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Silk Road Redux: The Specter of Ambitious China in the 21st Century

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Global Studies

by

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September 2022

Silk Road Redux: The Specter of Ambitious China in the 21st Century

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by

Tymoteusz Waclaw Chajdas

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ABSTRACT

Silk Road Redux: The Specter of Ambitious China in the 21st Century

by

Tymoteusz Waclaw Chajdas

Focusing on the unquestioned basis of the Silk Road as an enlivening historical concept, I suggest that conversations about China's rising power miss the complexity of its peculiar diplomacy, which has been used to legitimate and justify a foreign policy project referred to as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). This dissertation makes a case for the *Silk Road Redux*, or a revival of ideas of connection circulating across infrastructural, technological and multimedia components that began to re-present the development of China's incorporation into modern world system as well as its central role in the transnational network of supply chains. Combining global history, geopolitics, infrastructure, development, cultural and media studies, I position the Silk Road as an analytical category to better understand the BRI and modern China.

This in-depth study of historical texts, blueprints and physical objects, suggests the necessity to reconsider ideas about great power relations and soft power globally. I argue that the Silk Road has become an ambient and social aesthetic to be reprised in a larger project of worlding China. This approach allows me to develop an understanding of an ambitious power, which manifests itself in the material world as well as promotes, legitimizes and justifies its physical presence globally. This dissertation is composed of four chapters, a prologue and an epilogue.

The Prologue begins with the 1907 Peking-Paris race that sets the stage for an enduring desire to shrink distance, conquer hostile terrain, and provide the possibility of achieving the unattainable. The Introduction describes the BRI, positions it within the current literature in relation to the Silk Road, as well as sketches the air of romance and mystique associated with the cultural heritage of ancient connectivity. Chapter I focuses on the BRI's antecedent by exploring the various ways in which divergent ideas, meanings and memories of worldliness formed a collective dream that connected vast geographies and survived centuries.

Chapter II interrogates the journey the Silk Road idea took to become a cultural imaginary – from the birth of the concept in 1877, I sketch the movement of the Silk Road idea across global circuits of geological knowledge. Chapter III traces the circulation of the Silk Road imaginary in both political and popular discourse to eventually become an icon of cosmopolitan connectivity. Chapter IV focuses on the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity legitimated with spatial imaginations, drives and ambitions.

The Epilogue furthers scholarly conversation of BRI's opaque nature by suggesting that the plasticity of the initiative provides new optics to capture the socio-political, economic and cultural forces at play and well as invites further research into the plasticity of the BRI framework. In the Conclusion, I summarize the argument, specifically the Silk Road positioned as a global cultural imaginary and the repercussions of BRI's malleable political mechanism, which offers a unique opportunity to better understand modern China as a rising and distinctively ambitious global power.

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Prologue: A Stupendous Challenge

“A Stupendous Challenge: Is there anyone who will undertake to travel this summer from Paris to Peking, by automobile?” read the 1907 advert placed in the French newspaper *Le Matin* (Young, 2014, p. 2). The premise behind this question was to ridicule the racetracks of the time, by noting that the automobile’s sole purpose was the promise of making long-distance journeys possible, yet “all we have done is make it go round in circles” (Fenster, 2006, p. 12). The belief was that “if a man had the car, there wasn’t anywhere that he couldn’t go” (Brown, 2019), and so began the challenge which captured the public imagination like no other. Sometimes compared to the first walk at the North Pole, or the first step on the Moon, other times dismissed as a flight of fancy, the 10,000-mile distance attracted both car enthusiasts and automobile manufacturers alike (Young, 2014, p. 2), who dreamt of achieving the unimaginable, rendering the frontiers meaningless and testing not only the horsepower and willpower, but also the power of possibility.

It may be difficult to comprehend the scale of the challenge today. In the early twentieth century, the world was a comparatively large place and the route between Beijing and Paris had never been driven before – making the race the very first opportunity for a car to make its way across the former Silk Road. Additionally, the automobile was still in its infancy as it was only just becoming popular in Europe and had yet to proliferate across Asia (Illien, 2019; Alvarez, 2020). Accelerated by the desire to test the endurance of the newly emerging technology, the race attracted forty crews who signed up with down-payments of 2,000 French Francs each (approximately 8,000 Euro). But only five teams showed up at the starting line in Beijing on June

10th: a Contal tricycle from France, two De Dion-Bouton vehicles, also from France, a Dutch Spyker, and an Itala from Italy (Pirelli, 2022).

The event was not a typical speed race. No prizes were promised upon arrival in spite of the strenuous circumstances: the automobiles had open rooftops and were exposed to abnormal weather conditions all the while large chunks of the Beijing-Paris distance were missing actual roads. Nevertheless, the glory of “having accomplished an epic undertaking” awaited the winner along with a bottle of G.H. Mumm, arguably pioneering the tradition of celebrating victory with champagne (Illien, 2019; Alvarez, 2020). At the opening of the race in Beijing, Italian journalist, Luigi Barzini, recalled:

The time has come. The drivers and mechanics reach their vehicles. The engines roar, and thick clouds of smoke are released from the exhaust pipes. The crowd’s voice rises. Many officials who came on horseback climb on. One hundred cameras waver above our heads in search of their target. We Italians rush to climb back into the Itala that awaits, quivering and trembling as though impatient to set off... Fireworks and firecrackers burst all around...Off we go...through the Capital of the Celestial Empire at unprecedented speed, and one that will probably never be witnessed again either.

(Fondazione Pirelli, 2020)

Little did Barzini know that not only the Italian team would arrive first at the finish line in Paris, but also that both the unprecedented speed and the unthinkable desire to circumvent transcontinental distance would not cease to exist in August of 1907, but only accelerate. Following the début in the world of motor sports, the desire to see “half the world” (Fondazione Pirelli, 2020), by driving from the Great Wall of China in Beijing all the way to Place Henri Mondor in Paris (Brown, 2019), survived in spite of numerous political obstacles. In 1997, the

Peking-Paris Motor Challenge (as it is known by today) was revived by a road rally enthusiast, Philip Young and, since 2007, the race continues to take place every three years attracting contestants from around the world challenged to re-live Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 days* by conquering the 7,621-mile distance in classic and collectible cars in just a month (Illien, 2019).

The race, still regarded as the longest and toughest in its category (Illien, 2019), continues to occupy public imagination, though not necessarily in this very format. For years, seekers of adventures sought ways to conquer the unimaginable distance of the Eurasian landmass. Especially following the Covid-19 pandemic, as the global tourism restarts, so does the interest in traversing the ancient route from the People's Republic of China all the way to Western Europe. In spite of the efforts of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) to improve its long-term strategy to promote economic growth and development through tourism in the region (Singru and Perez, 2021), the pandemic did not hinder the dreams of re-enacting the journey of the famed Venetian merchant on land.

“It was a trip most of us can only dream about: following the ancient trade route through the centuries-old towns and sweeping landscapes of Central Asia,” writes Berlin-based author Charly Wilder in the 2020 travel section of the *New York Times* (Wilder, 2020). Traveling for 12 days with her husband, Wilder followed a section of the ancient Silk Road through the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, to experience the “cradle of civilization — the holy grail of empire-builders from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan” (Wilder, 2020). Having experienced architectural marvels, local hospitality and flavorful cuisines, Wilder's story takes a much more romantic turn than the contestants of the Peking-Paris race, or its latest

iteration that tests the limits of human power, namely the Silk Road Mountain Bike Race through the Tian Shan Mountains in eastern Kyrgyzstan.¹

No matter the circumstance, or the travel logistics involved, the desire to not just ponder over the lost glory of the Silk Road region, but to accomplish a seemingly “torturous” task (Wilder, 2020) of shrinking distance, conquering hostile terrain, and finally proving the possibility of achieving the unattainable, remains strong. Individuals, groups of daredevils, corporate entities and nation states are jumping on to experience or reclaim the Silk Road spirit. The most ambitious of all, which only slightly resembles the pomp of the original Peking-Paris race, was celebrated with the flood of confetti and champagne as a bright red locomotive rolled into the Barking Rail Station in East London on January 19, 2017.

Carrying a total of forty four containers of goods, the freight train departed the Chinese city of Yiwu (south of Shanghai) and passed through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium and France before entering England as the first direct intercontinental train service connecting China with the United Kingdom. The journey took 18 days, almost half the time it usually takes to ship goods between the two countries, at half the price of sending them by air (BBC, 2017; DeutscheWelle, 2017; Sawyer, 2017). The rail connection is just a small part of the largest infrastructure project ever attempted to be realized, with hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in financial backing. While some say that the project could lead to sizable geo-political and economic changes felt right across the globe, the truth is that the change is already underway. The ancient silk routes are being revived.

¹ The 1,120-mile trail with the highest point of elevation to date (13,730 feet), is in its fourth year and has recently attracted approximately a hundred riders to tackle the “gravel, single and double track and old soviet roads that have long been forgotten and fallen into disrepair” (Arbour, 2021; SRMR, 2022).

Introduction

“Dreams are what gives life its color.
They make morning light brighter,
And the night not so dark.”

Jadwiga Chajdas, 2021

“We need to imagine living elsewhere before
We can live there.”

Avery Gordon, 1997

“Tomorrow we will run faster,
Stretch out our arms farther. . .
And then one fine morning —
So we beat on, boats against the current,
Borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

F. S. Fitzgerald, 1925

The future always begins with a dream – whether it is one that, in its seeming naïveté, helps us defeat the struggles of the present, or whether it prevents us, through haunting memories, from repeating mistakes of the past. After all, it is both the past and the present that can assist us in forging social imaginaries yet to come. The journey that they take us on – toward a meaningful future – may seem inconspicuous, but the stories and narratives that plot it reveal a complex project in the making. Such is the story of the Silk Road revival. As a distant memory that feels nearly elemental to the human condition, the Silk Road’s enduring romance and eternal influence seems to rest on the countless renderings and retellings of the familiar story of the glorious past.

“We cannot remember, often, how we learned of [the Silk Road], only that knowledge of it seems to be a birthright,” writes the *New York Times Magazine* editor Hanya Yanagihara. “It may not be the first story of human movement, recorded or otherwise, but it is the most abiding”

(Yanagihara, 2020). This enduring nature of the Silk Road emerges from the histories that underpin it. Frequently attributed to being created in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 C. E.), the Silk Road presents us with an image of routes that stretched throughout the Eurasian landmass and connected the ancient Chinese city of Chang’an (now Xi’an) with Rome and Constantinople. As an icon of historically interwoven geographies, it lured early travelers with exotic goods and new technologies as well as satisfied a common thirst for adventure. For China specifically, the Silk Road evokes memories of glorious times when the Chinese civilization was flourishing and the empire stood at the center of the world as the “Middle Kingdom” (Rolland, 2017, p. 1). With these associations, the Silk Road became a unique concept that has become, at once, a commodity, a medium and a notion that formulated theories of unimpeded flow of tradable goods, ideas, customs and religions. As a testament to human desire, the Silk Road offered an opportunity to step outside of the familiar world into a dazzling dream of what is yet to come – whether it occurred in the antiquity, or in the twenty-first century.

Silk Road Redux

Today, the role of an adventurer is being played by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the ancient trading routes take the form of a complex network of highways, pipelines, railroads, ports, fiber-optic cables, and economic corridors which all promise to re-connect the world. The *Belt and Road Initiative* (first referred to as “One Belt, One Road,” which remains to be its official name in China; Thereafter: *BRI*)² is a China-financed venture, which encompasses a series of

² *One Belt, One Road* is the literal translation of the Chinese name for the project (一带一路). Since its announcement, the BRI was translated into English as “One Belt, One Road.” Yet, the name was later changed to the “Belt and Road Initiative” in English (without changing the Chinese characters used). One of the reasons for this change was the ability to recast the initiative as a more inclusive, vague and an open-ended undertaking as opposed to employing the logic of

physical infrastructure projects and diplomatic maneuvers grounded in the aspiration of the Chinese state to retrieve ancient connectivity reminiscent of the Silk Road. Announced by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in March 2013, and later termed as “a project of the century” (Xinhua, 2017), the BRI serves as an umbrella-term for various individual China-backed projects which are frequently described as a vision of China’s renewed regional engagement and its resurgence as a world power (Rolland, 2017, p. 1). The two largest BRI projects are the Silk Road Economic Belt (SERB) stretching across the Central Asian landmass, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which, rather confusingly, does not imply a literal road but mirrors the seven imperial journeys of Admiral Zheng He through the Indian Ocean during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Wrapped up in the rhetoric of global connectivity, prosperity and peaceful co-existence, the BRI is drawing on the allure of the Silk Road to validate China’s assertive foreign policy. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the Silk Road was chosen as a vehicle that animates the initiative. The official rhetoric frames it as a project that plots the revival of the “great heritage of human civilization” that was once characterized by “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” (Xi, 2017). Promoted through a series of trade, development and territorial engineering projects, as well as the language of connectivity, global cultural heritage and harmony, the BRI is framed as a “new proposal for enhancing international cooperation” that resists what is commonly referred to as Westernization, or Americanization. Officially, the BRI represents “the inevitable trend for cultural revival” as well as a “sustainable development pattern” that offers “an alternative mode of production, distribution, and exchange,” and promises not to repeat the mistakes of the Western developmental practices (Xi, 2017; Islam, 2019).

singularity and geostrategic motivation. I utilize the term “Belt and Road Initiative,” or “BRI,” to reflect the new official translation as it circulates in the English language.

With an array of new funding institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the Silk Road Fund, the BRI is, undoubtedly, the most ambitious foreign policy project ever developed by China. Offering a fantasy of utopian globalization where the future prevails on the logic of a frictionless, peaceful and cooperative world order, the BRI sees physical infrastructure as an essential step toward Eurasian integration and the creation of a vibrant “community of common destiny,” where all roads “will eventually lead to Beijing, both literally and figuratively” (Rolland, 2017, p. 2). Given its vast size and scope, the BRI sparked countless conversations about whether the initiative is gesturing toward the possibility of a hopeful and shared future, or if it actually is signaling toward another vehicle of neo-imperial violence. In addition to its vast scope, some of the inherent vagueness reinforces the debates about the direction of China’s trajectory as a rising Eurasian power, especially following the period of extraordinary growth that the nation has undergone in the last several centuries that has not only changed its own history, but also reshaped, and will continue to reshape, the global political and economic order.

It is clear that in the midst of the tense U.S.-China relations, China’s economic miracle, and its increases in global infrastructure spending, as well as Xi Jinping’s abolishment of the presidential limit, China is being steered toward a new era. Its influence has already been felt “from Portugal to Vladivostok and from Greenland to Pakistan,” (Mayer, 2018, p. 3), which naturally prompts both excitement as well as an outright suspicion. Since 2013, when the initiative was conceived, BRI has outgrown its original plans and proposed corridors. Today, the initiative is considered to be a truly global enterprise which encompasses 139 countries³ (though not all are

³ Due to the scarcity of reliable sources regarding the size and scope of the BRI, I rely on the 2021 report entitled “China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States” by the Council on Foreign Relations, which confirms the participation of 139 countries in the BRI. These include: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Armenia, Austria,

formally recognized as BRI recipients), with Latin America being added in 2017 as a “natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (Wang, 2017; Hillman and Sacks, 2021).

