Anyhow, the ambition of becoming a great power, which grew in the Indian psyche in its post-independent era, has always been antagonistic to external influences in South Asia. The doctrine initiated in 1983 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi particularly emphasized the crucial importance of India for the stability of the region (Dixit 1998). In such a dominating context, the skepticism with which contemporary Indian officials treat the BRI is less surprising.

Besides India's concern of seeing the BRI as a strategic project which would eventually weaken her grip within the region, other serious concerns are arising in South Asia in the aftermath of the BRI's initiation. In particular, the evasive nature of the partnerships between China and the other member states involved in the new Silk Road in South Asia shows how the BRI is gradually becoming a neocolonial project that intends to challenge the territorial sovereignty of its member states. As Xi Jinping's official foreign policy, Beijing has described the overarching agenda of the BRI as a fair project that creates a win–win situation for both China and the other member states. Ostensibly, China appears willing to invest in countries that are desperately looking for foreign investment, and simultaneously it extends assistance in building roads and other infrastructure facilities to the member states of the BRI. The highway development project and the construction of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport and Hambantota International Port in Sri Lanka are seemingly ideal examples of Chinese bonhomie. But China's ulterior motives were exposed when Sri Lanka was required to issue China a 99-year lease for Hambantota Port in 2017 in exchange for debt relief (Ferchen and Perera 2019). The situation in Sri Lanka exposed just the tip of the iceberg. Sri Lanka, being a part of China's vision for a maritime silk road, sought the indulgence of Chinese debt at the expense of losing its economic sovereignty.

A similar situation is likely to happen in Pakistan with the intensifying Chinese presence. China and Pakistan have maintained a good rapport in the past, and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a pivotal factor in the BRI—has already provided economic benefits to Pakistan, mainly for the transportation network. At the same time, the dominating Chinese presence in Pakistan under the

banner of the BRI has increased resentment among the public in Pakistan (Jain 2018:12). Islamabad's inability to negotiate with China has resulted in its reliance on Chinese aid to fund infrastructure development, such as railway lines and harbor projects. However, none of the projects carried out as part of the CPEC has generated employment opportunities for Pakistanis, as Chinese employers have preferred to employ people from their own national background. In 2017 the Chinese consulate in Karachi was attacked by a Baloch separatist group that denounced the Chinese as oppressors in the region, along with Pakistani forces (Jain 2018:18). At this point, we should also duly note that the Diamer-Bhasha dam to be built under the CPEC will displace thousands of people and submerge thousands of rock carvings dating back to the sixth millennium BCE.

The revival of the Silk Road under the BRI has created a dilemma in South Asia as states in the region lose their sovereign rights. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad cancelled all the BRI projects initiated by the previous government (Jones and Hameiri 2020). Capitalizing on internal state troubles is another aspect of the BRI, which is quite evident in Myanmar. The project China initiated with Myanmar's military government to develop the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) portrayed a holistic picture that provided sanguine hopes for the country's waning economy. However, the number of infrastructure projects started by China in various regions has evoked strong protest from the people in Myanmar, as those projects have harmed the regions' environmental stability. Also, the largest and most controversial project under the BRI in Myanmar is the Myitsone dam, a 6,000-megawatt hydropower project that would have displaced over 10,000 villagers in the state of Kachin. The project was revived in 2019 at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, where China promised to provide the government of Myanmar a grant of one billion yuan (about 150 million USD) to improve the livelihood of the people affected by the civil war. But the severe damage caused by the CMEC in certain regions cannot be healed or diminished by way of a financial grant. In particular, the state of Kachin has seen a steepening increase in deforestation, which is attributed to the Chinese-funded road-building project that has further opened a path to transport timber from Kachin to Chinese territory. All in all, these three examples from South Asia—Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar—are bitter witnesses to the revival of the Silk Road in the twenty-first century.

Some of the initiative's critics have pointed out that China's increased presence and the expansion of the BRI would undermine the decision-making ability of the participating sovereign states, thereby creating a new type of colonialism. The gravity of the BRI and its influence in the state apparatuses of its partner states are akin to the way in which, in the colonial era, the British East India Company trapped princely states in the Indian subcontinent before subordinating India by force. However, in examining the reality of the history of the Silk Road, a primary factor ever since its beginning has been China's ability to acquire the greatest profit. According to the economic historian Andre Gunder Frank (1992), China was an economic heavyweight in the era of the old Silk Road, and the entire global economic order was Sino-centric until the period of European colonialism. The ancient Silk Road network provided great momentum to the Chinese economy, and, most importantly, the political fragmentation along the Silk Road was based on Chinese dominance over smaller states. Subordinate states in East Asia provided tribute to China, and, in doing so, they acknowledged the political authority of China. Frank (1992:89) pointed out that the "Chinese civilization through the Silk Road provided a common intellectual, linguistic and normative framework in which to interact and resolve the conflicts." The modern avatar of the ancient Silk Road legacy and China's contemporary attitude toward the state parties in the BRI are both reminiscent of its historical superior status (as perceived by the Chinese). The notion of the global governance of Xi Jinping and his flair for a China-centric globalization has generated dozens of practical questions. Furthermore, the broadness of the BRI and the questions arising from it regarding the sovereignty of its participating states and potential threats to the environment are not mere rhetorical quibbles to ignore. The above-mentioned examples that have already stemmed from South Asia raise concerns about the objectivity of the BRI.

