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Revival of the Silk Road legacy. Examining how China uses history to legitimize its «Belt and Road Initiative»

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Abstract: *This article is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the usage of historical silk routes by the Chinese as a popular narrative for the modern BRI. While looking at the archaeological trace, the historiography and other dimensions, this article would unfold how the nostalgia on the 'Silk Routes' have been rejuvenated for an ambitious geopolitical project. Taking both land and maritime silk routes into the consideration, this paper would further consider the position of historical narratives for the geopolitical ambitions of the 21st century.*

Key words: History, China, Silk Routes, Geopolitics, Power

Introduction

The Silk Road produced fascinating stories. It influenced many generations of researchers as a favourite field to unveil the contributions made by one of the most important movement corridors in the human history. The narratives that existed among the scholars on the historiography of the Silk Road took a different direction when Chinese president Xi Jinping announced his 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative in 2013. In 2015, China changed the name OBOR and adopted 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) as the new title of their ambitious project.

The overwhelming economic growth of modern China has exceeded the old prosperity of the Spanish Empire in the 16th century and even the memories of the industrialisation of Europe.¹ The ardent interest of Chinese state apparatus towards succeeding in their mammoth venture of reviving Silk Road legacy shows the indomitable flare sparking within a nation to become an epitome of a global player. The rapid economic influence of China in every continent has given them a greater potential which is likely to vanquish the US hegemony. It was in 2016 that China replaced the USA as Germany's most important trading partner showing the rapport between

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¹ Shambugh, 2016.

Beijing and Europe. The most important historical reality that one cannot ignore is Xi Jinping's initiative of OBOR is not China's maiden attempt of soaring its power globally as it can claim a long history of being a global key player.

It is a common understanding that The Silk Road was largely dominated by the Chinese presence. The shared narrative is as follows; Chinese influence was in the apex during the periods of Han (206-220 CE) and Tang dynasties (618-907 CE) as the Middle Kingdom. Romans and later Byzantines were eager to acquire the best Chinese silks (hence the name), and other commodities came from the Silk Road through Central Asia and the Middle East. The archaeological evidence has also left traces illustrating the Chinese influence through the ancient Silk Road. Also, the (hi-)stories of legendary figures such as Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta and many other ancient travellers who travelled through the Silk Road have affirmed the abundance of power held by the Chinese as a global 'superpower' in the past.

However, the normative historical reading of the Silk Road above is problematic. The first is prevalent to the immemorial Chinese domination of the Silk Road. In the archaeological record, nor in textual sources, is there any evidence of a Chinese dominance in Silk Roads trade until the early medieval period. Long before the Han Dynasty joined the trade networks outside its borders, multiple complex routes had already existed between East Africa, the Indian Subcontinent, Arabia and the Mediterranean. The archaeological evidence is remarkably scarce – and also all textual sources confirm that China was, in fact, the very last of the ancient Empires to even join in the trade networks. The Indian Maurya Empire was one of the first, so were Ptolemaic and then Roman Egypt, Aksum, and many pre-Islamic Arabian kingdoms. It was actually because Han emperor Han Wudi heard about all the trade opportunities outside the walls of the Chinese empire, that he decreed to open up the Jade gate (in Xinjiang) to allow trade to happen in front of this gate with international traders. Not until the much later Tang Dynasty however, were any foreigners allowed onto Chinese soil.²

The second problem is about the lack of archaeological evidence for creating grand narratives. There is only one brief textual mention of Roman interest in Chinese silk (by Pliny the Elder)³ – and no other data to date confirm this. The lack of hard evidence from the Antiquity is concerning when it comes to accurate assessment of historiographies.

Finally, the Silk Road as it was told by the legendary figures' sources are all from the early to late medieval period – this is a very different time than Antiquity (and the Han or even early Tang era). China became very powerful trade-wise in medieval times, and a main partner especially of the Islamic Golden Age empire (where

² Frankopan, 2015.

³ Pliny the Elder, 1991: 123.

trade centres stretched from Mali to Samarkand) – but the origin of the networks was not Chinese, and the situation (and power dominance) in Antiquity was very different.