In addition to the growing geographical reach, which points toward a rather malleable nature of the initiative, the BRI began to expand the scope of its “corridors” with new appendages, such as the Digital Silk Road (DSR), the Health Silk Road (HSR), and the Green Belt and Road (GBRI). The Chinese government stresses that BRI’s primary purpose lies in stimulating development in the infrastructure-deprived countries, and it denies any strategic motivations.⁴ In spite of that, the academic inquiry into the BRI continues to ponder over China’s distinct foreign policy (Godement and Kratz, 2015; Mayer, 2018; Winter, 2019; Alam and Asef, 2020; Alves, 2021). Outside of China, the literature prioritizes policy analysis (Godehardt, 2016; Summers, 2016; Miller, 2017; Zhang, 2017; Freymann, 2020; Hillman, 2020), while in China, the state-funded research institutes, think tanks and universities (now as a part of the “BRI think-tank alliance”) shape the narrative from the perspective of the Chinese state (Mayer, 2018; Rolland, 2019).

Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Chile, Comoros, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Cote d’Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gabon, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guinea, Guyana, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Mauritania, Micronesia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nepal, New Zealand, Niger, Nigeria, Niue, North Macedonia, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, South Korea, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, The Gambia, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

⁴ On numerous occasions, Xi Jinping stated that China “will not resort to outdated geopolitical maneuvering.” Additionally, he reaffirmed that the BRI should be understood as “an initiative for economic cooperation, instead of a geopolitical alliance or military league,” which puts it in a different category than the Marshall Plan as China does not wish to “play the zero-sum game” of geopolitical rivalry (Xi, 2013; Mitchell, 2018; Xinhua, 2018).

This divergence of knowledge production has not only failed at effectively utilizing theoretical frameworks to render the BRI more intelligible, but it also reinforced some of the inherent differences in both scholarly and popular discourse about China's increasingly active foreign policy. The vast majority of Western scholarship remains particularly suspicious of China's motivations and critical of its increasing assertiveness in global affairs by utilizing the "threat of China" rhetoric (by invoking the "Thucydides Trap," where one great power threatens to displace another) (Roy, 1996; Gertz, 2000; Swaine, Daly and Greenwood, 2000; Broomfield, 2003; Zoellick, 2013; Allison, 2017), while Sinologists and Sinophiles tend to emphasize the peaceful nature of Chinese political culture (Xuetong, 2001; Pan, 2004; Glaser and Medeiros, 2007; Wang, 2009; Islam, 2019).

In an attempt to move past the tired narratives of China's containment reminiscent of disciplinary conventions of fields such as International Relations while avoiding the common pitfalls of uncritical Sinophilia, I draw on insights from Global History, Cultural Studies as well as Development and Critical Infrastructure Studies to explore the strategic and selective revival of global heritage, which—presented as the Chinese cultural history to be proud of—creates new forms of indomitable national ambition. More specifically, I trace the cultural symbolics of the Silk Road as an archetypal narrative of cross-cultural and transcontinental encounter which, as a global cultural imaginary, has been employed, both ideologically and materially, to describe, legitimate and justify the Belt and Road Initiative. Paying close attention to the material and textual manifestations of the Silk Road revival by modern China, I develop an understanding of a distinct form of ambitious power, which allows me to enter the conversations about China's rising political, economic and cultural prominence in the global system, without necessarily supporting either the Western or the Sino-centric logic.

In this context, I predominantly focus on the subject of China's growing global ambitions as I make the case for the *Silk Road Redux*, or a revival of various meanings circulating across infrastructural, technological and multimedia components that began to re-present the development of China's *worlding* to the rest of the world. Moreover, I ground my dissertation in the conversations that call for the necessity to reconsider ideas about power relations and soft power globally (Harvey, 2003; Bennett and Joyce, 2013; Easterling, 2014; Ando and Richardson, 2017), given the growing political, economic and cultural assertiveness of modern China (French, 2017; Milner, 2017; Walker, 2018; Winter, 2019).

Ever since the 2014-2015, China transitioned from Deng Xiaoping's "low profile" strategy to an increasingly proactive regional diplomacy, which has progressively been securing China's own understanding of its place in the global history as well as the world at large (Winter, 2019, p. 16). BRI, in this context, provides for the most elaborate illustration of this transition. It also shows that the conventional idea of soft power is not fully capable of comprehensively capturing China's global ambitions. This complication to the existing popular and scholarly discourse is further problematized by the rise of heritage diplomacy that surrounds the BRI, which does not only aim at promoting the export of cultural ideas or goods, but it also attempts to rewrite the history of transcontinental connectivity, trade, and people-to-people encounters as a shared history of global heritage (Winter, 2016a, p. 9).

The approach taken in this dissertation would unlikely become a subject of inquiry to the modern scholars of International Relations or Political Science who, too often, overlook the significance of history and the complexity of culture in the production of both political and social life (Mazarr, 1996; Yu, 2002; Michalowska and Schreiber, 2017). While some inter- and trans-disciplinary scholars have already discussed how the historical contexts are inherently related to cross-border relations in Asia today (Brook, van Praag and Boltjes, 2018; Winter, 2019), little

attention is devoted to them. In fact, whenever history and culture receive recognition in political debates, these conversations are limited to the issue of “soft power” which does not fully capture the complexity of a grand geo-vision, such as the BRI.

In this context, I find it necessary to interrogate the cultural histories of the Silk Road, which have the capacity to unravel the various ways in which material pasts have the capacity to create new trade infrastructures, development paradigms and security patterns. This is particularly important as the BRI attempts to mobilize heritage sites across Asia, which have already been the “honeypots of development” (Winter, 2016a, p. 9), to further legitimize infrastructural construction and urban revival. Therefore, the Chinese politics of cultural heritage becomes a technology of spatial and social governance that evokes the Silk Road aesthetic of cross-cultural contact and exchange to “build mutual respect and trust” under the banner of BRI. This practice is not only seen as the major tenet of the BRI, but it has also occupied the center of Beijing’s attempts at stabilizing China’s Western provinces by incorporating the Muslim Uighur communities with the rest of the nation through trade infrastructure (Winter, 2016a, p. 10).

Politics of Global Heritage

By focusing on the unquestioned cultural⁵ tenets of the Silk Road as an enlivening historical concept, I suggest that the conversations about China’s rising power are, in essence, missing the

⁵ I employ Clifford Geertz’ conceptualization of culture understood as “webs of significance,” which grounds it in symbols that express and shape community behavior (Geertz, 1973). This can be used to show how ideas, objects and symbols are drawn together by global flows which are manifested across physical and media landscapes. It can be seen as a kind of “thick description,” which allows me to go beyond the surface appearance of either BRI or the Silk Road and investigate rich contextual details and complex layers of symbols and webs of relationships while observing and interpreting social meanings which these relationships produce (Dawson, 2010, p. 1).

complexity of its peculiar form of diplomacy by either speculating over the preferred vision of China's power, or by restricting our thinking to the realm of political asymmetry. This logic devalues the complexity of the Silk Road as an enduring global imaginary that can be, in fact, deployed for both political and neoliberal means. In this dissertation, I depart from simply understanding the Silk Road as a historical fact of archeological significance. Instead, I consider it a set of asymmetrical and disjunctured, yet interwoven, meanings which carry historical weight as well as deep cultural significance. This approach provides for a better foundation to further understand the countless Silk Road revivals, especially in the twenty-first century, which have been coinciding with the rise of heritage politics that proves to be one of the defining characteristics of an increasingly globalized world. Mapping the BRI developments along the world heritage sites, Timothy Winter attributes the rise of heritage politics to the expansion of the international governance of culture, inclusive of the protection of cultural artifacts and relicts from the past, which encourages states to cooperatively engage in internationalizing “cultural nationalisms” and building “bridges through the identification of shared pasts” (Winter, 2015, p. 1010). This specifically refers to the appropriation of cultural heritage for both commercial and political purposes, which has become a leading practice across many emerging economies in Asia, South America, the Middle East and Africa (Winter, 2014).

Cultural heritage is usually understood as an assemblage of values, discourses and materialities,⁶ which evoke a sense of both national and collective identity. Through cultural

⁶ I rely on the work of Jules Prown and his theorization of material culture as well as the relationship between visibility of texts and history to unravel the cultural values and attitudes which they may contain. According to Prown, an artifact—or simply an object made by a human being which I extend here to written, material and visual media—is a historical event which proceeds to “live in the present” (Prown, 2001). It is its persistent existence in the present that prohibits the artifact from reflecting its entire context, which demonstrates that any historical narrative is only partial.

inheritance, they bridge the gap between the past and the present as well as the human and non-human (Anico and Peralta, 2008; Labadi, 2013; Golinelli, 2015; Winter, 2015; Smith, Messenger and Soderland, 2017). Today, cultural heritage of cross-cultural connectivity is entering a new and increasingly important moment, where economic and political transformations that characterize modern globalization are allowing “non-Western modes of heritage governance to gain newfound legitimacy on the international stage” (Winter, 2014, p. 319). This symbolic performance, which provides an imperative for culture to be deployed at the forefront of politics, especially in China, has the capacity to project a growing sense of Sinocentric worldviews⁷ (Shambaugh, 2013).

Discussing this practice, Winter proposes the concept of a *geocultural power* which, similarly to Samuel Huntington’s argument, places culture, religion, and history at the core of global geopolitics (Huntington, 2000). Yet unlike him, Winter does not compartmentalize cultures into static cultural blocs, but rather develops a theory of heritage diplomacy. According to Winter, scholars and political commentators worldwide should pay more attention to this new form of

⁷ In fact, in the past century, we have seen an emergence of numerous institutions, such as UNESCO, The Getty Conservation Institute, Aga Khan Trust For Culture, World Monuments Fund, and Global Heritage Fund, along with a number of nongovernmental bodies and foundations dedicated to heritage preservation, especially in Asia, such as The Henry Luce Foundation, The Asia Foundation, or The Lee Foundation (Winter, 2016b, p. 18). However, only in recent years, an increasing number of experts have suggested that deep history plays a significant role in the formation of ambitious foreign policy in China, especially in the contexts of overcoming the century of humiliation as well as securing international recognition for nation and the Chinese civilization on world stage (Osno, 2014; Callahan, 2017; French, 2017; Miller, 2017). In his detailed analysis of the ways in which the Chinese state conveys and communicates such ideas globally, Winter notes that cultural heritage has become a powerful technology which supports significant amounts of investment to connect modern-day China to its past by establishing “museums, festivals, expos, and countless intangible heritage initiatives” (Winter, 2016a, p. 9). This practice has been particularly visible during the World Fair hosted by the city of Shanghai in 2010, where the Chinese pavilion celebrated the national heritage along with the ideology of “unity through diversity” by literally absorbing the pavilions of Tibet and Xinxiang in a manifestation of cosmopolitan Chinese cultural heritage. Although the stand-alone Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan structured seemed separate, each of them was “carefully positioned in the shadow of The Oriental Crown’s overhanging eaves” (Winter and Daly, 2012, p. 3).

diplomatic protocol which incorporates cultural pasts and material cultures in the promotion and justification of “exchanges, collaborations, and forms of cooperation within wider configurations of international relations, trade, and geopolitics” (Winter, 2019, p. 22).

This distinct form of diplomacy signals an emergence of the new “geocultural powers,” or sovereign states that are capable of exerting their influence on a global scale through cultural means. Geocultural here is akin to geopolitical, where the prefix “geo” signals the methods of power accumulation and the reordering of geophysical space, and the “cultural” allows for it to occur with the help of cultural heritage (Winter, 2019, p. 17). In this sense, the heritage of cross-cultural connectivity allows nation-states to reconfigure the past in order to produce spatialized narratives that convey the emergence of a desirable future, such as the one defined by transnational prosperity and cross-border connectivity, commonly referred to as the revived, Silk Road.

When considering the BRI, or the New (revived) Silk Road, it is important to stress that the practice of utilizing and repurposing cultural heritage of cross-cultural connectivity is neither new, nor it is Chinese. Historically, the Silk Road heritage was evoked at critical points of transformation and at the moments when connectivity was promoted through commercial or political means. In geopolitics, Silk Road guided the Great Game, or the political and diplomatic confrontation between the British and the Russian Empires over Afghanistan and other territories in Central and Southern Asia throughout much of the nineteenth century (Wood, 2002, p. 147). It also drove attempts of English political geographer, Halford Mackinder, in developing the Heartland Theory,⁸ which envisioned economic reintegration of Eurasia grounded in the idea

⁸ Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) belonged to a group of geographers (inclusive of Karl Haushofer (1869–1946)), who highlighted the notion of an “organic state” in the production of national destiny (Bassin, 1987; Tuathail and Toal, 1996). Seeing nation-states as natural organisms that describe, form and order entire populations and ecosystems, classical geopoliticians like

that Central Asian symbolized the “Heartland”⁹ of imperial rivalry running along the ancient trading routes (Ge *et al.*, 2018, p. 58). His theory utilized history in order to create a persuasive argument in support of physical connectivity, which remains as strong today as it did over 150

Mackinder relied on the clash-of-civilizations rhetoric which often universalized nationalistic conception of geostrategy. Germany, during both World Wars, is perhaps the most direct example of such logic where the German state attempted to counter British domination along with the presumed American and Russian hegemony. Following the theory of an organic state, Mackinder influenced generations of strategic thinkers on the importance of geographical space in deployment of military power (Buszynski, 2019, p. 8). In doing so, he advanced the idea that world politics is a “closed system” where actions of all states were interconnected, and where the major axis of conflict laid between land- and sea-powers. This belief was inspired by the seminal work of an American strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), entitled *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890). Mahan, working in the age of a sailing ship, saw America as an island destined to command two oceans—the Atlantic, and the Pacific. His theories, although outdated now, have influenced much of the maritime security of pre-Pacific War Japan, the Soviet Union, as well as the contemporary U.S. and China (Buszynski, 2019, p. 7).

⁹ Inspired by this oceanic logic as well as the introduction of railways, Mackinder produced a distinct form of industrial-geopolitical imagery. In his 1904 paper delivered to the Royal Geographical Society, he outlined a theory of “geographical pivot” which saw Russia as reincarnated Mongol empire that could influence the “pivot area,” or the landlocked region of central Eurasia (Mackinder, 2004). To this end, Mackinder believed that increasingly powerful Russia could “pivot in all directions, towards the East, the South and the West, in a way that would be difficult for a sea power such as Britain” (Buszynski, 2019, p. 8). This assumption resulted in the publication of *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919) which further positioned Eurasia as a “world island,” and the “greatest natural fortress on earth” (Mackinder, 1962, p. 201) that could become a strategically advantageous zone as well as a rival to any sea-power (Mackinder, 1962, p. 78). Mackinder’s expansionist logic gave way to his famous diction: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island. Who rules the World Island commands the World” (Mackinder, 1962, p. xviii). His imperial vision of economic integration of Eurasia would resonate with generations of thinkers and strategists who would reinscribe geography as a fundamental and most permanent factor in foreign policy (Spykman, 1944, p. 41). Nearly 45 years later, in the 1950s, Owen Lattimore, American scholar of China, explicitly inscribed the Silk Road heritage into Mackinder’s theory, and arguably introduced the Silk Road, as a Western neologism, into the Chinese language (Lattimore, 1950). Guided by bias toward the Soviet control of Central Asia, Lattimore laid out contemporary geopolitical appropriations of the Silk Road, including the 1999 US Silk Road Strategy Act which, until today, dictates US policy in South Caucasus and Central Asia (Congress, 1999; Chin, 2013, p. 195). Mackinder’s logic resurfaced in recent years in reference to China’s increasing territorial footprint in the region with many observers drawing parallels between the BRI and Mackinder’s original “Heartland” theory (Kuljanin, 2018; Zhou and Esteban, 2018; Wey, 2019; Liu, 2020).

years ago, with roads and railroads imagined as “transmuting the conditions of land power” (Mackinder, 2004, p. 434)

In this sense, the Silk Road has become a cultural technology that enables recycling history and world heritage for political and commercial ends. It demonstrates a longing for a better future wrapped with a strong sense of nostalgia for the romanticized past. For Lotte Jensen, such a practice is akin to the rise of historicism in the 1800s Europe which, by triggering the dissemination of historical knowledge along with the establishment of museums, libraries and archives, did reinforce the structure underpinning the modern nation-state (Jensen, Leerssen and Mathijsen, 2010). Therefore, the (re)production of the bygone times into the “new past” began to render history a matter of public, national interest and a matter of collective identification, thus contributing to the construction of modern national identity (Jensen, Leerssen and Mathijsen, 2010).