Using Archaeology as a Means of Legitimacy

The field of archaeology has a long-standing association with colonialism; throughout the nineteenth century, it harbored and, to a certain extent, fortified the motives of Western imperial missions. After increasing its capital through labor exploitation and rapid colonial expansion, nineteenth-century Victorian England was obsessed with remaking itself in the image of Greco-Roman antiquity. The

predilection that pervaded the minds of British administrators affirmed that the British Empire reflected the same virtues practiced in ancient Rome (Laurence 2001). The archaeological expeditions led by British archaeologists in Ottoman-ruled Greece and divided Italy received rather welcome attention in Britain, where they were often seen as evidence that the British Empire was the successor of Greco-Roman grandeur, as expressed in historical studies as well as artworks of the time (see Kucich 2006). For French colonial archaeologists, the parallel between their colonial quest and their Roman legacy was still visible in North Africa, as they had colonized the entire region. David J. Mattingly (2013) has pointed out how zealously British and French archaeologists drew similarities between the colonial possessions of their countries and the Roman Empire. In that context, archaeology was used for the purpose of self-aggrandizement throughout the colonial era.

It is ironic that the twenty-first-century revival of China's interest in invoking its past and in seeking archaeological traces of the ancient Silk Road follows the same ambition that European colonialists held in the nineteenth century. Through its actions, the Chinese government is asserting its claim over the origins of the Silk Road; yet, China was the last to join the networks in antiquity, and it was only in medieval times that Chinese trade became more dominant. This reality is contrary to the narrative of Chinese hegemony over the Silk Road from time immemorial. To create this narrative, Beijing has led a massive campaign through the BRI to revise the Silk Road archaeology across Asia and toward Africa. The geopolitical trajectory of China's usage of archaeology is grounded in the conspicuous motive to gain legitimacy for the BRI through evidence stemming from the past. China's technical support for preserving Buddhist archaeological sites in Pakistan is just one of several examples that reveals China's fascination with the past as a tool to legitimize its ambitious project. The 2018 cultural agreement between China's Minister of Culture, Luo Shugang, and Pakistan's Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, National History and Literary Heritage, Marriyum Aurangzeb, was intended to consolidate the longstanding historical ties between the two countries that had derived from the Silk Road legacy (Storozum and Li 2020:71). It is worth noting that Pakistan's efforts to restore its archaeological research on the Silk Road saw a sudden revival after Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in 2015, when the Chinese leader overwhelmingly focused on the China–Pakistan

Economic Corridor as an essential feature of the overall success of the BRI. The technical and financial support China promised to Pakistan in order to preserve its archaeological heritage was received as a gesture of camaraderie by Prime Minister Imran Khan. But, from a critical perspective, one can make a strong contention that China's passionate effort to aid Silk Road preservation archaeology is a strategy oriented toward civilizational legitimacy. The same level of enthusiasm has been brought to Africa, as China considers African countries to be crucially important members of the BRI. The revival of China's interest in tracing its historical roots to the African continent has created a new discourse about Zheng He's maritime expedition to East Africa in the fifteenth century (Lin 2011:23). Zheng He's naval expeditions under the Ming dynasty denote the maritime strength possessed by the Chinese before Europeans envisaged it; revisiting these expeditions makes clear China's growing interest in Africa, as well (Wekesa 2015:117). The granting of financial support to preserve Silk Road archaeology symbolizes Beijing's self-aggrandizement as the rightful custodian of the ancient Silk Road, and Beijing is likely to use this support as a powerful tool to strengthen the objectives of the BRI.

Academic Discourse around the BRI

At this point, we would like to open a parenthesis for academic work related to the BRI. Due to the intricate nature of the topic, our focus is on the environmental impact of the new Silk Road project and the scholarly work built around it. We intentionally choose the environment as a theme because it has a better chance of obtaining scientific consensus across the globe. However, we investigate these BRI-related environmental works not for their scientific integrities and validities, but rather for the ways in which their authors support their scientific narratives. We provide lengthy quotes in the hopes of reducing our own bias.