Thus, our concern is to unpack how and why in much scholarship today we see a shift of focus to China in studies of the ancient Silk Roads – a projection of the dominance that came to be in medieval times. What makes the scholarship to overlook or brush over the important difference between the ancient and medieval Silk Roads networks; in fact, a very different picture emerges in Antiquity when China is concerned.

The recent revival of nostalgia towards the Silk Road under the BRI raises some fundamental questions.⁴ The cardinal issue of the new Silk Road or BRI is using a road as a power project. Furthermore, the BRI produces some ambiguities on the status of nation states who have exposed their sovereignty for China's ambitious mission. In this paper, I 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 schema, this paper will also attempt to document how a historical space can transform into a contested space tethered with 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 that influenced and still continues to influence nations, states and cultures as a project based on complex political agendas.

In the Beginning

As any emergent communication and transportation network, there is no single genesis story of the Silk Road. About 5500 years ago Eurasian steppe nomads domesticated the horse and drastically altered the course of human history. The Bactrian camel soon followed the same fate and burdened the bulk of transportation between Eastern and Western civilizations for centuries.⁵ People who were utilizing these animals were naturally contributing to the formation of roads in Central Asia. The archaeological evidence suggests that the road network had been functioning as early as the 3rd millennium, with further intensification in the 2nd millennium BCE.⁶ While organically developed road networks can be considered as 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 empire into Central Asia (329 BCE-10 CE) initiated by the Alexander the Great. The Achaemenid Empire had an extensive road network mainly connecting Susa and Sardis and extending further east, to Kandahar, India, and Bactra.⁷ An efficient road network was

⁴ Cheng, 2016.

⁵ Potts, 2004.

⁶ Kuzmina, 2008: 108.

⁷ Colburn, 2013: 31.

necessary for sustaining this vast empire. The imperial roads were maintained and guarded, and an efficient postal system was established for high-speed communication.⁸ The second major phase started with Alexander's march which extended as far as the Hyphasis River in India.⁹ With the conquests of proceeding kingdoms and empires further towards the east, Silk Road, or at least its state-motivated foundations, started to become more pronounced.¹⁰ In 43 CE, the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela mentioned the people of "the Silk country",¹¹ suggesting an effective road had been already in use and silk was considered as a commodity. But, one should note here the continuous absence of a given name for the road.

In current historiography, the official opening is attributed to the Silk Road to Zhang Qian's visit to the West in 138 BCE,¹² yet this traditional interpretation is open to debate. This decree by Han Wudi (following Zhang Qian's reports) marks 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 Roads' – but the moment that China decided to join. Furthermore, the term itself was coined after two millennia by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877. The term appeared in the first volume he published from the collections of volumes he compiled about his stay in China between 1868 to 1872. Not surprisingly, von Richthofen had originally named the road as 'Seidenstrasse', yet the English translation and equivalent was picked up by the scholarship.¹³ Nevertheless, the European invention of the term is much deceiving and misleading, because none of the old textual narratives written by the travellers of this route used a term called 'Silk Road', but it became a cultural phenomenon feeding the globalization's fashionable nostalgia.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the Silk Road was not a single road leading from one destination to the other. It was rather a network of many unmarked paths led through rough geographical regions such as mountains and deadly deserts. Besides the famous overland network, the maritime Silk Road which connected China with different continents beyond seas was expanded through many avenues.¹⁵

The core of the Silk Road known as the Middle Silk Road (in medieval times, but not in Antiquity) connected three cultural and political and economic superpowers Iran, India and China. Eastern Iran happened to be the starting point of the Middle Silk Road, moving through a town called Merw in the West and the road further expanded to the Gobi Desert. The road was connected with Dunhuang from the east and Kashmir

⁸ Colburn, 2017: 875.

⁹ Howe & Müller, 2012.

¹⁰ Juping, 2009.

¹¹ Pomponius Mela, 1998: 184.

¹² Kuzmina, 2008: 2.

¹³ Richthofen, 1877; Nobis, 2018: 723.

¹⁴ Thorsten, 2005: 301.