Cultural heritage, therefore, becomes a powerful tool of nation-building and policy-making, which has frequently been used to present a range of possibilities to target global challenges, such as strengthening international trade, development aid, post-conflict recovery, peace, security or national resilience (Labadi, 2019). In this context, the BRI becomes the utmost example of heritage diplomacy in praxis, where the cultural heritage of cross-cultural connectivity possesses the capacity to selectively repurpose the past as an apparatus of great power diplomacy. It also demonstrates how the political strategy of selective reading of history and culture is capable of materializing China’s global ambitions to secure political, economic and cultural influence globally.

In this context, I consider cultural heritage as an agent of China’s nation-making which, through its visual and non-visual assemblages of meaning, has the capacity to animate, describe, legitimate and justify both political projects as well as commercial and neoliberal endeavors. The

ways of reimagining and rewriting the Silk Road history provide an excellent example of this process. Apart from being utilized for geopolitical projects, the Silk Road spirit of transcontinental connectivity uses pro-globalization rhetoric as a commercial tool of profit-making. While Susan Whitfield sees the Silk Road as “a brand used to label anything exotic and randomly eastern to the whole of pre-modern exchanges across Eurasia” (Whitfield, 2015, p. 21), James Millward notices that the exotic aura of the Silk Road, namely the images of caravans, camels and silk markets, has been appropriated by politicians, economists and businesspeople into a “neoliberal fantasy about a time when free traders roamed unimpeded across the old world and peace broke out all over.”¹⁰

In this context, the newly reimagined Silk Road can be seen as an occasion to both legitimate and secure Chinese political and economic interests in Eurasia as well as to allow the region to emerge from decades of isolation in order “to give a concrete shape to the idealized vision of an interconnected and economically successful Eurasian continent” (Rolland, 2017, p. 9). The Silk Road’s commercial allure, however, goes beyond that. Millward reminds us that the Silk Road has increasingly been utilized as “a mascot for the encounter and exchange” to promote international commerce, and salutary multiculturalism reminiscent of the ancient times.¹¹ These very strategies go back to the 1960s, when the Silk Road idea was widely circulated in the West.

At the time, the popularization of the term itself was deeply commercial in nature as it was linked to the publication of numerous trendsetting travel guides and coffee-table books, such as Luce Boulnois’s *La Route de la Soie* (1963), and Robert J. Collins’s *East to Cathay: The Silk Road* (1968). These publications, along with the outburst of Silk Road-inspired products and services, such as themed museums, art exhibitions, tourist attractions, lifestyle and entertainment products,

¹⁰ Millward, 2018, Working paper shared with the author, p. 3.

¹¹ Millward, 2018, Working paper shared with the author, p. 3.

capitalized on the promise of transporting consumers to “the days of Marco Polo’s adventures in the Far East, a chimerical past that is “fabled,” “exotic,” “mysterious,” and, above all, undisturbed by mundane affairs” (Langenkamp, 2017, p. 251).

In this manner, the practice of cultural heritage does not merely evoke the past for a short-term political objective. It is rather a centerpiece of contemporary neoliberal globalization. The notion of heritage has shown us that it possesses the capacity to become a political target during conflicts when, especially in the Middle East and Europe, the destruction of churches, mosques and cities becomes a standard military strategy to disrupt societies by undermining “the religious, cultural, or territorial bonds of populations” (Winter, 2019, p. 6). It has also been increasingly entangled with knowledge production and intellectual property under global capitalism, where heritage is utilized to sustain the reputation of world’s most prestigious universities and publishing companies, preserve geographical and historical landmarks as well as facilitate the flow of capital (Campbell, 2001; Hargrove, 2002; Merchant *et al.*, 2015; Balmer, 2017).

For this reason, it is not a coincidence that cultural heritage is used to promote capitalist enterprises (Misiura, 2006; Parowicz, 2019), especially since culture is now considered a commodity (Appadurai, 1988, 2013; Bendix, 2008, p. 260; Kuutma, 2009). Apart from the promotion of UNESCO heritage sites of cultural and historical significance, the practice of cultural heritage has become a branding tool for producers of luxury goods. International luxury brands, such as Patek Philippe, Ralph Lauren or Hermès, have successfully built and legitimated their corporate empires on the premise that heritage is ethically appealing (Joy *et al.*, 2012), therefore, enabling them to generate profits and maintain a globally-recognized status (Ikeda, 2006). The workings of heritage politics do not only operate through the—often controversial—logic that luxury products are more sustainable (as outlined in the Patek Philippe’s corporate motto which states: “You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the

next generation” (Hurth, 2010; Lacroix and Jolibert, 2017)), but also one that celebrates the past without necessarily highlighting the romantic or mythical reading of it.

Whether involved in the establishment of globally-recognizable brands (Cox, 2013), or cultivation of tourism industries (Timothy, 2011; Bourdeau and Gravari-Barbas, 2016), the notion of cultural heritage has recently been receiving more attention in both corporate (Balmer, 2017; Atwal and Bryson, 2018; Jackson, 2019) as well as academic and policy circles (Di Giovine, 2008; Glad, 2011; Forrest, 2012; Vidal, 2012; Rozman, 2014; Matsuda and Mengoni, 2016). In this context, the capacity of the selective reading of history serves a political and a neoliberal alibi. This very practice has allowed the Silk Road to become a technology which sensorial-emotional power enables recycling both global history and world heritage for the political and commercial ends. In the moments of commercialization, the Silk Road unravels its mythic nature, which has remained relatively amorphous as it embodies an assemblage of—frequently conflicting—facts, narratives, and memories, but also values, ideas, and fantasies. In this way, the Belt and Road draws on this romance and mythology to represent an ambitious global future yet to come.

While Winter’s concept of “geocultural power” is instructive in describing the various ways in which China has been repurposing the Silk Road aesthetic in pursuit of its “geocultural” advantage, as it will become clearer in the next pages of this dissertation, I build on his notion and complement the processes of heritage diplomacy with an assemblage of practices used by China to construct a twenty-first-century great power. Recognizing the strategic reading of culture and history, I explore the ways in which the Silk Road provided us with the language and the geo-imagination to fully comprehend large-scale infrastructures, technical systems and global supply chains. By looking at various cultural heritage and technopolitical projects, I explore the fascination with civilizational discourse which traditional disciplines of Political Science or International Relations cannot fully explain or account for with their geo-political language. In

this context, I suggest that China's more assertive stance in global politics is being displayed in a form of its grandiose infrastructural undertaking, which is being promoted, legitimized and justified by appealing to Western sensibilities.

Furthermore, I suggest that by reconfiguring the largely Western imagination of the Silk Road, the BRI project—as grounded in both selective reading of the past and the heritage of cross-cultural connectivity—performs two distinct functions. First, it facilitates the *worlding* of China, or the experience of being “in” the world, which manifests itself in a complex and active synergy between China and the world that renders China an important element of contemporary globality. Second, the BRI offers a promise of reconfiguring the established paradigms of development, cross-border cooperation and worldwide trade infrastructure, as well as respacing the landscapes of global interconnections.

The Enduring Romance

Every common narrative of the Silk Road has been exaggerated. It is not only rare that the merchants, traders and pilgrims carried goods over exceptionally long distances by land (Whitfield, 2015, p. 24), it is also debatable that the merchants, monks and travelers carried commodities all the way from the Chinese city of Xi'an (often framed as the commercial capital of the Silk Road) to Rome, a distance of approximately 8,500 km (5,282 miles) (Church, 2018, p. 2). In addition, the inconsistency in the Silk Road name, which implies a singular path, has no resonance with the historical reality. The Silk Road romance extends to the ambiguity concerned with the time-frame of its existence. While some historians argue whether the peak of Silk Road connectivity occurred at the period between 200 BCE to 1450s CE, many agree on the fact that the Silk Road began a little over 2000 years ago and reached its zenith between of the 1400s and

1500s, when sea crossings to America became world's dominant trade routes (Ebrey and Liu, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 2000; Del Testa, Lemoine and Strickland, 2004; Lockard, 2007; Liu, 2010; Paine, 2014; Whitfield, 2015).

In spite of the fact that the Silk Road was, indisputably, nothing else but a “networked,” uneven and asymmetrical form of transregional exchange, the romantic stories that circulated the globe, eventually, rendered the Silk Road a universal icon of historically interconnected geographies, which is widely recognizable today. In this way, the silk cloth became a paradigmatic material that has inscribed not only the contours of China's political ambitions, but also the ethnic identities of the communities that lived along the Silk Road. Countless legends about the Silk Road, including the earliest folk tale of the Chinese emperor's concubine who, having observed silkworms spinning their threads, introduced basic methods of weaving silk, began to carry the romanticized memories of prosperity, wealth and power, as well as placed silk “among the most fundamental elements of Chinese civilization” in the twelfth century B.C. (Boulnois, 1966, p. 17).

Such narratives, which coincided with China's moments of extraordinary globality, have never been a product of just Chinese imagination. In fact, the romantic spirit of these narratives was solidified by the Westerners who revived it in the moments of cross-cultural Sino-Western contact and increased trade connectivity. This fascinating insight into the complex and active synergy between China and the rest of the world shows us that, for instance, before the T'ang Dynasty (618—907), there was little, if any, European writing on Silk Road. With the disintegration of the Chinese empire, these memories and narratives resurfaced with one of the most acclaimed European travelers, Marco Polo (1254-1324), who reached China in the late 1200s.

The accounts of Polo's travels, consolidated in the *Book of the Marvels of the World* (c. 1300), along with testimonies of Jesuits and Franciscan missionaries, provided the Westerners with

exotic descriptions of the routes leading to the riches of the East. While the 1300s produced a wealth of literature on Central and East Asia,¹² such knowledge production was not exclusive to that period. Polo, however, remains one of the figures who left a powerful cultural imprint and became an idolized symbol of the Sino-Western cultural encounter (Bergreen, 2007; Paterson, 2016). Originally from Venice, Polo embarked on an epic journey along the Silk Road to Cathay (China), where he was officially appointed to serve as Kublai Khan's foreign emissary to India and Burma that led him on numerous diplomatic missions throughout the empire (McCarty, 2008; McNeese and Goetzmann, 2009; Pigman, 2016).

During that time, Khan had extended his hegemony over "Cambulac" (Beijing) and established a summer residence at "Xanadu" (Shanghai) in 1264 (Man, 2010) which gave birth to one of the most influential travelogues of the Western civilization. Polo's accounts, interwoven with his imagination, paved its way to a very selective European view of China, which did not only describe the nation in vague terms, but it also misallocated it on maps and named it inconsistently (Steinmetz, 2008, p. 362). In the next century, exotic accounts of a mysterious empire prevailed and were only attributed to China when historians uncovered records of the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, whose descriptions revealed landscapes of the greatest cities and rivers as well as incredible wealth of the Chinese empire (Moule, 1920).

Polo was not the only one who contributed to the romantic and exotic accounts of China. John Mandeville (1357-1371) was another figure who, belonging to a small group of Orientalists of the time who were fascinated with the Orient. Although he devoted his writing career to China,

¹² Here, I mainly refer to L André de Longjumeau, reached the eastern borders of the nation during his diplomatic travels, while Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Benedykt Polak, and William of Rubruck focused on reaching Mongolia (Baudrillart, 1912; Jurow, 1976; Dawson, 1980; Polak, 1993; Rockhill, 2017; Lower, 2018; de Carpin, no date). It is also useful to mention the Uyghur Nestorian Christian, Rabban Bar Sauma, who was the first diplomat sent from China to reach the royal courts of Christendom in the West (Fernández-Armesto, 2001; Rossabi, 2010).

Mandeville remains less prominent in the literature on Sino-Western encounter. Some speculate that he might have never visited China and just based his writings on preexisting accounts (Steinmetz, 2008, p. 362). Others label him a fictional writer. In spite of that, we shall reorient our attention from the fact that some of those early writings were not grounded in first-hand experiences, and focus on the impact of those fantasies put forth by people like Mandeville.

In a vein similar to an author Karl May who, wrote about America without ever visiting the New World, the legacy of early Orientalists should not be frowned upon. Instead, I would suggest that the writers, adventurers and scholars alike who engaged in writing about the Silk Road became powerful cultural actors who influenced not only their national cultures, but also the modern-day allure that the silk routes still carry today. Similarly to the legacies of May, which some see as influencing generations of Europeans by synthesizing and transferring elements from different cultures and therefore contributing to the shaping of their national identity (Góral, 2014), the legacies of Western knowledge production about China did work in relatively similar ways. This pertains to the circulation of knowledge about China across the East-West divide, and its subsequent impact on the creation of a transnational image of what China as well as the Silk Road represented.

These Oriental narratives of the Silk Road riches were reinforced by the trade that blossomed during the Han Dynasty (Steinmetz, 2008), when the visions of untapped potential of the Central Asian routes coincided with the first instances of silk cloth being seen in Rome at the beginning of the Common Era. It was then, when a Greco-Roman astronomer, geographer and astrologer, Claudius Ptolemy, produced a geographical treatise, which would lay the foundation upon which the Silk Road mythology would be further developed. In *Geography* (c. 100-150 C.E.), Ptolemy did not only organize the geographical knowledge of the Roman Empire, but he also attempted to map the ways in which the early Sino-Western contact was imagined. Revising the world atlas of

Marinus of Tyre (who became known as the first Roman to ever place China on a map), Ptolemy developed a method of mapping known as equirectangular projection, which currently constitutes the standard of modern geographical practice (Chin, 2013, p. 199).

The equirectangular projection involved a form of mathematical mapping of the latitude and longitude coordinates as systematically arranged, which allowed Ptolemy to determine the longitudinal extent of Asia by measuring the distance from Hierapolis (modern-day Turkey) to Sera (modern-day North China, also known as “the chief city of the “Silk People””), and layering it in close proximity to the parallel 36° north of the equator (Fig. 1) (Berggren and Jones, 2002, p. 150). This very method sketched a relatively straight line extending from the Parthian Empire (247 B.C. – 224 C.E.) (vast area of central-eastern Turkey all the way to present-day Afghanistan and Western Pakistan) that continued to the Stone Tower (an area considered to be the mid-point of the Silk Road; currently corresponding to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan) (P’iankov, 2015, p. 60).