The brief literature review suggests that most of the environmental work related to the BRI comes from Chinese scholars. A thematic issue in *Environmental Earth Sciences*, which is published by Springer, aims to find "harmony between the environment and humanity" and explores the "balance between environmental protection and economic growth" due to the Silk Road initiative (Li et al. 2017). All the authors in the thematic issue agree that the new Silk Road will have detrimental effects in the countries through which it will pass, but especially in China itself. Its impacts, however, should be mitigated via

sound science and the cooperation of participating countries because the project will bring "immense economic benefit to the undeveloped northwest part of China and Eurasian countries, especially central Asian countries" (Zhang et al. 2016:938–939). However:

> The countries of Central Asia need to recognise that the economic success of the proposed new "Silk Road Economic Belt" hinges on their ability to develop programs that can ensure the region's water resources are managed in a sound and sustainable manner.... External pressures from neighbouring Russia and China are likely required to make this happen [Howard and Howard 2016:1].

In fact, China should play the leading role and help other countries mitigate the environmental impact of the BRI, since:

> … the New Silk Road could become a great "river of knowledge" connecting China and Central Asian countries such as India and Pakistan, with the Middle East and Europe. As the seed to this initiative, a research institute needs to be established under the auspices of the Chinese central government that would be responsible for conducting, managing and supervising pioneering research in support of the New Silk Road project. This institute could be based in Xi'an, where the road starts, with subbranches of the parent institute created in other countries as the road grows and the "river of knowledge" develops [Li et al. 2015:7270].

In their work, our colleagues assume—but do not show—that the new Silk Road will bring economic benefits to Eurasia. The assumption stems from the success stories of the historical Silk Road, and thus scientific work is finding refuge in historical narratives; it appears that the fantasy of the BRI has already become concrete in scientific circles. Furthermore, since it is inevitable that the BRI will be realized, the "smaller" countries of Central Asia must find ways to mitigate the environmental impacts of the mega-infrastructure project. China (and Russia) will need to police these mitigation efforts, since in their current status these countries will be unable to accomplish the task themselves. Finally, the last hegemonic move will come from academia, whereby China will provide the necessary knowledge and expertise to address the potential environmental crisis that it will create. The Chinese state apparatus is indeed destabilizing postcolonial studies (Vukovich 2017).

It is also claimed that the BRI will help participating countries converge their energy efficiencies (EE). However, in order to provide a stable groundwork for the BRI, scientists should "clarify whether the initiative will narrow the gaps in EE among the member economies or not, and also provide practical information for policy makers in China and the other [BRI] countries" (Han et al. 2018:113). The authors conclude that their study "cannot estimate empirically the impact of the [BRI] on EE convergence directly due to the nascent status of the [BRI]. However, there is no better way to predict the impact of the [BRI]. In future, when the [BRI] is in effect, conducting an empirical test of its impact on EE convergence would be a highly valuable contribution to all concerned" (Han et al. 2018:121). Therefore, the reader is expected to rely on these scholars' intuition.

Such inferences do not surprise the reader, as it is common for higher education and research to follow dominant state ideologies (see Chomsky et al. 1997). Kamola (2014) uses an Althusserian analysis to show how higher education in the US underwent structural transformations that served the needs of daily—but also global—material practices envisioned by the neoliberal doctrines of Thatcher and Reagan. A subject (an academic subject in this case) produces an imaginary relationship thorough "repetition of particular actions within the context of structured material apparatuses" (Kamola 2014:523). However, since there is no single ideology and different apparatuses have the potential to produce multiple ideologies, one should talk about not *an* imaginary relationship, but rather *relationships* (Kamola 2014:523). What makes the Chinese academic knowledge-production peculiar is the fact that it is saturated with nationalist ideas from the state, intellectual, and popular domains (Wu 2016). Yet, the BRI narrative is overtly transnational and points at a future unified region. Thus, it is no surprise that there is great skepticism toward the BRI across the globe.

A Concluding Theoretical Framework

China's use of the Western-coined term "Silk Road" is unusual as it intends to evoke positive images of the past and to promote an understanding of prosperity and connectivity (van Noort 2019:1). This aim, however, is based on uncertain socioeconomic, political, and cultural narratives, as discussed throughout this paper.

The first issue is the mechanism the Chinese government deploys in order to broadcast a positive image of the BRI. The mechanism selectively constructs the past; the BRI is a prime example of how

archaeology can be used to legitimize the endeavors of modern states (Harrison 2013). Most of all, the political landscapes of the historic Silk Road and the BRI are drastically different. The Silk Road ran through four empires (Han, Parthian, Kushan, and Roman), which stretched between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. These empires provided some sense of security within their borders and had mutual agreements through which all parties benefited from trade, one way or another. Modern-day China, on the other hand, negotiates single-handedly with a series of nation-states by way of an entirely different modus operandi. As a matter of fact, the self-claimed romantic universalism spearheaded by China must deal with the issues generated by the governments of India and Pakistan, which are heavily motivated by nuclearization. The new Silk Road landscape also includes the contested territories of the oil-rich Caucuses and Iran, one of the major "Axis of Evil" countries (Thorsten 2005:303). As a geopolitical project, the BRI is fueling the struggle between powers in the region within a constantly shifting framework. For local regions, the fallout from this struggle is immense. For instance, China intended to build a deep-water port in Crimea that bypassed Russia in order to deliver commodities to Europe. The project was halted when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine revolution. Ukraine had agreed to be a part of the BRI in 2013 (Brugier 2014); however, in 2015 Russia agreed to integrate the Eurasian Economic Union (EUU) with the BRI (Cheng 2016).