¹⁵ Rezakhani, 2010.

was linked from the south creating a unique blend of geopolitical cultures. Following the Middle Silk Road, the Eastern Silk Road made its connectivity towards Chinese trade towns from Dunhuang via Anxi and via Tianshui and Baoji to Chang'an. Western Silk Road had its direction to cover major trade ports in the Mediterranean Sea. From Merw through Mashhad, Teheran and Baghdad to Palmyra. From Palmyra it was again divided into two sub-routes: one led to Constantinople through Aleppo, Antiochia and Tyros whereas, the other route took the southwest direction to reach Cairo and Alexandria via Damascus and Gaza.

The salient feature prevailed throughout the expansion of the Silk Road was not necessarily the trade relations as it has been always depicted. The Silk Road also paved the path to culturally connect major political powers.¹⁶ But, it is essential to remember this connectivity was not always rooted in peaceful engagements and confrontations among the major powers appeared as a challenging factor in the Silk Road. Furthermore, the narrative is about medieval trade networks and also power/state-centred. The archaeological records may be also indicating that the trade networks actually moved with great flexibility in between all the great powers, and the powers reacted to the workings of these routes.

The power politics in the Silk Road appeared as a major obstacle for both Romans and Chinese to accomplish their trade interests. Parthians were the major adversary power in the Silk Road between the Chinese and Romans.¹⁷ In 97 CE, Chinese ambassador Kan Ying commenced a journey along the Silk Road with the expectation of reaching Rome. His attempt to reach Rome as a Chinese envoy got nipped in the bud after reaching Mesopotamia.¹⁸ From where Kan Ying anticipated sailing to Europe, but Parthians did not want Chinese to be in direct contact with Romans. The reason which compelled Parthians to hinder Chinese attempts to reach Romans was mainly based in their reluctance to lose the massive profit they earned as the middlemen in the Silk Road between the Roman Empire and the Chinese.¹⁹ We should also note that the information about the Chinese envoys in from the Hou Hanshu text, and it is only a single paragraph long, casting doubt on the accuracy of claims about Parthian motivations.

It was in 115 BCE Parthian king Mithridates II made a pact with the Hun emperor Wu Ti to facilitate the trade in the Silk Road. This political alliance uplifted Parthian prosperity for many decades until they were defeated by the Romans in Emperor Trajan's campaign in 117 CE which resulted in the decline of Parthian's influence in the trade of the Silk Road. The long delayed direct contact between two empires was eventually accomplished in 166 CE when emperor Marcus Aurelius

¹⁶ Beckwith, 2019: 17.

¹⁷ Maksymiuk, 2021.

¹⁸ Whitfield, 2019.

¹⁹ Beckwith, 2019: 137.

dispatched a Roman envoy to China. The complexity existed between Chinese and Romans over the trade in the Silk Road and Parthians role as felicitators and how it waned before strong empires indicates the evasive political gambles in the Silk Road.²⁰

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

The nostalgia on old Silk Road and its heyday was revived after Xi Jinping became the Chinese president and his vision of increasing China's participation in the global governance was a notable factor even before he took 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 towards a more just and reasonable direction".²¹ In pursuit of a new global governance, China needs an ideology and a palpable vision. But, the Maoist ideology that have been reigning in China internally is not susceptible to aggrandize China's image globally.

Revival of Silk Road legacy under OBOR or BRI appears to be China's new narrative. From one side it stands as a pacific project reviving the old tradition of uniting civilizations through trade following the same historic destinations of the old Silk Road, but from the other side it challenges the national integrities of the states affected by BRI as in the same manner how politics erupted in the old silk roads. The juxtaposition of these two faces of BRI have rendered a sense of scepticism towards the implementation of this project. The scepticism also stems from China's domestic policy plans: the country aims to circumvent Russia to reach European markets,²² to cut commodity transportation times, to reduce its energy dependency via establishing political connections with Central Asian countries, and to politically stabilize its western provinces.²³

Bottom Reality

The political discontent looming before Chinese project of reviving the Silk Road is a reminder of the chaotic political order that used to be prevalent throughout the old Silk Road in the past. The nomadic tribes who persistently sabotaged the trade, Parthian rivalry with Romans were just a few of those reminiscences of the volatile nature of the politics in the Silk Road. Ambivalence of many states to become partners of the Belt and Road Initiative has clearly hindered Chinese dream of new globalization through the silk road legacy. Thus far India has been a strong opponent to BRI despite its intertwined history with the old Silk Road and India's hesitation to become

²⁰ Schippmann, 1998.