Guided by early science as well as the romantic stories of the Sino-Western contact, Ptolemy’s scientific interpretation of the coordinates was not flawless. In fact, he created a largely inaccurate representation of the Silk Road by transferring the latitude and longitude of the globe onto the horizontal coordinates of a grid (Berggren and Jones, 2002, p. 150), which involved projection of a spherical image onto a flat surface. This method rendered the Silk Road twice as long as its actual distance which, in fact, was Ptolemy’s faithful reproduction of an already imperfect estimation found in Marinus’ atlas¹³ (Tozer, 2005, p. 341-342). Ptolemy’s projection did not only

¹³ Other accounts, however, offer us a different explanation of these inaccuracies. Tupinkova and colleagues argue that due to the scarce availability of geographical sources at his time, Ptolemy actually did not work with spherical co-ordinates but rather measured, estimated or inferred terrestrial distances available in different units. Under these circumstances, he either “erroneously adopted size of the Earth” or “erroneously recalculated distances measured in some local units into stadia which he used in his mapping” (Tupinkova, Schemmel and Geus, 2014, p. 64). This

misinterpret the distance stretched across Central Asian steppes, but it also oversimplified the complexity of the networked Silk Road exchange as a direct link that ran through “Hierapolis across the Euphrates and Tigris, through the old Median capital Ekbatana and the Caspian Gates” to the capital of the Parthian Empire, corresponding to the parallel 36° north of the equator (Berggren and Jones, 2002, p. 152).

This ambiguity, which still troubles modern geographers attempting to recalculate Ptolemy’s coordinates, planted a seed of ambiguity and romance, which was reproduced in further legends, stories and myths, only to emerge as a complex narrative of transcontinental connectivity, where the coexistence of facts and fantasies rendered the Silk Road persuasive, plausible, enduring and plastic. In this context, the earliest memories of the ancient trading routes, just as the visions of the BRI, share certain commonalities, which marry the scientific and technological achievement with a visionary spirit as well as an overwhelming ambiguity. In other words, while connectivity might be used as a common denominator for both the Silk Road and the BRI, it is the allure of progress, science and innovation which, combined with the human curiosity and ambition, constitutes an enduring aesthetic and a dream-like fantasy of interconnected world where frictions, whether political, societal or cultural are limited, if not eradicated, and mutual exchange drives peace, wealth and prosperity.

The Air of Mystique

The Silk Road romance resurfaced along with the announcement of the BRI in 2013, which currently constitutes the single, most direct parallel between the ancient trading routes and

produced numerous errors where, for instance, Baktra, the last station of the route to Stone Tower, was situated by Ptolemy “not only onto a wrong latitude, but also into a wrong valley” (Tupikova, Schemmel and Geus, 2014, p. 16).

China's contemporary geo-vision of transnational connectivity. In other words, the mystique associated with the Silk Road itself was skillfully transferred to the BRI (consciously, or not), which equips it with a degree of plasticity. Just as there exists no comprehensive map of the ancient trading routes (because of the historical inconsistencies), there is no one comprehensive map which would display the entirety of the BRI. In fact, the visual representations of the BRI, presented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the international media, maintain—at best—a complicated relationship with the Silk Road renderings. They both stand in stark contrast and are, at once, surprisingly similar. It is clear that the visions of the BRI exceed both earlier representations and popular imaginings of the Silk Road. The BRI, as imagined and presented by the Chinese state, is of multiple dimensions and iterations; it does not only imply the sea and land routes, but it also indicates equally ambitious and connectivity-enhancing projects, such as the Ice Silk Road, the Digital Silk Road, and the Super Grid, among many others. Additionally, the scope of the BRI is much greater than what the original Silk Road ever was. As seen in many of the BRI visualizations, the initiative aims at connecting China with not just Europe, but also much of Africa, South-East Asia, South America, and even New Zealand.

These visions are also incoherent. The vast majority of them are produced and disseminated by global news media (See Fig. 2; Fig. 3; Fig. 4) and international think tanks (See Fig. 5; Fig. 6). As of today, there is no single official map issued by the Chinese state which would corroborate the accuracy of these interpretations which, as I will later suggest, should be seen as a strategic maneuver of the Chinese government. At the same time, the visions of the BRI, as well as memories of the Silk Road, share unexpected commonalities. One of them is the Oriental-romantic rhetoric, but also the inconsistency of information. Each BRI map has been produced at different times and by different actors, therefore, not fully reflecting the most up-to-date scope of the initiative, the motivations, or realities “on the ground.” Similarly to the ancient silk routes,

the BRI has no official visual blueprint that outlines the initiative in its entirety, which contributes to the overwhelming uncertainty surrounding the initiative and its motivations.

What remains fascinating, however, is the deliberate strategy of the Chinese state to remove the only official interactive map of all BRI projects which ever existed. The map, depicting both completed and projected investments, is no longer to be found on any of China's governmental websites, after it was removed from the China Central Television's website in 2017 (to my estimate),¹⁴ which once provided a relatively transparent platform to navigating the BRI projects, inclusive of the names of stakeholder, funding bodies, the currency of development and even the projected completion timelines. Ironically, this maneuver is very much revealing of the BRI itself – it renders the initiative amorphous and disjointed, which constitutes an ever more direct parallel with the earliest memories of Sino-Western connectivity. Always elusive and nearly mystical, the earliest memories and recollections of the Silk Road have skillfully been absorbed by the Chinese officials into the BRI itself which, refraining from transparency, enables the Chinese state to operationalize its motivations and expectations of such grand venture.

In doing so, the BRI becomes a geo-spatial vision which provides little-to-no indication with regard to where the “New Silk Road” actually begins, or where it ends. This corresponds to the multiplicity of historical impressions, memories and cultural narratives of the ancient silk routes—none of which is linear or straightforward. Therefore, the BRI embraces the spirit of distressing uncertainty – one that is plausible and persuasive to people across cultural borders, but also one which offers little explanation yet does not require explaining. It is an idea that both extends the realm of the national, cultural, or religious boundaries, as well as preserves itself as opaque,

¹⁴ See the press release announcing the official interactive map of all BRI projects. Available at: (<http://www.chinagoabroad.com/en/article/cctv-releases-the-official-belt-and-road-initiative-map>). Accessed: September 2019.

complex and ambiguous. In other words, the Silk Road aesthetic, as embraced by the BRI, evokes the universalizing and cosmopolitan sensibilities as well as Orientalizing, imaginative and fantastical elements.

Whether considering China's shipbuilding or superior navigational skills,¹⁵ or the long-distance transportation of precious commodities, the Silk Road became an emblem of China's international aspirations. Silk, as an icon of interconnected societies as well as a symbol of the political, imperial and commercial power, became a prominent anchor at the moments of early globality, cross-cultural contact and increased commerce to, eventually, equip the Silk Road concept with an enduring spirit of cosmopolitan connectivity. This propensity is grounded in the emergence of cohesive trade infrastructures dating the Han and T'ang Dynasties as well as the

¹⁵ I primarily refer to the figure of Zheng He (1371–1433/1435), a Muslim-born Chinese mariner, explorer and diplomat who commanded and facilitated seven Chinese naval expeditions, nearly a century before the Portuguese reached India. His legacies are a testament of Ming dynasty's wealth, shipbuilding and navigational capacities which were equal to, if not surpassed, any other European maritime achievements (Dreyer, 2006, xi). This instance of China's internationalization "gave Chinese history a place in the oceanic narrative of exploration, trade, colonization, and exercise of sea power" (Dreyer, 2006, p. 165), which exposed the complexities of China's foreign policy during Ming dynasty. Edward Dreyer suggests that Zheng He was never a peaceful explorer because the magnificent sizes of his fleets as well as "too frequent" incidents of fighting prove otherwise (Dreyer, 2006, xii). Instead, Zheng He remains a symbol of Chinese "power projection" along the vast regions of Southeast Asia who were obliged to acknowledge the power and majesty of the Ming Emperor. Edward Dreyer further justifies this point by saying: "This objective required a much greater naval presence than any amount of exploration would have needed. Zheng He's armada was frightening enough that it seldom needed to fight, but being able to fight was its primary mission. This insight helps to explain why Zheng He's ships needed to have their great size and carrying capacity" (Dreyer, 2006, xii). This display of power along the maritime silk routes testifies not only of China's expansionism or early globalism, but it also points to the formation of indomitable national ambition. It is, therefore, at the moments of cross-cultural contact and increased trade connectivity that national ambition is being formed, which often produces national prosperity. This has been demonstrated by commercial projects during the colonial era (Wilson, 2004; Rajagopalan and Desai, 2012), which resulted in a spectacular accumulation of wealth. However, at times, it was not necessarily the connectivity itself, but rather the combined role of institutions, colonial enterprise, resource extraction and technological advancements that allowed certain regions to emerge as a powerful and prosperous civilizations—as it was the case with the West overcoming pre-modern growth constraints during the 19th century (Pomeranz, 2009).

technological advancements of the Ming Dynasty, which represented moments of national ambition and prosperity. It was during such moments when Chinese interest in Silk Road increased.

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that China attempts to “revive” the Silk Road, via the BRI, at the time of its economic and political ascendancy. John King Fairbank once suggested that, historically, China’s accumulation of wealth coincided with the increases of the nation’s self-understanding (Fairbank, 1968). In this context, I suggest that the *New Silk Road*, as appropriated by China, serves this very role today. As a geo-vision that promises commercial and cultural exchange, the BRI signals China’s *worlding*, or rather “representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations” (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 7). This very experience, which utilizes deep past and cultural heritage, allows China to legitimize its position as an increasingly integrated element of the global system, just as it provides the language for the Chinese state to promote its role in (re)shaping the globally networked system of supply chains.

Additionally, the use of explanatory power of history, and by extension – global heritage, to produce justifiable and self-legitimizing futures allows China to sustain a distinct Sinocentric political philosophy. Historically, such a worldview ensured that the “son of Heaven” occupied the pinnacle of the Chinese society, just as China’s self-imagination (especially with regard to its position to the ancient Silk Road) occupied the center of the global history of connectivity. Currently, it allows the Chinese state to successfully describe, promote and legitimate the BRI as a revival of cross-border connectivity in hopes of forging a promise of desirable futures yet to come based on the multiple and endless reinterpretations of the Silk Road’s historical reality. For that reason, Tamara Chin once claimed that “we are heirs to two Silk Roads: not the ancient and the modern, but the invented and the reinvented” (Chin, 2013, p. 194).

Expanding Geopolitical Imagination

It is no surprise that a spatial project like BRI has generated numerous debates concerned with its potential territorial, political, economic, environmental and cultural footprint (Swaine, 2015; Kaczmariski, 2017; Liu and Kim, 2018; Reeves, 2018; Flint and Zhu, 2019; Gong, 2019; Winter, 2019; Fang *et al.*, 2020). While much of the existing scholarly and media discourse agrees on the fact that BRI, as a complex and grandiose socio-political enterprise, could lead to sizable political changes felt right across the globe (Aris, 2016; Djankov and Miner, 2016; Huang, 2016; Hancock, 2017; Miller, 2017; Yu, 2017; Church, 2018; Shan, Nuotio and Zhang, 2018), it is also widely accepted that the political analysis of Chinese contexts occupies a contested space in the modern academy. In addition to the seemingly irreconcilable debate over China's increasingly active foreign policy, many scholars have suggested that the subject of "China" is largely missing from the non-Western studies of geopolitics (Weidong, 2019, p. 94; An, 2020, p. 23). This realization creates further polarity and an imbalance in contemporary geopolitical knowledge. Moreover, the vast majority of scholarship concerned with the BRI tends to focus on its observable physical manifestations, which prompts conclusions about the viability or motivations of the initiative (Rolland, 2017, p. 3), without paying attention to the historical and cultural dimensions of the imaginary upon which the project rests.

Against this background, I am as inspired by the emerging tradition of critical geopolitics which concentrates on the ways in which ideas and discourses are deployed in statecraft (Fouberg, Murphy and De Blij, 2015), as I am grounded in the field of Global Studies which, largely developed after the turn of the twenty-first century, is concerned with understanding the historical and contemporary phenomenon of globalization in all its aspects (Gunn, 2014). Given the global dimensions of the Silk Road as a historical space as well as an enduring cultural concept, I move away from the traditional state-based analysis of international order to better examine the ways

in which the world operates as an interwoven and interactive set of processes and relationships that exist across broad spheres of human experience (inclusive of the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, the religious, the environmental, the legal, the technological, the scientific and the subjective).

Drawing on the romantic myths of the Silk Road and the creative modes of reimagining the twenty-first-century global dynamics, I investigate the ways in which the Silk Road has become an ambient and social aesthetic to be reprised in a larger project of *worlding* China, or rather the experience and the condition of being an inherent part of contemporary globality. In doing so, I pay close attention to the material and textual manifestations of the Silk Road revival to develop an understanding of a distinct form of ambitious power, which successfully manifests itself in the material world as well as promotes, legitimizes and justifies its physical presence globally. To accomplish this task, I employ cross-regional and transdisciplinary perspectives not limited by a single time-frame or nation-state, and a mixed-method approach informed by neo-materialist and Global Studies frameworks, which allow me to “rethink” disciplinary constraints (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017; Gunn, 2015).

Such disciplinary re-thinking takes the form of conceptual blending, where the Silk Road, as an object of the inquiry, also becomes an analytical paradigm that guides us through historic *liaisons routières* (road links) and semantic paths which blend the material and concrete with the symbolic and the metaphoric. In this sense, the Silk Road, as a source of overlapping layers of meaning, serves as a conceptual anchor that opens the analytical aperture into the making and the textualization of global space. Inherently paradoxical (as a material link that both connected and separated two hemispheres), the Silk Road poses a sense of urgency to expand both historical and cultural inquiry into the field of political analysis. It is there, where textualization of physical place (reminiscent of the Silk Road) becomes not only inherently tied to social, political, military, or

economic developments, but it also signals toward a fundamental bond between the material presence of a place and the symbolic meaning of a space (Strassberg, 1994, p. 6; Soja, 1996; Gludovatz, Noth and Rees, 2015), which becomes particularly revealing in a larger political project like the BRI.

The BRI, by attempting to revive the 2000-year-old civilizational order, does not only foster a “rebirth” of the ancient trade infrastructure, but it also positions the succession of President Xi Jinping to the national icons of Emperor Wu of Han, Zhang Qian, Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, and Zheng He. As a heuristic approach and a conceptual lens, the complexity of the Silk Road opens peripheral, scarcely present, or otherwise-disciplined areas of research and analysis into a transdisciplinary inquiry of global connectivity which spans the frontiers of global history, cultural studies, political economy and media studies to uncover the politics of China’s re-presentation as an emerging global power—an investigation that has not yet been undertaken.

While Global Studies is defined as a transdisciplinary field of inquiry that fuses conceptual and analytical perspectives from a variety of disciplines and fields throughout the Social Sciences and the Humanities, it provides a distinctive framework, which ensures that to any given inquiry remains transnational, transdisciplinary, historical and contemporary. More specifically, the field directs us to focus on (1) the analysis of events, processes, ideas and phenomena that cross national boundaries and cultural regions; (2) implementing perspectives that span the traditional disciplines of economic, political, social, cultural, religious or ideological analysis; (3) the analysis of events, trends and processes which antecedents go back centuries, if not millennia; (4) highlighting the contemporary effects global phenomena (Gunn, 2014; Steger and Wahlrab, 2016). In doing so, this inquiry not only draws its methods and conceptual perspectives equally from the Social Sciences and the Humanities, but it also seeks to develop innovative theoretical and methodological approaches to the complex anatomy of a global issue, such as the BRI.

This dissertation accomplishes two goals. First, it positions the civilizational discourse of the Silk Road at the core of the BRI. Second, it maps how the Silk Road's potential for multiple reinterpretations of its historical reality has been repurposed to legitimize China's indomitable global ambitions along with its central position in the world system. To explore this complex set of relationships, I make a case for the *Silk Road Redux*, or a revival of various meanings circulating across infrastructural, technological and multimedia components that began to re-present the development of China's worlding to the rest of the world. In this transdisciplinary exploration of the Silk Road revival, I study the global circulation of the Silk Road idea by considering how the production and the use of Silk Road imagery connects cultural and material objects which bridge geographies and span centuries.