The emergence of a China-centered globalization is another objective behind the gigantic project of the BRI, with its overarching characterization as the Chinese method of initiating a "peaceful rise" or "Harmonious Society," contrary to Western colonialism's use of harsh military strategies (Bijian 2005). The Chinese vision posits a utopia that is intended to be built upon a past filled with a self-proclaimed nostalgia—a nostalgia that was mainly idealized through Western orientalism, and which China has forged as suitable for its project. But it is quite palpable that this depiction is antithetical to the real geopolitical strategy that China has been using in the member states of the BRI. The loss of territorial rights to repay Chinese debts and the other undue influences of the BRI are much akin to a new type of colonialism in the twenty-first century, which is rather paradoxical to the narrative China promotes of the Silk Road as a peaceful project connecting the world (Rahman 2019). The conspicuous reality of the BRI is leading toward China's globalization, and the usage of the Silk Road

romance seems to have embodied China's leading role as a dominant player in the historical narrative. However, in fulfilling this mission, China has embraced a past created by the West and has shown an eagerness to use the archaeological traces of past roads to enhance its modern legitimacy. As an example, the way in which China uses its soft-power strategies to reduce the perception that it is the dominant actor in the BRI is based on its attempt to portray the historical links between China and other states via the Silk Road of the past. Nevertheless, this premise appears problematic, as the so-called roads of the past cannot be suitably applied to the present projection of the BRI by virtue of the geopolitical discontents around it.

This image also generates a new kind of orientalism. As Nobis (2018:728) succinctly states, China produces a "utopian future by extensively relying on a non-existent, and thus, utopian past—a past created by Richthofen, Verne, Marco Polo, and their likes. Interestingly and symptomatically, the Chinese project of this silk global utopia draws to the past, which is the invention of Western Orientalism." We claim that through this self-orientalism, China falls into the trap of creating an East–West divide, while at the same time creating an image of a shared destiny that will be generated by the new Silk Road project (van Noort 2019:18). The problem is further complicated by the fact that archaeological data pertaining to the ancient trade networks (up to the Han Empire) are still misread or wrongly interpreted by historians like Beckwith and Frankopan, as well as by the Chinese authorities. We make an observation similar to the work of Yan and Santos (2009): China—once under the gaze of the Western sociocultural system—is now producing a new gaze, a new representation of the past, which one may label a self-orientalizing discourse. In making the new past, the strategy is to legitimize the civilizational romance that China is the paternal state that continues to nourish all the other states. The annals of Chinese history are a far better witness in proving China's infatuation with its dominance over other states, as historically the country portrayed itself as a Middle Kingdom wherein states in the periphery beyond the Chinese empire were seen as subordinate (Ruskola 2013). The Chinese interest in spreading this civilizational narrative to the member states of the BRI is just a reminder of China's attitude toward its neighboring states in antiquity. For example, the new Silk Road diplomacy that China aptly uses to accomplish its grand objectives for the BRI consists of patronizing academic institutes and financially sponsoring pro-Chinese think tanks in the member states.

On the other hand, China's enthusiasm to revive the historical links with BRI member states denotes the subtle way in which it has been utilizing the archaeological space in a politicalized project. The Chinese attempt to create narratives of the past exaggerates its historical role in the Silk Road. Such an attempt, driven by sheer ambition for power, may result in accelerating the distance between the West and East Asia. The kaleidoscopic history that China reverently glorifies in parallel to its ambitious BRI project essentially needs a focus on the shared destiny of the Silk Road, rather than relying on China's own selective historical narratives.

The BRI is a problematic project. Its future socioeconomic, political, and cultural consequences are unknown, while the Chinese state hegemony continues to spill over into Eurasia in multiple domains, including academic. Nevertheless, the BRI is not unique in the sense that state hegemony operates and produces fictive images. In general, the public perception considers roads to be connective infrastructures that herald improvements in mobility, economy, and political integration (Enns 2018). Furthermore, roads help in the creation of imaginative geographies of security in contested landscapes (Ojeda 2013). The BRI carries these historical and archaeological imaginations to transnational levels in the twenty-first century.

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