²¹ Berlie, 2020: 42.

²² but see Cheng, 2016.

²³ Brugier, 2014.

a part BRI is rooted in her long political clash with China since Sino-Indian War in 1962. But, the most compelling cause rendered India to boycott BRI is based on India mistrust towards Beijing as an indomitable threat to their regional hegemony.²⁴ India showed disinclination for China-Pakistan economic corridor as a clear threat for Indian territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, the Chinese presence in Himalayan territory, mainly in the landlocked country Nepal has raised India's suspicion dramatically. Hemmed by Indian influence at large, Nepal has turned to Chinese promise of infrastructure development and other benefits as a geopolitical blessing. Given these circumstances Nepal has gleefully become a part of BRI by allowing Chinese in China-Nepal economic corridor in 2017 has raised India's concern. Both Pakistan-China economic corridor and Nepal-China economic corridor have been viewed by India as new strategic tools of China to encircle India.²⁵

The India's antagonism towards the implementation of BRI in South Asia is a stunning example for the power politics of the roads. Ironically, old Silk Road had expanded its path along India as Indian subcontinent served a decisive location for old Silk Road interests. The ancient Indian cities like Varanasi, Patali Putra were flourished under the Silk Road, but at that India did not have a monolithic political identity to maintain.²⁶ As an alternative viewpoint, one can also suggest that, in the time of the Maurya empire, from 300 BCE, Pataliputra was a main capital of a uniform Indian 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. Anyhow, the ambition grew in Indian psyche in its post independent era to become great power has been always antagonistic towards the external influences in South Asia. The doctrine initiated by then Indian prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1983 particularly emphasized the crucial importance of India for the stability of the region.²⁷ In such a dominating context, it is less surprising the way Indian statesmen treats Chinese BRI with an utter sense of scepticism.

Besides India's concern of seeing BRI as a strategic project which would eventually cut her grip in the region, there are some other serious concerns arising in South Asia in the aftermath of initiating BRI. In particular, the evasive manner of the partnership between China and the other member states in the new Silk Road in South Asia has shown how BRI is gradually becoming a neo colonial project that intends to challenge the territorial sovereignty of its member states. As Xi Jin Ping's official foreign policy, the overarching agenda of the BRI has been described by Beijing as a fair project creating a win-win situation for both China and other member states.

²⁴ Thaliyakkattil, 2019: 50.

²⁵ Stobdan, 2019.

²⁶ Frankopan, 2015: 89.

²⁷ Dixith, 1997.

Ostensibly China appears to be a state willing to invest in countries that are desperately looking for foreign investments and simultaneously China extends her assistance in building roads and other infrastructure facilities in the member states of BRI. The highway development project, Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport and Hambantota International Harbour in Sri Lanka are the ideal examples showing Chinese bonhomie. But the ulterior motives of China were exposed when Sri Lanka had to hand over their port Hambantota for 99 years lease to China in 2017 as an exchange for debt relief.²⁸ Situation in Sri Lanka exposed just a tip of the iceberg. Sri Lanka being a part of China's vision in maritime silk road sought the indulgence of Chinese debt in the expense of losing its economic sovereignty.