This study, in its historical and geographical scope, is transnational, comparative and conjunctural. It utilizes a diverse body of texts across different contexts, events, and circumstances, which re-present the various elements and components of the Silk Road imaginary. Conducting an in-depth study of texts, blueprints and physical spaces to better understand the BRI, I juxtapose written, material and visual texts to reinstate both culture and history into the center of geopolitical reflection. It is through the examination of the ways in which the BRI is animated that this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that positions geopolitics and grand power dynamics as being continuously re-shaped by cultural, material, spatial and socio-historical arrangements.

While some experts who engaged in analyzing the BRI conjure up an image of infrastructural links and corridors reminiscent of Mackinder's geopolitical pivot, the logic of the BRI is far more tangled and embedded. Maximilian Mayer argues that the classical concept of the "great game" (Brzezinski, 2016), if utilized for further analysis of China's remaking of institutions, space, and political relationships (Zhang and Belgibayev, 2014), is no longer sufficient for two reasons. First,

Eurasia constitutes a potential macro-region which is neither a territorial unit, nor an established concept within the contemporary political imagination.¹⁶ Second, the nature of China's ascendancy remains a conundrum, and the ways in which it may play out on a regional or global scale remains to be an open empirical question (Breslin, 2017; Mayer, 2018). At the same time, one cannot ignore the rhetorical power embedded within the BRI, which does not only deploy the allure of cultural heritage to create an imagined space of cross-cultural friendship, but it also projects China's image as a peaceful and non-interventionist power.

This complexity, as observed through the logic of Silk Road revival, calls for an expansion of the traditional geopolitical imagination,¹⁷ which has recently come under attack (An, 2020). Given the Euro-Western standard for political analysis and geopolitical inquiry (Dodds, 2000; Dalby, 2013), which considers nation-states as “fixed units of sovereign space” and ““containers” of societies” (Agnew, 2007, 2003, 1994, p. 53), I find the “critical” branch of geopolitics, which does

¹⁶ Mayer extrapolates that the connection made between the Silk Road and the BRI is continuously contested by other state actors, such as Russia, which pursues its own plan of intercontinental integration, also known as the Eurasian Economic Union. (Mayer, 2018).

¹⁷ Here, I conceptualize traditional geopolitics as the effects of geo-physical places on politics. Therefore, land as a means of production, becomes a centerstage which allows the process of politics to occur as it allows the economic, political and social power to materialize. Historically, land was considered a universal good due to the widespread benefits it could generate. Seen as a tool to graze cattle, grow crops, and build factories, land allowed individuals to relate to their surrounding (Moore, 2015, p. 7), as well as start conflicts over it. Land soon became a major factor in human affairs (Elden, 2013, p. 1), and an entity which enabled individuals to appropriate and exercise control rights over it (Rousseau, 1992; Locke, 2014). Only in the 1800s, the properties of land, such as the national value of natural resources, were inscribed into theories of international politics guided by two individuals: Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) and Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922). Ratzel, a social Darwinist who was instrumental in shaping German settler colonialism, has laid the foundations for modern-day geopolitik with both works *Politische Geographie* (1897) and “Laws of the Spatial Growth of States” (1896) (Flint, 2016, p. 20). Believing that the state was a force rooted in, and shaped by, natural environment, Ratzel identified both land and sea as “physical pathways” that enabled “territorial expansion and eventual consolidation” of land by securing and expanding the “living space” of growing states in their relentless acquisition of territory and resources (Dodds, 2007, p. 28).

not merely consider geo-physical places as nodes of political life, particularly effective in exploring the ideological and cultural constituents of great powers.¹⁸ Inspired by the scholarship which challenges the dominant geopolitical imagination with the “Subaltern turn” (Sharp, 2011, 2013), the framing of territories as historical entities (Sassen, 2008), and the perception of nations and national histories as fluid processes that are made and remade (Harvey, 1978, p. 101), this inquiry moves away from the material spaces of geopolitical study and into the analysis of imagined spaces and cultural flows (Appadurai, 1990; Soja, 1996; Parker, 1998; Kuus, 2010; Kuus *et al.*, 2013).

Such a conceptualization of geopolitical power—one which is grounded culturally as well as territorially—guides this dissertation. Without devaluing the significance of nation-states, new directions in critical analysis have drawn attention to socially constructed spaces within which spatial and socio-cultural language constructs new collective identities (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996; Massey, 2005). This realization alters the dynamics of modern-day geopolitics and, consequently, calls for new approaches of comprehensive analysis. Critical geopolitics, in particular, positions the analysis of the imagination at the core of its research agenda, along with the study of discourse,

¹⁸ As an early precursor to the cultural turn in geopolitics, Swedish professor of political science, Rudolf Kjellén, refined the organic theory of the state. His newly coined term “geopolitics” emerged from his 1899 writings that analyzed dispositions of continents and the division of states and empires into sea and land powers (Dodds, 2007). As he propagated the idea of states as potent entities which could perpetually grow in strength, Kjellén saw both culture and natural resources as engines of growth as well as instruments of an otherwise integrated notion of power (Marklund, 2015). Since the cultural component of early geopolitics took a eugenic route, the territorial logic became increasingly significant in the next years to come. With time, territory as a new juridico-political category, which always existed in our collective memory (Elden, 2013, p. 5), began to encompass various political scales and historical periods (Gottmann, 1973; Foucault, 1980, p. 68). Gaining momentum as a politico-strategic expression of land control, and differing from space itself (which is a conceptual configuration out of which territory can be generated (Raffestin, 2012, p. 126)), territory allowed for measuring and recognizing terrain as it became a geopolitical and economic category that allowed for its inclusion in the wider circulation of capital (Elden, 2007, p. 17).

narrative and identity formation that occurs in geophysical space (Newman, 1998; Neumann, 2008; Díaz Sanz, 2018). This method, having a strong tradition among human and political geographers, points to the fact that imagination is “too persuasive and important a fact of intellectual life to be left alone to geographers” (Harvey, 1995, p. 161).

In this sense, my dissertation undertakes David Harvey’s plea to demonstrate how individual desires and collective imaginations have the capacity to become rooted in socio-political life. Because of that potentiality, I consider the act of imagining an inherently political process. Writing on the very question of collective imagination, Arjun Appadurai once suggested that it would be a futile effort to comprehend the processes of globalization in all of its totality without the universal capacity of collectively imagining the world as a global space:

The imagination is no longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: It allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries. This view of the role of the imagination as a popular, social, collective fact in the era of globalization recognizes its split character. On the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled—by states, markets, and other powerful interests. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge.

(Appadurai, 2000, p. 6)

Following Appadurai, I view this inquiry into a political project, which scope at once global and local, contemporary and historical, material and imaginary, lies less in line with geographical

tradition, and more in reference to the convention of “geo-graphing,” which is shaped by political actors who often “seize space and organize it to fit their own cultural visions and material interests” (Tuathail and Toal, 1996, p. 2). In doing so, the materiality of geophysical space and the immateriality of culture, symbol and meaning become intrinsic parts of imaginary geographies of international politics that are subjectively produced by political actors, statecraft intellectuals and institutions which impact both foreign and strategic policies (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). By doing so, I aim at expanding the geopolitical imagination and, consequently, the horizon of the contemporary inquiry into global phenomena, such as the BRI, to illuminate the ways in which object of the analysis “has control over texts, knits them into narratives, and thus turns them into a vehicle through which it exercises power” (Müller, 2008, p. 328).

The Road Ahead

In the following pages, I combine Global History, Geopolitics, Critical Infrastructure, Cultural, Urban, Development and Media Studies to trace and describe the unquestioned basis of the Silk Road as an enlivening historical concept. This, in turn, allows me to suggest that conversations about China’s rising power miss the complexity of its peculiar diplomacy, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, I ask: *Why, and how, does China wish to revive the ancient Silk Road? And, what implications does this dream carry for the world, and our understanding of geopolitical, socioeconomic and techno-logistical global entanglements?* To answer these questions, I make a two-fold argument.

First, I suggest that the extent of the BRI can only be grasped if it is analyzed through its antecedent – the Silk Road. To accomplish this, I suggest that it is necessary to redirect the common understanding of the Silk Road as a historical site into a narrativized and archetypal, yet

nonlinear, irregular and complex, flow of meanings. Therefore, in order to understand the *why* of the Silk Road Redux, I position the Silk Road as an icon of cosmopolitan worldliness which, historically, tended to reemerge at various moments of extraordinary globality, thus acquiring properties of a cultural imaginary which potentiality (grounded in civilizational rhetoric and the logic of global heritage and cross-cultural connectivity) not only opens the possibility of a desirable future yet to come, but also creates a space for itself to be utilized as a political and neoliberal tool of territorial engineering, empire building, nation making, and history writing.

Promoted through a series of trade, development and territorial engineering projects, as well as the language of connectivity, global cultural heritage and harmony, the BRI offers a seductive fantasy of utopian globalization where the future prevails on the logic of a frictionless, peaceful and cooperative world order. In this sense, the global cultural imaginary of the Silk Road, which animates the BRI, allows the Chinese state to, both ideologically and materially, describe, legitimate and justify its ambitious undertaking. Paying close attention to the material and textual manifestations of the Silk Road revival, both historically and contemporarily, I suggest that the methods and means of China's Silk Road Redux render the People's Republic of China a distinct form of *ambitious* power. In this sense, the Silk Road has become an ambient and social aesthetic to be reprised in a larger project of worlding China, which allows the state's ambitions to be manifested in the material world as well as promoted, legitimized and justified through their physical presence globally. This understanding allows me to enter the conversations about China's rising political, economic and cultural prominence in the global system, without necessarily supporting either the Western or the CCP-centric logic.

Second, to evaluate the implications of the dreams embedded within and promoted through the Silk Road Redux, I further interrogate the BRI's open design which, through its financial scale, timescale and the scope of its implementation, remains as opaque as the earliest memories,

historical inconsistencies and the rhetorical mode embedded within the Silk Road idea itself. By considering the BRI's inherent spatial cartography, I analyze the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity, which allows me to position it as an amorphous, yet largely coherent, geo-vision which, animated by the memories of deep antiquity, is in fact a constantly evolving political mechanism of spatial reconfiguration. This very insight does not only shed more light on the BRI as a global utopia that is legitimated with spatial imaginations, drives and ambitions, but it also uncovers a deeply embedded mechanism that carries profound implications for the world, and our understanding of geopolitical, socioeconomic and techno-logistical global entanglements.

By consulting critical interdisciplinary perspectives, I locate plasticity as an inherent feature of the BRI which does not only borrow its mythic and amorphous nature from the Silk Road imaginary, but it also replicates its allure of cross-cultural connectivity by pushing the limits of the "political" as we know it. I further suggest that the malleability of both the Silk Road and the BRI provides new optics to better understand the socio-political, economic and cultural forces at play in the making of the BRI. In other words, I offer a glimpse into a flexible form of space-making, where the uniquely liquid power electrifies the political project of space-making and equips the state with tools to navigate the fractured and deterritorialized global reality in the pursuit of its geopolitical and geo-economic objectives. At the same time, Silk Road's plasticity affords multiple diffused interpretations and agencies, which can engage in an opportunity of judgement, action and rejection. All of the sudden, the pastoral image of the Silk Road landscape becomes a real-world laboratory, which attempts to displace concerns over power asymmetries or uneven relations within the BRI framework with the rhetoric of cosmopolitan globality that uses the allure of premodern cross-cultural heritage and cross-border connectivity.

Each part of the argument is weaved into the body of this dissertation, which is composed of four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter I focuses on the “Silk Road” before the *Silk Road*, or rather the various ways in which divergent ideas, meanings and memories of both worldliness and premodern connectivity formed a collective dream that connected vast geographies and survived centuries, only to be revived and repurposed with the announcement of the BRI. It is there, where I attend to the BRI’s antecedent to explore the vision of worldliness as well as the dream of a prosperous and peaceful co-existence which is deeply embedded in China’s BRI, also labelled as the “project of the century.”

Chapter II interrogates the emergence of the Silk Road idea and its consequential journey into becoming an enduring cultural imaginary. By tracing the birth of the concept at the crossroads of techno-scientific blueprints and fantastical myths, I sketch the history of the Silk Road idea that moved across global circuits of geological knowledge to become a vision of a united and prosperous humanity yet to come. Grounded in geological imagination paved with steel and coal, this chapter maps the invention of the Silk Road imaginary, and its early movement across time and space. Chapter III continues where the Chapter II left off by tracing the circulation of the Silk Road imaginary’s vast geographies that allowed it to become an enlivening historical concept and a cross-cultural imaginary. Following the Eastward flow of geo-economic logic to China, this chapter concentrates on the Westward movement of the Silk Road idea, its re-articulation as well as its return to China to demonstrate the ways in which the widespread circulation of the term transformed it into a popular icon of cosmopolitan connectivity.

Chapter IV shifts the focus to the Belt and Road Initiative and frames it as a visionary foreign policy of the Chinese state. To better comprehend its spatial cartography, this chapter does not develop a series of hypotheses around individual BRI projects, but rather considers the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity.

Here, I suggest that the amorphous, yet largely coherent, geo-vision of the BRI transforms vast Eurasian space into abstract and malleable landscape. Animated by the Silk Road imaginary, BRI becomes a project of spatial reconfiguration which produces a global utopia that is legitimated with spatial imaginations, drives and ambitions. The Epilogue serves the role of both supplementing the dissertation's argument as well as expanding on the scholarly conversation of BRI's opaque nature. It is there, where I suggest that the elastic vision of cross-cultural connectivity, as encapsulated by the BRI, necessitates an approach which does not deprioritize the plasticity of objects of social scientific or humanistic inquiry. Seeking guidance from the fields of medical humanities and architecture to better conceptualize the malleable political mechanism represented by the BRI, I suggest that the plasticity of the initiative both provides new optics to capture the socio-political, economic and cultural forces at play and well as invites further research into the plasticity of the BRI framework.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the argument, specifically the Silk Road positioned as a global cultural imaginary and the repercussions of BRI's malleable political mechanism, which offers a unique opportunity to better understand modern China as a rising and distinctively ambitious global power.

I. The Silk Road and its Worldliness

Rooted in in the imaginations and desires of exploring the world beyond one's immediate cultural or ethnic borders, the Silk Road became a historically-enduring and globally-shared concept that fuses facts with fabrication to produce a distinct logic of world-imagining and world-making. Prior to being named as such, as well as providing a discursive coherence, Silk Road was, at best, a set of collective desires, dreams and imaginings, which would then circulate under one name and, eventually, become an enduring global imaginary. In this chapter, I focus on the "Silk Road" before the *Silk Road*, or rather the various ways in which divergent ideas, meanings and memories of both worldliness and premodern connectivity formed a collective dream that connected vast geographies and survived centuries, only to be revived and repurposed with the announcement of the BRI. By excavating the spirit of intersecting realities and myths, I lay ground for the timeless geo-imagination to materialize. Attending to its antecedents as well as material articulations and tangential expressions, I explore the vision of worldliness which paints a dream of a prosperous and peaceful co-existence by relying on the intrinsic human desires for a better future yet to come.

Steering China's Future by Rewriting the Past

Waiting to be tucked in bed, a little Caucasian girl asks her father why he would be gone for the next few days. "I'm going to attend a forum on the Belt and Road Initiative," he enthusiastically responds. "What's that?" she asks, as the father walks over, sits on her bed, and begins a bedtime story accompanied with an unfolded world map and miniature ship and camel

toys. This is how the state-controlled *China Daily* opens its first English-language video series released in 2017. Over the course of five videos known as “bedtime stories,” the girl learns about the benefits of globalization as he father praises China’s contributions to the world since early antiquity. While the videos are rife with awkward conversations, such as when the girl wishes the world could see how Xi Jinping plans to restore China’s legacy, they also offer a glimpse into a political mechanism that aggressively promotes the Belt and Road Initiative to the world.

The BRI represents a contested and unparalleled vision of global connectivity. In the wake of profound and longstanding economic and financial crises, inclusive of humanitarian disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese government has committed to dedicating a substantial amount of resources to revive the ancient Silk Road by (re)connecting more than 60% of the world’s population with a total investment estimated ranging from \$1 to \$8 trillion (World Bank, 2018). The plan to build a complex network of physical infrastructures has already been estimated to account for at least one third of the global trade (Hillman, 2018). However, what remains more striking is the visionary dream of global cooperation, unfettered prosperity and reciprocal engagement, which the Chinese state is projecting in times defined by a growing disbelief in globalization (especially in the context of the European project and the inward-looking turn exemplified by the Trump Administration).

In China, the BRI celebrates Xi for reviving the country’s historic significance globally. These messages, which appear in the political speeches as well as the state propaganda, highlight the parallels between the BRI and the ancient Silk Road, and suggest a revival of the old, morally superior international order (Freyman, 2021, p. 19). By projecting harmony among nation-states, the Chinese state portrays Xi as a visionary leader who is capable of restoring China’s rightful place in the global system, while benefiting the world – just as it was the case during the Silk Road times. The “bedtime stories” provide just one example of the extensive propaganda machine

deployed to introduce the world to the peaceful rise of China as a worldly power which promotes fair globalization, free trade, and peaceful co-existence.

At home, this mechanism deploys a more authoritative voice in justifying and legitimizing the BRI to its citizens and state-owned enterprises. In a documentary series entitled “One Belt One Road,” which aired on China Central Television (CCTV) in 2016, we can experience one of the most audacious tools deployed to provide guidance and educate both the Chinese citizens as well as the bureaucracies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), local governments and the state-owned enterprises on the benefits of the global vision embedded in the BRI. The series, featuring a range of interviews with world leaders, such as Vladimir Putin, Henry Kissinger or Kevin Rudd, reassures its viewers that the Silk Road marked the peak of China’s imperial glory, and that President Xi stands at the forefront of a historical transformation as he attempts to revive it. The central argument of this domestic propaganda attempts to persuade that the Silk Road spirit enabled China’s neighbors to prosper in the past. Therefore, it is now the time that China would use its economic position to, once again, assist its neighbors, and reclaim the country’s lost status by reviving the ancient worldliness reminiscent of the Silk Road times.

Such messages portray China as the leader of the developing world, whose duty is to become a global supplier of public goods as well as a provider of technology and capital markets. As the propaganda convinces us that the BRI can resolve inequalities and conflicts that emerged from the rise of the West, it amplifies the importance of worldly values, such as cross-border friendship, cooperation and unlimited economic growth. Such messages are not an empty rhetoric. Instead, they mirror the steps taken by the Propaganda Department of the CCP to weave its interpretation of a worldly past (and future) into the society’s fabric, beyond the spectacle of infrastructure building.

Since Xi took office in 2013, there have been numerous country-wide attempts to rewrite the history of the Silk Road, which have become most pronounced in the school textbooks (Freyman, 2021). These changes to the curriculum tend to support the narrative deployed by the BRI which implicitly glorifies Xi's foreign policy. More specifically, the historical revisions position the Silk Road as a strategic initiative developed, solely, by the Chinese Emperor, Han Wudi who, allegedly, did not only commission the Silk Road but also created an extensive maritime network (Maritime Silk Road) to ensure China's prosperity and win the friendship of foreign states (Freyman, 2021). These claims are historically weak, at best. Yet their purpose is not to retell the ancient past, but rather to rewrite it more closely in parallel with Xi's BRI concept. While the 2001 textbooks, analyzed by Freyman, mentioned the largely bloody story of Xinjiang's integration into China, their updated versions from 2016 (three years after BRI was announced) gloss over such historical facts and focus on the peaceful communication between the Chinese and foreign civilizations (Freyman, 2021, p. 31).

This "flagrant disregard for historical accuracy" (Freyman, 2021, p. 20) is just another signal of legitimating Xi's reign as a successor of Emperor Han Wudi. However, it also points to a larger issue of historical narrativization deployed for political means. Han Wudi remains the central figure in the epic entitled *Records of the Grand Historian* (c. 91 B.C.), which documented his order for Zhang Qian (ambassador to the world outside of China) to search for military alliance in the Western Regions (modern-day Xinjiang and Central Asia) in 138 B.C.E. (Li, 1999). As the first-recorded official contact between a Chinese dynasty and the "West," the figure of Zhang Qian would become a frequent reference for the premodern connectivity. Such messaging would extend beyond the history textbooks and frame Zhang Qian as the "founder of the Silk Road" during official political events, such as when President Xi Jinping introduced Zhang as the

“friendly emissary” on a “mission of peace” at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Billman, 2021).

In spite of this veneer of historical accuracy that has meticulously been deployed in the nation-making efforts, Zhang Qian is not the founder of the Silk Road. Yet, in China, he is considered a domestic hero, and his legacies are said to be responsible for initiating contact with the West as well as opening China to the world of international exchange. As we will explore further, nothing could be more erroneous. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the scientific research concerned with the origins of the East-West contact concluded that such forms of exchange may have emerged prior to the Qin period (221–206 B.C.E.), most likely in the early prehistoric Bronze Age (3300 B.C. – 1200 B.C.) (Li, 1999). In the mid-1980s it became clear that the first forms of contact between the East and the West began in approximately 2000 B.C. Following archeological excavations in the Xinjiang Province, scientists discovered “Mongoloid” and “Europoid” bone structures dating 1300 B.C., which were subsequently corroborated with European-specific mitochondrial DNA found at the site (Li, 1999; BBC, 2016). It was then, when researchers began to agree that the physical and cultural contact between the two hemispheres predates the advent and the expansion of international trade as we know it (Met, 2000), or at least are told by the Chinese textbooks.

If the Sino-Western contact (and, by extension, the Silk Road exchange) did not, in fact, begin with Zhang Qian, or with the rise of Roman, Parthian, Kushan, Xiongnu, or Han empires in the first century B.C. (as some claim), we may ask: What did, in fact, spark an increased interest in cross-regional connectivity that led to these forms of primordial contact and exchange? The most rational explanation points us to the natural instincts of early humans that led them to search for new lands or water sources (Fraser, 2010; Ferrante, 2012; Dartnell, 2019). Yet, we must also consider that humans are as much herd animals as they are *imagining species* whose survival has, to

a large extent, depended on their ability to think, feel and imagine. In spite of strenuous travel and imperfect geography, people on both sides of the Meridian, undoubtedly, did not stop dreaming about what lied beyond their frontiers. That is why the capacity to dream, as well as to deploy imagination as means of creating the present and the future, lies at the center of this dissertation.

Pathways of Desire

To look at the BRI in the isolation of individual projects or through the prism of one state's propaganda is to miss the larger context. The BRI, apart from its large size and ever-broadening scope, encapsulates a distinct form of transnational imagination, which does not project a brave new world, but rather signals the revival of a interrupted history. Since the historic Bandung Conference of 1955, the desire to renew the ancient, trans-civilizational and Afro-Asian history has occupied the center of the anti-colonial discourse. Grounded in the notion of South-South (and South-East) cooperation, the BRI taps into the rhetoric of renewal, which once positioned Asia and Africa as "the cradle of great religions and civilizations [that] have enriched other cultures and civilizations while themselves being enriched in the process" (Senate, 1956, p. 166).

Similarly to the Bandung diplomacy seventy years ago, the BRI becomes akin to a global political movement that, intentionally or not, challenges the Global North-dominated political and economic system. Following the decolonization movement (1945-), countries of the Global South, advocated for both economic and cultural cooperation, human rights and the promotion of world peace to challenge the deepening global inequality as well as their economic and political dependence on the Global North (Appadorai, 1955, p. 232; Braveboy-Wagner, 2009, p. 13). Today, a similar logic takes hold. What once was a collective ambition to establish a new

cooperative world order, is currently being reflected with the emergence of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (whose mission is to “foster sustainable economic development in Asia” and promote “deep integration” of China’s economy into the global system (Lessambo, 2021; Rosefielde and Mills, 2021, p. 251)), and by the BRICS’ (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) New Development Bank, which aims to fulfill the “need to simultaneously achieve growth, inclusiveness, protection and preservation” (de Siqueira Duarte, 2019, p. 92).

Such efforts to better address the needs of the developing world stem from the refusal of the current hegemonic order that was engineered by the financial institutions, instruments and development schemes imposed by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). BRI, therefore, continues the tradition of challenging the status quo and, simultaneously, positioning China at the forefront of the international economic order. China’s new institutional arms emerge along with a broader discourse of inclusive “Asian Community of Shared Destiny” and the “World Community of Shared Future” to promote two large national agendas: the “China Dream” and “Made in China 2025.” They, in turn, have become particularly evocative of how China conceptualizes itself, and what vision it carries for the world. In this context, when looking beyond the official discourse, state propaganda or the new institutional infrastructure, it is necessary to pay attention to the cultural, historical and ethical aspects of China’s emerging global stance.

The BRI serves a particularly illustrative case because its allusions to deep antiquity are used to define the currency and the fate of the initiative which, in turn, promises to connect two-thirds of the world population. While much is to be said about the goals and motivations of the BRI, the very desire to create an ambitious future grounded in the past, which remains at the core of the BRI, has guided humans through much of the history. In an increasingly hyper-connected world, it is enticing to assume that the ancient past, which the BRI repurposes, was much different

from the present. One thinks of crude ways and sedentary communities, where people rarely ventured beyond their familiar confines. Indeed, the Mediterranean prehistory partially confirms that with the accounts of farms and hamlets that dominated the settlement record (Whitelaw, 2017, p. 118), which did not necessarily indicate any concrete forms of long-distance mobility (Clifford, 1997).

At the same time, anthropologists remind us that people, as herd animals, have always had the tendency to seek and forge new pathways and connections across vast geographies as means of making sense of the world (Gräslund, 2005). This inherent human desire to explore and to connect with the unknown has become a near-universal feature of many of the world's cultures and religions. For example, the Zoroastrians spoke of the paths of enhancement, the ancient Hindus referred to three *margas* (paths) of spiritual liberation, and the Christians saw moving across ancient paths as a way of finding one's soul (Moor, 2016, p. 14). Whether uniquely enabling or constraining, such forms of physical movement and spiritual connectivity expose the distinctive human desires to collapse space and circumvent proximity.

Such acts of desire to conquer both geophysical and metaphysical space, as well as command the future, find a direct parallel with the sudden expansion of the European activities on land and sea in the fifteenth century. It was at that time, when the yearning for the unknown was also accompanied with an ambition to extract, and even subjugate, whatever stood on the way. In this sense, the European colonial project saw connection through the means of expansion, or aspiration, to build "shortcuts" to the trading centers of East and South Asia in hopes of minimizing travel time and the risks of financial losses (Dünne, 2011). Yet, with time, these vast sea routes and road links, enabled and paved by slave labor, gained great historical and cultural significance. It is perhaps for that reason that Fernand Braudel once emphasized "the importance of road links" for being "the infrastructure of any coherent story," including that of global history

(Braudel, 1995, p. 282), while Peter Frankopan referred to transcontinental links as essential threads in both conceptualizing and shifting the “world’s center of gravity” (Frankopan, 2015, p. 493).

Indeed, the importance of *liaisons routières* (road links) cannot be overstated as semantic paths that provided texture to world’s cultures. Countless legends narrate curious stories of foreign lands mixed with the dreams of better futures through the use of road links and journeys that promised eternal riches. Whether we speak of *Hermes*, the ancient Greek god of trade, wealth and luck; *Janus*, the Roman god of new beginnings; *Chimata-no-kami*, the Japanese goddesses of innumerable roads; or *K’uei-Hsing*, the Chinese god of travelers, the yearning for faraway places remains as ancient as humanity itself. The Anglophone world calls the products of such *wayfinding* “desire paths”¹⁹ (Moor, 2016, p. 20), or physical connections and pathways established as a result of an ongoing and reoccurring traffic, which highlights the continuous sense of desiring while orienting oneself in the geophysical space.

Such forms of spatial connectivity, which become historically significant, point us to one of the earliest and most notable roads of all – the Silk Road. Usually referred to as the icon of commercial and cultural exchange that connected the major civilizations of Asia, Europe, and Africa more than two millennia ago, the Silk Road has never been a static concept. As a network of transcontinental connections (Barisitz, 2017b, p. 10), its geographical scope as well as its meaning shifted depending on circumstances. At times, the ancient trading routes symbolized conquest and divide. Other times, they pointed toward increased connectivity through

¹⁹ languages have grown to reflect the fact that humans, among other mammals, have been striving to forge new paths to access or experience faraway lands. The Japanese speak of *kemonomichi*, or beast trails; the French call them *chemin de l’âne*, or donkey paths; the Anglophone world calls them *desire paths*.

burgeoning trade, or the spread of disease.²⁰ Even today, the Silk Road evokes several divergent images of the Sino-Western encounter.

The first one, nearly universal, projects the impressions of merchants on camels selling Chinese silks and Indian spices at Arabian markets.²¹ The other one, common in China and India, portrays Buddhist pilgrims traveling along the ancient trading routes, sometimes with the company of a monk and an acrobatic monkey.²² The final impression is akin to European fiction which produced images of Western adventurers who embark on journeys across deserts seeking prizes and “Oriental” women. No matter the representation, the notion of the Silk Road has always crossbred deep history with imaginative fiction. Such diverse and, at times, conflicting ways of documenting and imagining Sino-Western exchange testify of the fact that the interpenetration of Western and Eastern cultures was not just material, but also symbolic.

In other words, the materiality of documented commercial, religious and diplomatic missions along the silk routes were accompanied, and would have not been possible, without the mutual

²⁰ Here, I refer to the most widely-spread disease by the Silk Road trade, namely the “Black Death,” or the bubonic plague. Black Death originated Southeast Asia and is now estimated to have killed one third of the entire population of both China and Europe in the fourteenth century (Barisitz, 2017a, pp. 10–11). Another disease that spread along the Silk Road was small pox, which was brought to India from Egypt (Fenner *et al.*, 1988, pp. 210–211).

²¹ While romanticized image, the “road” mostly traded low-weight, low-bulk, high-value goods, due to the high transportation cost and favorable transport conditions (Barisitz, 2017a, pp. 10–11). Chinese silk was one among many of the low-weight and high-value commodities. Since silk was easy to transport, it became an icon of the Silk Road trade. In addition to silk, the “road” provided a way to trade other luxury goods such as “brocade, embroidery, paper, precious metals, carpets, apparel, glass, horses, and slaves.” Bulkier goods included “grain, olive oil, other preserved foodstuffs, wax, lumber, textiles, and manufactured goods” (Barisitz, 2017a, pp. 10–11).