A similar situation is likely to happen in Pakistan with the intensity of Chinese presence. Both China and Pakistan have maintained a good rapport with both countries in the past and the China-Pakistan economic corridor as a pivotal factor in the BRI has provided rosy expectations to Pakistan as a project which lead to boost country's economy. On the contrary, the dominating Chinese presence in Pakistan under the banner of BRI has increased the resentment in Pakistan public largely.²⁹ Especially Islamabad's inability to negotiate with Chinese proposals has resulted in relying on Chinese aid the infrastructure development such as railway lines and harbour projects. However, none of the projects carried under China-Pakistan economic corridor has generated employment opportunities for Pakistanis as Chinese have preferred to employ people from their nationality. In 2017 Chinese consulate in Baluchistan was attacked by a separatist group which claimed Chinese as oppressors in the region along with Pakistani forces.³⁰ At this point, we should also dully note that the Diamer Basha Dam to be built under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will displace thousands of people and submerge another thousands of rock carvings dating as back as the 6th millennium.

The revival of the Silk Road under BRI has created a dilemma in South Asia as it leads the states in the region to lose their sovereign rights. Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohammad cancelled all the BRI projects initiated by the previous government stating that Chinese BRI as a resemblance of a neo-colonial project.³¹ The utilization of resources amid conflicts for own benefits has been another notable aspect of the BRI and the example in Myanmar is an apt illustration to it. The project initiated by China in Myanmar with the military government to develop China-Myanmar economic corridor portrayed a holistic picture providing some sanguine hopes to the waning economy in Myanmar. However, the number of infrastructure projects started by Chinese in various regions in Myanmar have caused a strong protest

²⁸ Maces, 2020.

²⁹ Jain, 2018: 12.

³⁰ Jain, 2018: 18.

³¹ Erickson, 2019.

from the people in Myanmar as those projects have hindered the environmental stability in the regions. Also, the largest and most controversial project under BRI in Myanmar is the Myitsone Dam, a 6,000-megawatt hydropower project that would have displaced over 10,000 villagers in Kachin state. This project was revived in 2019 at the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, where Chinese promised Myanmar government to provide one billion Yuan grant for improving the livelihood of the people affected by the civil war. But, the severe damage caused by Chinese-Myanmar economic corridor in certain regions cannot be healed or diminished by a financial grant. In particular, Kachin state has seen a steeping increase of deforestation which is attributed to road building project under Chinese funds and it has further opened a path to transport timber from Kachin to Chinese territory. All in all, Myanmar is just one example along with Pakistan and Sri Lanka in South Asia as bitter witnesses to the revival of the Silk Road in the 21st century.

Some of the critics have pointed out the rise of Chinese presence and expansion of BRI would undermine the decision-making ability of the sovereign states creating a new type of colonialism. The gravity of BRI and its influence in state apparatuses in its partner states are akin to the way how British East India company trapped princely states in Indian sub-continent before subordinating India by force in the colonial past. However, in examining the reality of the history of the Silk Road, it becomes purely evident the Chinese hegemony in acquiring the best profit has been always robust motive since the very beginning of the Silk Road. According to economic historian Andre Gunder Frank, China had been an economic heavyweight in the ear of the old silk road and the whole global economic order was Sinocentric until the era of European colonialism.³² Ancient network of the Silk Roads provided a greater momentum in the Chinese economy and most importantly the political fragmentation in the Silk Roads was based on Chinese dominance over the small states. Subordinate small states in East Asia provided tributary for China and in doing so they admitted the political authority of China. Gunder Frank has pointed out “Chinese civilization through the Silk Road provided a common intellectual, linguistic and normative framework in which to interact and resolve the conflicts”.³³ The modern attitude of China towards the state parties in the BRI or the modern avatar of the ancient Silk Road legacy reminds of the old superior status perceived by Chinese. The notion of global governance of Xi Jinping and his flair for China -centric globalization has generated dozens of practical questions. Furthermore, the broadness of BRI and the questions arising from it regarding sovereign rights of the states and some potential threats to the environment are not mere rhetorical quibbles to ignore. Above mentioned

³² Frank, 1992.

³³ Frank, 1992: 89.

examples that have been already stemmed from South Asian states have raised the concern about the objectivity of Belt and Road Initiative.

Using Archaeology as a way of legitimacy

Archaeology is a theme that has a long-standing affinity with colonialism which had harboured and to a certain extent fortified the motives of Western imperial missions in the 19th century. After increasing the capital through labour exploitation and its rapid colonial expansion, Victorian England in the 19th was obsessed with making a resemblance of themselves and the Greco-Roman antiquity. The predilection pervaded in the minds of British administrators in the 19th century affirmed that British empire reflected the same virtues practised in ancient Rome.³⁴ The archaeological expeditions led by British archaeologists in Ottoman ruled Greece and divided Italy received rather welcoming attention in Britain as it was portrayed as their fate to be the successor of Greco-Roman grandeur. For the French colonial archaeologists, the parallel between their colonial quest and Roman legacy was still visible in North Africa as the whole region happened to be colonized by them. David J Mattingly has pointed out how zealously British and French archaeologists tried to make similarities between the colonial possessions of their countries and Roman empire.³⁵ In that context, the usage of archaeology in colonial era was oriented in self-aggrandizement.

It seems to be ironic that the recent revival of China's 21st century interest in invoking their past and seeking the archaeological traces of the ancient Silk Road follows the same ambition of the European colonialists used in the 19th century. Through its actions, the Chinese government is claiming the Silk Road was an invention of theirs and the Chinese was the natural bearer of the movement landscapes; in Antiquity, China was the last to join the networks, and only in Medieval times did Chinese trade become more dominant. The reality is contrary to narrative of Chinese hegemony of the Silk Road from time immemorial. To create this narrative, Beijing has led a massive campaign in revisiting the Silk Road archaeology across Asia toward Africa with the Belt and Road Initiative. The geopolitical trajectory of China's usage of archaeology is grounded on the conspicuous motive of gaining the legitimacy for the BRI through evidence stemming from the past. The Chinese technical support in preserving the Buddhist archaeological sites in Pakistan is just one example from several other incidents that underpins the argument showing how China has been fascinated with the past as tool to legitimize its ambitious project. The cultural agreement signed between Chinese minister of culture Luo Shugang and Pakistani minister of state for information and national history Marriyum Aurangzeb in 2018 was intended

³⁴ Lawrence, 2003: 27.

³⁵ Mattingly, 2014.

to consolidate the longstanding historical ties with two countries that have derived from the silk road legacy.³⁶ It is worth noting that, the Pakistan's nostalgia to restore its archaeological excavation on the silk route saw a sudden revival after the visit of Chinese leader Xi Ji Ping to Pakistan in 2015, where Chinese leader overwhelmingly focused on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as an essential feature to the overall success of Belt and Road Initiative. The technical and financial support promised by China in Pakistan to preserve its archaeological heritage has been received a gesture of camaraderie by Pakistani government of premier Imran Khan. But, from a critical perspective, there is a strong contention that one can make on China's passionate effort in aiding the silk road preservation archaeology as a strategy oriented in the civilizational legitimacy. The same level of enthusiasm has been upheld toward Africa as China considers African countries as crucially important members to the BRI. The revival of China's interest in tracing its historical roots in African continent has created a new discourse about Zheng He's maritime expedition to East African countries in the 15th century.³⁷ The naval expeditions of Zheng He under the Ming dynasty denote the maritime strength possessed by the Chinese before Europeans envisaged it, however, the modern fascination of China on revisiting Zheng' expeditions to Eastern African coast is an apt illustration of showing its strategy toward Africa in bolstering its presence.³⁸ As we noted, the sheer objectives of granting benevolent support in preserving the silk route archaeology symbolizes the self-aggrandizement of Beijing as the rightful custodian of the ancient Silk Route and Beijing is likely to use it as a powerful tool to strengthen BRI objectives.

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 better chances to offer scientific consensus across the globe. However, we investigate BRI related environmental work not for their scientific integrities and validities, but for the ways in which colleagues support their scientific narratives. We provide lengthy quotes with 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 envi-

³⁶ Storozum & Li, 2020.

³⁷ Lin, 2011: 23.