²² Here, I refer to the *Journey to the West*, the 16th-century novel attributed to Wu Cheng'en, which is regarded as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. The novel tells the story of a pilgrimage of a Buddhist monk named Xuanzang, who travelled to the “Western Regions” to obtain Buddhist texts.

desire of peoples on both sides of the Meridian to imagine the worlds beyond their ethnic or cultural frontiers. This form of worldly imagination, although existing since the beginnings of time, only intensified with imperial expansion. Historical documents demonstrate that Western expeditions to China (and Central Asia) before the thirteenth century were rather rare,²³ and only intensified at the turn of the fourteenth century due to the growth of the Mongol Empire (Steinmetz, 2008; Friedman and Figg, 2013). At the same time, little-to-no attention was devoted within the Anglo-American academy to the fact that the ancient Chinese dreamed of reaching the faraway (Western) lands long before the peak of Silk Road's commercial exchange. This form of dreaming preceded the comprehensive documentation of cross-cultural contact (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 27), as well as the very moment when the term Silk Road entered the popular discourse (See Chapter II).²⁴

To uncover the remnants of the Sino-Western contact, both traditional historians and archeologists of the ancient world usually directed our attention to the images of Buddha found in the Kongwangshan cliffs in Jiangsu Province (Fig. 7) or to the mural at the Thousand Buddha Grottoes in Dunhuang, which depict ancient faith infrastructures and Tang Buddhist monasteries at sacred Mount Wutai in the Shanxi province. Both artifacts embody iconic imagery inclusive of tribute missions from Hunan (Fig. 8), and the journeys of pilgrims departing for Buddhist scriptures (Fig. 9), which have rendered their sites significant constituents of global cultural heritage (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 30). However, it is only when we supplement our historical analysis with the cultural reading of symbols and signs that we become capable of seeing beyond

²³ Some of the rare examples include the figure of Euthydemus I, Hellenistic ruler of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom in Central Asia, who supposedly led an expedition into the Tarim Basin (modern-day Xinjiang, China) in search of precious metals during the 3rd century BC.

²⁴ See Appendix A: Travelers Along the Silk Routes.

the ancient tokens of movement and exchange into the imagined worlds of cross-cultural connectivity.

Imagined Geographies of Cross-Cultural Connectivity

Before it acquired a name, and before it became the story of ultimate progress of human civilization, the “Silk Road” absorbed ambitious dreams of prosperity, opportunity and peaceful relations to become an all-encompassing story of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” (Islam, 2019, p. 26). Yet, in spite of its seeming cohesiveness, the Silk Road could not have been more disjunctured. In fact, it is best understood as a web of overlapping layers of meaning, which mixes the actual and material aspects with the imagined, symbolic and visual elements to produce an enduring cultural concept.

Its first cartographic illustration dating the late fourteenth century, also known as the *Catalan Atlas*, is a testament to the concept’s plasticity. It is in this representation, where we clearly see the convergence of both authentic and playful impressions of the Silk Road as they create an extraordinary portrait of the ancient silk routes (Fig. 10).²⁵ This amorphous and multilayered

²⁵ Here, I refer to fantastical and authentic elements—seen in both portrayal of travel routes and historical figures as well as the images of whimsical monsters and demons in the Catalan Atlas. It is there, where divergent impressions—both authentic, actual, and historical as well as playful, fantastical and extraordinary—not only sketch the earliest travel routes through the maze of exotic animals, supernatural creatures, commercial exchanges, demons, battles and faraway lands, but also embrace the fact that the Silk Road history has never been structured or linearly arranged. In the late 14th century, Abraham Cresques (1325-1387) a master map-maker, incorporated both fantastical images, established knowledge, legends and accounts of travelers (including Marco Polo) into a map that is the earliest known illustration of what we currently understand as the Silk Road. The map appeared as the Catalan Atlas in c. 1375, which was produced as a gift for the 13-year-old King Charles VI of France. Also known as Mappa Mundi (or Mapamondi), the medieval European map of the world is considered the most important map of the medieval period in the Catalan language. A vivid example to consider is the figure of Alexander the Great pointing at the devil while an angel is playing a trumpet, or Kublai Khan, a

vision of the historical reality is not accidental. Rather, I suggest, it constitutes the foundation of the Silk Road aesthetic, which I understand as a complex arrangement of ideas and meanings about the Sino-Western encounter that survived centuries only to be repurposed in both the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Since the roots of Silk Road's multilayered image lie in the cross-cultural capacity to imagine (or to represent the promise or times other than the actual), its essence is best exemplified with the earliest recorded experience of such occurrence, namely an ancient folk tale about the journey of a Chinese emperor along the silk routes known as the *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven* (c. 281 C.E.).

First discovered as a manuscript in the 296 B.C., and later re-written as a cohesive tale in 281 C.E. during the Chin (Jin) Empire,²⁶ the legend of King Mu pioneered the ways in which the ancient trade routes are imagined (and remembered) by embracing the duality of imaginative and empirical modes of visualizing the worlds beyond. The tale traces the journey of King Mu, the fifth king of the Zhou dynasty (976–922 B.C. or 956–918 B.C.), who desired to achieve the unattainable wealth – immortality. Presented as a nuanced travelogue that documents his travels to the Western lands, the tale shows Mu's determination to reach the crossroads of Eastern and

grandson of Genghis Khan, being playfully pictured in an upside-down position (Fig. 11) (Nebenzahl, 2004).

²⁶ Chin (Jin) dynasty (266 to 420) is interesting in a way that it comprised of two distinct phases, namely the Xi (Western) Jin, ruling China from CE 265 to 316/317 as well as the Dong (Eastern) Jin, which ruled China from CE 317 to 420. In this manner, it symbolically reflects the divergence between the “West” and the “East” until 265 CE when Sima prince (also posthumously known as Wudi) established one of the earliest legal codes and reunited China under one monarch. Historians claim that his fame stems from the fact that he received envoys from as far away as Rome, and much research suggests that Buddhist philosophy, art, and architecture influenced this dynasty's culture. Additionally, Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an – symbolically tied to the Silk Road imagery) was a capital of the Jin Empire during 312–316.

Western lands known as the Kingdom of Kunlun.²⁷ It is there, where Mu encounters the Queen Mother of the West,²⁸ who guards the “peaches of immortality” – a symbol usually associated with the many wonders found in Western lands.²⁹

While the Western Mother and the Silk Road have rarely been discussed together, the crosspollination of symbolism associated with transregional connectivity and the wonders of cross-cultural exchange cannot be left unnoticed.³⁰ As the story goes, the Queen Mother – who symbolizes prosperity, longevity, and eternal bliss (K. Wu, 2015, p. 137) – received 400 pieces of silk from Mu, which she then traded with the communities in the Arab world as well as Africa.

²⁷ Kunlun here could refer to both the Kunlun Mountains the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau south of the Tarim Basin, and the Kunlun representing a mountain or a mountain range in classical Chinese mythology which symbolizes axis mundi and divinity.

²⁸ As *The Tale* tells us, the Queen Mother of the West, appears in a rather ambiguous figure of Si Wang-mu peoples. According to Eitel, this reference implies a woman whose name derives from a non-Chinese language (Eitel, 1888). While the ancient text does not indicate whether Si Wang-mu was a woman, the figure of Si Wang-mu is re-appropriated as a character in Orson Scott Card’s *Xenocide* and *Children of the Mind* as God-touched and God-spoken maid, named after the Queen Mother of the West (Card, 2002, 2009)

²⁹ The Peaches of Immortality are strikingly similar to the motif of Golden Peaches, which occupies a special place in Chinese cultural history. Having reviewed the rich portrait of the T’ang Dynasty (618—907), Edward Schafer deconstructs the idea that an appetite for foreign commodities was a strictly European phenomenon as he stresses that the imperial court frequently received gifts of yellow peaches from the kingdom of Samarkand. This commodity, just as silk for Europeans, shaped the ways in which China imagined itself during the age of contest and expansionism through robust sense of nationalism and “exoticism” (Schafer, 1963, p. 26).

³⁰ Depicted on a pottery tomb found in Sichuan (Fig. 12), the Queen Mother of the West is one of many cultural signs that move across material spaces and reveal an otherwise invisible layer of historical reality. Through its rich symbolism, the figure itself expresses a motherly image as well as an allegory of possibility grounded in the imagined and lived experiences from the crossroads of the East and the West. Historians trace the inscriptions of “Western Mother” to the ancient times, even prior to the inception of Taoism (before the 15th century BC), when as a mythological-religious icon she was worshipped in China and the neighboring countries. The cross-regional nature of this imagery grew in popularity during the Han Dynasty in the 2nd century BC, which coincided with the growth of the empire as well as the burgeoning Silk Road trade (Mair, 2006; Pregadio, 2013, p. 94).

This fabled form of commercial exchange placed trade at the heart of the Sino-Western contact as well as opened up a precedent for a distinct form of dreaming that highlighted the world beyond China's ethnic borders (iNews, 2022). In this way, the figure of the Western Mother does not only symbolize the collective imagination of the possibilities kept out of sight, but it also encompasses the rich imagery of Western landscapes which, described as "wild" but "pacifying" and "tranquil," gesture toward eternal riches, peace, cooperation, openness and mutual benefit – values not at odds with the Confucian teachings.

As one of the earliest Chinese fantasies of the West, the enchanting image of Queen Mother of the West does not only symbolize the dreams of cross-cultural encounter, but it also signals an evolving cosmopolitan spirit that intensified during the times when imperial attempts of ethnic preservation clashed with the richness of its multiethnic and multicultural T'ang empire. This inherent contradiction of cosmopolitan yet uninviting empire, and wild yet tranquil West, reflective of the real and imagined accounts of history, provided a foundation the nation-making efforts in China that were grounded in "the contrast between Self and [the] Other"³¹ (Abramson, 2008, p. 23). These sentiments also provide us with a testimony of diverse cultures, peoples and ethnicities which co-existed in a largely imagined social structure that was later systematized under the Tianxia doctrine to guide China's interactions with the world.

³¹ According to Abramson, various communities including Confucian elites and Buddhist monks as well as "barbarians" were involved in the process. To him, T'ang court wished to incorporate foreign peoples but also aspired to preserve the integrity of Han Chinese. This created "the distinction between humanity on the one hand and barbarity and bestiality on the other was often seen in terms of culture and education" of the Other, writes Abramson. The Han elites viewed cultural practices of the non-Han, such as the people of the steppes, or Central Asians, as animal-like, such as the practice of tattooing. They were frequently referred to as possessing "faces of men and hearts of beasts" which can be tracked to the sources dating back to the first millennium B.C.E. (Abramson, 2008, p. 27).

Following the peak of the commercial exchange during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) (Park, 2012), the T'ang period (618 C.E.—907 C.E.) exemplified an increased interest in the world outside of the Chinese empire, which coincided with the growing transregional commerce. At the time, the Silk Road did not carry its contemporary name. However, the imperial court claimed it as “Chinese” (*The Story of China with Michael Wood*, 2016). It was also then, when the Chinese city of Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) became the center of ancient connectivity since it was considered to be “the seat of power for the Tang imperial court,” as well as “a pulsing hub of art, fashion, and culture” (Colburn Clydesdale, 2009).

During the vividly syncretic period, the T'ang empire became both an origin and a destination for pilgrims,³² as well as the heart of commercial circulation of goods, long-distance shipments of commodities and various forms of exotica (Colburn Clydesdale, 2009).³³ While the newly appropriated trade infrastructure began to serve as an Occidental fantasy, and a justification of imperial control at home,³⁴ the desire for exploration and the appetite for foreign lands was never

³² The most notable was Ennin, who arrived from Japan in 838 (Cotterell, 2008). But it was also a departure point for Buddhist pilgrims who travelled along the trade routes. The most notable was a Chinese monk named Xuanzang (ca. 602–664), who, in rebellion to Taizong's (the T'ang Emperor) outlawing of travel beyond China, left the vibrant center of commerce Chang'an (modern Xi'an) toward India in the quest of holy Buddhist scriptures in 629. Xuanzang travelled to the world beyond China's ethnic and religious borders to return sixteen years later with a gift of sutras, statues, and relics along with his documented chronicles of the world west of China (Wriggins, 2004; Park, 2012; Sen, 2015).

³³ Colburn Clydesdale notes that Central Asian kingdoms “sent staples and exotica: lions from Persia and rhinoceroses from Champa (a kingdom in south and central Vietnam), hawks from the Korean peninsula, ostriches sent by western Turks, sandalwood from the Indonesian archipelago, cardamom from the coast of the Malay peninsula, indigo from Samarkand, and wool from Tibet” (Colburn Clydesdale, 2009).

³⁴ In this way, the multidirectional cultural and commercial exchange has begun to diffuse both Central Asian and T'ang cultures which has been accompanied by donations of silk under the tributary system. “to Goguryeo and Baekje (in Manchuria and the Korean peninsula), north to the steppes of Mongolia, west to the deserts and oases of Central Asia (in what is now

a strictly Western phenomenon. In fact, during the T'ang Dynasty, the Chinese engaged in various forms of "exoticism," such as when the "golden peaches" from the Western kingdom of Samarkand (modern-day Uzbekistan) rose to prominence in China as a luxury commodity (Schafer, 1963, p. 26).

This form of "Eastern" production of knowledge about the "West" went hand in hand with the "imperialistic conquest and commercial expansion" of T'ang China (Schafer, 1963, p. 30). Such forms of imperial mindset finds its way in ample evidence of demonizing discourse employed by the Chinese, which mirrors the inferiorizing linguistic practices employed by Western Orientalists (Martin and Koda, 1994; Hopkirk, 2001; Forêt and Kaplony, 2008). This reverse Orientalism, also referred to as "Occidentalism," which the Chinese employed was guided by a similar logic. We can see that, for example, in the T'ang artifacts from 643 C.E., which display Chinese impressions of Western (non-Han) landscapes along with the images of haughty-mannered Uighurs, black-browed Arabs, and curly-haired Greeks, who were culturally different and presumed to be "savage" and "ignorant" based on their appearance (Schafer, 1963, p. 31).

Such ways of imagining, which employ a particular civilizational logic that freezes entire regions and populations in time, leads us to a distinct conceptualization of space, where certain ideas and values become enmeshed with actual spaces and peoples and, as a result, produce long-lasting social realities. A postmodern interpretation of this phenomenon was introduced by Edward Said, whose notion of *imagined geography* defined spatial sensibilities that extended the "geographic" scope into a broader epistemological sense. Said's idea of imagined geography invites us to explore new topographies, where imagery and discourse co-create a space of tension between the materiality of a given place and its symbolic representation. This process marries

Xinjiang), and south to parts of the present-day provinces of Guangxi, Yunnan, and northern Vietnam" (Colburn Clydesdale, 2009).

units deemed separate (cultures, realms of experience, imaginations) into interpenetrating, “intertwined histories and overlapping territories” (Said, 1994, p. 60).

For Said, history has never been defined by economics alone. Instead, he suggested that all events could be historicized and contextualized in time and space. This conceptualization allowed him to further delineate the ideas and meanings which underpinned them in order to sketch the contours of a given imagined geography. In his understanding, the universal and universalizing ideas have a particular power to reduce real phenomena and repackage them as imagined sites, or clusters of impressions and perceptions of space created through certain imagery, texts, and discourses. “Stories,” Said claimed, “are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said, 1994, p. xiii). In this sense, notions such as the “Orient,” or even the “West,” become instances of imagined geographies as they emerge as products of certain cultural practices and meanings that became attributed to specific geographical areas.