³⁸ Wekesa, 2015: 117.

ronment and humanity” and explores “balance between environmental protection and economic growth” due to the Silk Road initiative.³⁹

All the authors in the thematic issue agrees on the fact that the new Silk Road will have detrimental effects for the countries it will pass through, but especially China itself. The impact, however, should be mitigated with sound science and through 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”.⁴⁰ However,

“[t]he 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”.⁴¹

In fact, China should play the leading role and help other countries to 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”.⁴²

In their work, our colleagues assume, but do not show the new Silk Road will bring economic benefits to Eurasia. The assumption is feeding from the success stories of the historical Silk Road and scientific work is finding refuge in historical narratives; it appears as the fantasy of the BRI has already become concrete in scientific circles. Furthermore, since the BRI will be realized inevitably, the ‘smaller’ countries of the Central Asia should find ways to mitigate the environmental impact of the mega-infrastructure project. China (and Russia) will need to police these mitigation efforts since in their current status these countries will not be able to accomplish the task themselves. Finally, the last hegemonic move will come from the academia and China

³⁹ Li, Qian & Zhou, 2017.

⁴⁰ Zhang, *et al.*, 2016: 938.

⁴¹ Howard & Howard, 2016: 976.

⁴² Li, *et al.*, 2015: 7270.

will provide the necessary knowledge and expertise for the potential environmental crisis which it will create. Chinese state apparatus is indeed destabilizing postcolonial studies.⁴³

It is also claimed that the BRI will help participating countries in converging their energy efficiencies (EE). However, 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 BR countries”.⁴⁴ They conclude that their study “cannot estimate empirically the impact of the BR initiative on EE convergence directly due to the nascent status of the BR. However, there is no better way to predict the impact of the BR. In future, when the BR is in effect, conducting an empirical test of its impact on EE convergence would be a highly valuable contribution to all concerned”.⁴⁵ Therefore, one should rely on these scholars’ intuition.

Such inferences do not surprise the reader as it is common for the higher education and research to follow dominant state ideologies.⁴⁶ Kamola uses an Althusserian analysis and shows how the US higher education underwent structural transformations serving the needs of daily, but also global material practices envisioned by the neo-liberal 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”.⁴⁷ However, since there is no single ideology and different apparatuses have the potential of producing multiple ideologies, one should talk about not an imaginary relationship, but relationships. What makes the Chinese academic knowledge production peculiar is the fact that it is saturated with nationalist ideas in state, intellectual, and popular domains.⁴⁸ Yet, the BRI narrative is overtly transnational and points at a future unified region. Then, it is no surprise there is great scepticism towards the BRI across the globe.

Conclusion

China’s use of Western-coined term ‘Silk Road’ is unusual as it intends to evoke positive images of the past and promote an understanding of prosperity and connectivity.⁴⁹ This aim, however, is based on uncertain socioeconomic, political, and cultural narratives as discussed throughout this paper.

⁴³ Vukovich, 2017.

⁴⁴ Han, *et al.*, 2018: 113.

⁴⁵ Han, *et al.*, 2018: 121.

⁴⁶ see Chomsky, *et al.*, 1997.

⁴⁷ Kamola, 2014: 523.

⁴⁸ Wu, 2016.

⁴⁹ Van Noort 2020: 186.

The first issue is the mechanism Chinese government deploys in order to broadcast a positive image of the BRI. The mechanism selectively constructs the past; BRI is a prime example of using archaeology to legitimize modern state endeavours.⁵⁰ Foremost, the political landscapes of the historic Silk Road and the BRI are drastically different. Silk Road was running through four empires (Han, Parthian, Kushan and Roman) which were lined up in a unique historical setting and stretching between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. These empires had provided some sense of security within their borders and had mutual agreements where parties were benefiting from the trade one way or the other. Modern-day China, on the other hand, single-handedly negotiates with a series of nation-states with entirely different *modus operandi*. As a matter of fact, self-claimed romantic universalism spearheaded by China should deal with the issues generated by the governments of India and Pakistan, which are heavily motivated with nuclearization. The new Silk Road landscape also includes contested territories of oil-rich Caucuses, and Iran, one of the major ‘Axis of Evil’ countries.⁵¹ As a geopolitical project, the BRI fuels the struggle between powers of the region within constantly shifting framework. The spill over of this struggle is immense for local regions. For instance, China intended to build a deep-water port in Crimea to bypass Russia for commodities delivery to Europe. The project was halted when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in the aftermath of 2014 Ukraine revolution. Ukraine had agreed to be part of the BRI in 2013.⁵² However, in 2015 Russia agreed to integrate the Eurasian Economic Union (Euu) with the BRI.⁵³

The emergence of China centered globalization is another objective behind the gigantic project of BRI with its overarching portrayal as Chinese method of ‘peaceful rise’ or ‘Harmonious Society’ contrary to Western colonialism through harsh military strategies.⁵⁴ The Chinese vision posits a utopia which is intended to be built upon a past filled with self-proclaimed nostalgia which was mainly idealized through Western orientalism and China has forged it suitable for its project. But it is quite palpable that this depiction becomes antithetical with the real geopolitical strategy that China has been using in the member states of BRI. The loss of territorial rights before Chinese debts and other undue influences of BRI are much akin to a new type of colonialism in the 21st century, which is rather paradoxical to what China promotes in its Silk Road narrative as a peaceful project connecting the world.⁵⁵ The conspicuous reality of the BRI is leading to China’s globalization and the usage of the silk road romance seems to have embodied the China’s leading role in the history as a dominant

⁵⁰ Harrison, 2013.

⁵¹ Thorsten, 2005: 303.

⁵² Brugier, 2014.

⁵³ Cheng, 2016.

⁵⁴ Bijian, 2005.

⁵⁵ Iqbal, Rahman & Sami, 2019.

player. However, in fulfilling this mission China has embraced a past created by the West that resulted in making an anomaly to what China perceives as their alternative to the West centric globalization. In doing so China has shown an ardour of using the archaeological traces of the roads for the legitimacy. As an example, the way how, China uses its soft power strategies to reduce the perception that China is the dominant actor in BRI is based on Chinese attempt of portraying the historical links between China and other states through the silk road in the past. Nevertheless, this premise appears to be a problematic one as the so-called roads of the past cannot be aptly applicable in the present projection of BRI by virtue of the geopolitical discontents around it.

This image also generates a new way of Orientalism. As Nobis succinctly puts 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”.⁵⁶ Through this Self-Orientalism, I claim, China falls into the trap of creating an East-West divide while at the same time, creating an image of a shared destiny also created by the new silk road project.⁵⁷ 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, and also by the Chinese authorities). The Self-Orientalism that China yearns to aggrandize has been used as a strategy in the partner states of BRI in order to legitimize the civilizational romance with China as 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 dominance over other states as historically the country portrayed herself as Middle Kingdom wherein states in the periphery beyond Chinese empire were seen as subordinate states to China.⁵⁸ The Chinese interest in portraying the civilizational narrative in the member states of BRI is just a reminder of China’s hegemonic attitude towards the neighbouring states in the antiquity. For example, the new silk road diplomacy that China aptly uses to accomplish its grand objectives in BRI is consisted of patronizing the academic institutes and financially sponsoring the pro Chinese think tanks in the member states. On the other hand, the enthusiasm shown by the Chinese in reviving the historical links with the member states of BRI denotes the subtle way China has been utilizing the archaeological space in a politicalized project. The Chinese attempt of creating Silk Road narratives of the past which mainly exaggerates the historical role of China in the Silk Road. Such an attempt driven by sheer power ambition may result in accelerating the distance between the West and the Orient. The kaleidoscopic history

⁵⁶ Nobis, 2018: 728.

⁵⁷ Van Noort, 2020: 203.

⁵⁸ Ruskola, 2013.

that China reverently glorifies parallel to their 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. It has unknown future socioeconomic, political, and cultural consequences while Chinese state hegemony keeps spilling over Eurasia in multiple domains, including academia. Nevertheless, BRI is not unique in the sense that state hegemony operates and produces fictive images. In general, public perception considers roads as connective infrastructures since they herald improvements in mobility, economics, and political integration.⁵⁹ Furthermore, roads help in the creation of imaginative geographies of security in contested landscapes.⁶⁰ The BRI carries these historical and archaeological imaginations to trans-national levels in the 21st century.

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⁵⁹ Enns, 2018.

⁶⁰ Ojeda, 2013.

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