Silk Road’s imagined geography is no different, and it has undergone a similar process. By fusing folk tales, cultural symbolism and ancient desires of cross-cultural connectivity, the Silk Road emerged as an enduring cultural concept which, since its inception, began to shape not only China’s social order but it also started to embody profound historical significance to much of Central Asia (Fairbank, 1968, p. 1, 12). In this sense, the Silk Road’s spirit is grounded in the imaginative processes, desires and fantasies associated with Sino-Western contact that became a foundational tenet of defining the Silk Road as we know it today. Such ideas, which are deeply ingrained in the cultural practices and beliefs, use their allure to act as signposts that illuminate modern culture and prompt action that, often, becomes legitimized beyond rationality (Roszak, 1988; Hannabuss, 1989). Silk Road, as a product of such desires and fantasies, which would

otherwise be unnaturally embodied in any given material place, became an imagined geography infused with ideas and meanings that married fantasy, desire, calculation and imagination.

Nostalgia for the Times We Never Knew

In “The Modalities of Nostalgia,” Pickering and Keightley write that there is “a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future” (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, p. 921). Depending on the form of revival—either through naïve reproduction or deliberate creation of the future—such renewal may take a very different form. Yet, regardless of the path, the idea that the old days can legitimate new realities creates an opportunity for an enchanting and enduring project to be born.

Undoubtedly, the notion of the Silk Road revival utilizes such an allure of the romantic past. Particularly in Central Asia, the notion took traction as it was utilized for nation building, nation branding and the promotion of fairer interstate relations in the region (Ubiria, 2015; Pomfret, 2019; Dadabaev, 2021). The common understanding of what the Silk Road once was, and what it currently symbolizes, is grounded in both historical accounts and folk legends, which shaped its narrativization and widespread circulation. In spite of the rich reservoir of ideas associated with the ancient trading routes, one cannot disregard the romantic and exotic aura that envelopes it. The nostalgia for virgin sand dunes, colorful silks, ornaments, as well as the Oriental riches that inspire connectivity and prosperity exposes complex dynamics in place. Such images have not only created a powerful story that shaped the perceptions of both China and Eurasia throughout history, but they have also guided socio-political and commercial projects that plot desirable futures by reviving the romanticized and distant pasts.

As it will become clearer in Chapter II, the Silk Road borrows its appeal from the sensibilities that are Western in origin. Relying on both the antiquated past and the shreds of Oriental imagination that define the historical record of Sino-Western exchange, the Silk Road gestures toward an idealized vision of abundant communities that connected vast geographies with a “corridor for the exchange of goods and...information” (Church, 2018, p. 1). This aspirational rhetoric slowly became an enlivening cultural concept and, at times, was repurposed for political reasons; other times it allowed China to be known as the “land of silk” (Boulnois, 1966, p. 17). By using pro-globalization logic of cross-cultural and transcontinental connectivity, the Silk Road began to bolster not only the story of premodern globalization as one of the mobility of capital goods, people and ideas, but also as one to be revived.

In spite of its ancient origins, the Silk Road is now synonymous with modern dreams of global interconnectivity, where the language of transregional ancient commerce has been translated into the modern context to not just promote movements, flows, networks, mobilities, circulation and fluidity, but also to legitimate the logic of open-ended markets and erased national borders. Deployed by the Chinese state as a self-Orientalizing rhetoric featured in both state propaganda and the nation branding efforts, the aspiration to revive the ancient silk routes draws on the cultural capital of the historical Orient to manufacture a desire for the forgone “good times” associated with widespread prosperity and peaceful relations.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a modern nation-state became to embrace market globalization, where capitalist dreams of the future often co-existed with the quest for recovering the past. This phenomenon has become particularly apparent in the Third World, which was reimagined as the “emerging” frontier of the new capitalist geography. With the phantom of communism gone and the gradual triumph of neoliberalism in Euro-America, nations of the Global South were encouraged to make structural adjustments and open up their

markets to foreign capital investments. This formula did not only promise economic prosperity in the post-colony, but it also offered a chance to fulfill each nation's great destiny as a rightful participant at the high-table of global politics (Agnew, 2005; Middell and Marung, 2019; Moisiso et al., 2020).

This promise of a brand new nation that attracts and generates capital was legitimized with claims of natural ties to the environment and civilizational significance that could erase the colonial shame and restore the mythical golden past. The glue that held the nation together turned the logic of the nineteenth-century cultural nationalism on its head. The spirit of the nation would now become a capital-infused growth story, where an uplifting narrative of economic potential grounded in the mythical past legitimized natural landscape as a repository of untapped wealth and turned its citizens as producers and consumers. This aura, which positioned nation as an engine of growth, prioritized national market value that became synonymous with affirming the worldliness of the people as a great nation (Kaur, 2020).

The Silk Road has played a role in manufacturing the dreams of economic growth. As a shining imagery that encapsulates the romantic memories of good times, its euphoria for improved globalization conceals the preferential and selective reading of history. As a dream-turned-capitalist-story, the Silk Road tends to be reduced to a single image: the golden age of movement, exchange and flows. Whether embraced as a historical narrative of the Sino-Western contact or a modern evocation of an enchanting fairytale, the Silk Road brings deep associations with the romantic vision of wealth-spreading connectivity enabled by the trade of silk (Elisseeff, 2000). This amplifies the largely unhistorical claims of a direct transmission of commodities, customs, habits and culture between the East and the West (Zhang, 2005), as well as the one-sidedness of disciplinary analysis that persists in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It also does significant disservice to understanding the concept itself by reproducing narrow perspectives and

narratives that solely focus on either archeology (Beckwith, 2009), or the economics of early commerce (McLaughlin, 2016). The romance of the foregone good times that exuded through such images grew significantly in the twenty-first century, and enabled the Silk Road idea to extend beyond the familiar space of art galleries and museum halls.

Political figures in the West (Hilary Clinton, Theresa May, and Emmanuel Macron³⁵) and beyond (Tayyip Erdoğan, Xi Jinping, Shinzo Abe, Vladimir Putin³⁶) often invoke the Silk Road times of thriving commerce and connectivity as modern-day guidelines for prosperous societies. At the same time, scholars of cultural heritage alert us that the Silk Road “is everywhere” as they point to rise of Silk Road imagery in the post-1990 world (Lowenthal, 1996, p. ix). Overwhelmingly present in the popular discourse, the Silk Road spirit now extends beyond the scope of geopolitics into infrastructure development, cultural industries, hospitality, gastronomy, travel, and luxury commodities markets (Millward, 2013).

³⁵ See the Guardian article on Theresa May evoking the Silk Road at: (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/31/theresa-may-holds-off-backing-china-900bn-pound-silk-road-strategy>), Accessed: July 2019; See France24 article on Emmanuel Macron evoking the Silk Road at: (<https://www.france24.com/en/20180108-france-macron-kicks-off-china-visit-gateway-silk-road-xi>), Accessed: July 2019.

³⁶ See Tayyip Erdoğan welcoming China’s New Silk Road project at: (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/china-welcomes-turkeys-participation-in-belt-and-road-partnership-137313>), Accessed: July 2019; See Vladimir Putin supporting China’s BRI by evoking the Silk Road at: (<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-pledges-support-for-chinas-124bln-new-silk-road-57991>), Accessed: July 2019; See Shinzo Abe’s justification on joining China’s Silk Road revival project at: (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2018/04/17/why-japan-had-to-join-china-in-building-trade-routes-around-asia/#17a517247175>), Accessed: July 2019.

Travel agencies offer trips along the ancient routes,³⁷ and restaurateurs promote exotic cuisines of the Silk Road region.³⁸ Yo-Yo Ma's Ensemble did not escape the allure either by performing musical-hybrids from across Eurasia.³⁹ Neither did the fashion industry in the West⁴⁰ and beyond⁴¹ which utilized the Silk Road to capitalize on its allure. The list further extends to mass media, where a Chinese reality talent show appropriated the Silk Road name,⁴² as well as popular role-playing games that recreate battles between monsters and warriors across the Silk

³⁷ See Travel Agency MIR Corporation at: (<https://www.mircorp.com/travel-the-silk-route/>), Travel Agency GeoEx at: (<https://www.geoex.com/destinations/central-asia/silk-road/>); Travel Agency Intrepid at: (<https://www.intrepidtravel.com/us/china/great-silk-road-126449>), Accessed: December 2019.

³⁸ See Silk Road Restaurant in Warren, NJ at: (<http://silkroadrestaurant.org>); Silk Road Nola in New Orleans, LA at: (<https://www.silkroadnola.com>); Silk Road in Walnut Creek, CA at: (<http://www.silkroadwalnutcreek.com>); Silk Road Cambridge in Cambridge, MA at: (<https://www.silkroadcambridge.com>); Silk Road Restaurant and Silk Bar in Amsterdam, Netherlands at: (<https://www.movenpick.com/en/europe/netherlands/amsterdam/hotel-amsterdam/restaurants/silk-road/>), Silk Road in Oslo, Norway at: (<https://silkroadoslo.com>), Accessed: December 2019.

³⁹ See the official website of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble at: (<https://www.silkroad.org>), Accessed: July 2019.

⁴⁰ See Forbes article on Oscar de la Renta's show at: (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hannahelliott/2011/02/24/oscar-de-la-rentas-jewels-from-the-silk-road/#19406f5c27ee>), Accessed: July 2019.

⁴¹ See Astana Times article on the British-Kazakh fashion show cooperation under the Silk Road banner: (<https://astanatimes.com/2018/03/kazakh-designers-demonstrate-collections-at-londons-silk-road-fashion-show/>), Accessed: July 2019.

⁴² See for more information about the Voice of the Silk Road: (<https://baike.baidu.com/item/丝绸之路好声音>), Accessed: December 2019.

Road.⁴³ Finally, one should not dismiss the *Silk Road* online marketplace, which was closed down in 2013 after selling illicit and unregulated substances (Leger, 2014).

Wonderful as these romantic accounts seem to be, they contribute to the creation of a particular version of historical reality, where the “Silk-Roadism,” as James Millward called it,⁴⁴ fused empiricism with the myth of “travelling silk” to create a spirit of the times that further removes it from its historical context.⁴⁵ In this sense, the Silk Road ceases to exist as a geophysical area, and becomes an *imagined space* kept afloat by the experiences, narratives, and images that have

⁴³ See the Silkroad Online’s website server: (<http://www.joymax.com/portal/>) as well as the mobile version (<https://www.silkroadforever.com/en-us/index.html>), Accessed: December 2019.

⁴⁴ Millward, 2018, Working paper shared with the author.

⁴⁵ In this context, James Millward observed that the Silk Road implies “neither silk nor a road” (Millward, 2013, p. 3). In spite of a proven long-distance trade connectivity occurring through millennia, the movement and exchange of silk across Central Asia included not only silk, but also “all the other tangible and intangible cultural baggage that travels with people (religions, technologies, medicine, fashions, food)” (Whitfield, 2015, p. 23-4). Therefore, the “silk,” in the Silk Road, is an oversimplification inasmuch as silk has never been the predominant, or only, commodity that was transferred across vast geographies since it was one among many other common tradable goods, such as “chemicals, spices, metals, saddles leather products, glass and paper” (Hansen, 2012, p. 5). The “road” is even more problematic since the Silk Road has never been a single route, or an unbroken road that allowed uninterrupted travel across the Sino-Western divide. Instead, it was rather “a stretch of shifting, unmarked paths” across vast territories (Hansen, 2012, p. 5), which connected dispersed communities through trade as well as exchange of goods, commodities and ideas between the East and the West. Additionally, there is no consensus as for where the silk routes actually began and where they ended, which has not necessarily been just a connection that began in China and ended in Europe (Esenbel, 2017). Lastly, the name Silk Road was never used during the peak of its transregional connectivity. Instead, the travelers, pilgrims and diplomats referred to the “northern” or “southern” road, depending on the direction of their travel (Hansen, 2012). While there is a convincing historical evidence of silk travelling from inner China to as far as Palmyra in Syria, the circulation of silk along with other commodities took place in multiple stages, and it was never regular—as it is imagined today when we refer to the Silk Road as a superhighway of cultural exchange (Hansen, 2012, p. 5). Modern archeological research has also proven that communities which settled along the trading routes had rarely engaged in commercial activity and, in fact, the vast majority of them travelled infrequently (Hansen, 2012, p. 5). In a similar manner, the sea trade routes have been numerous, stretching across vast geographies and a subject to many disruptions with irregular and unsystematic exchange (Whitfield, 2015, p. 24).

circulated in both the West and Asia (Lacan, 1977; Scott-Lee, 1991, p. 14; Boothby, 2014, p. 25). In Richard Rorty's words, such a phenomenon highlights the various representations that mirror the ways in which the reality is situated (Rorty, 2009). Since the Silk Road is composed of flows of romantic stories, fantasies and historical narratives, the reality mirrored by the concept itself created and solidified a particular, largely Oriental, understanding of the Silk Road – one which implies a space that allowed the Western and Eastern imaginings of one another to collide and produce a rich romantic portrait of imperial ambitions, unfettered prosperity and opportunity, as well as peaceful relations.

The BRI capitalizes on this imagery by transforming its discursive power into a neoliberal fantasy of transcontinental connectivity. Operating on the level of textuality, BRI repurposes the global cultural heritage of the Silk Road times to create a cosmopolitan desire knitted together with a web of overlapping of layers of meaning. Grounded in the aspiration to revive the ancient silk routes, the BRI acts in a two-fold manner: Corporally, it promises a future of frictionless connectivity and all-encompassing peaceful relations; Ideologically, it ignites acceptance among BRI-receiving countries with the ideas of wealth, prosperity, and opportunity. What is striking in the BRI concept itself is not necessarily the desire to revive the ancient silk routes, but rather the constant state of anticipation permanently without a deadline. Such promise of the good times yet to come is nothing more than a collective form of imagining that the Silk Road fuels, inspires and enables.

Collective Dreams of a Better Future

A speculative short story entitled *The Collective Dreaming of the Frin* (2002) describes a world where all living things are capable of sharing their dreams with others. This “communion of all

sentient creatures” creates a collective sensitivity through which dreaming stops being a property of the dreamer, and instead melds into a collective experience (Le Guin, 2003). Turning the individual act of dreaming into a “collective tonality,” Le Guin’s story flattens both time and space into a social, political, at times, ecologically transformative act (Goodman and Manning, 2022). This reframing directs our attention toward the connective and orienting properties of collective formations. Whether they be fantasies of collective aspirations, or foundations of political projects, the notion of collective dreaming sheds necessary light on conceptualizing the allure of the Silk Road, which is as much grounded in the concept’s popular reproduction as it is in its foundational ideas that were later consolidated under one name.

While dreaming has long been the domain of recollections of thoughts, visions, fantasies and wish-images (*Wunschbilder*) that occupy the mind (Freud, 1961, p. 108; Bloch, 1995, p. 82), dreams can also encapsulate collective yearnings beyond the individual experience. Let us take the *China Dream* as an example. Propagated by Xi in 2013, the “dream” is not just a national vision of Socialist values, but an all-encompassing aspiration that embraces individual desires, hopes and longings. As a strategy to target the Chinese youth and the “Millennials,” the China Dream integrates a wider set of national policies of modernization, urbanization and national prosperity with the individual aspirations to achieve personal wealth and wellbeing (Islam, 2019, p. 126).

BRI constitutes an intrinsic part of the China Dream. It encapsulates collective dreams of civilizational revival, where the abundant and romanticized past transforms primordial desires of cross-cultural contact and exchange into deliberate and strategic plans that produce justifiable and self-legitimizing futures. Silk Road, as a commonly-acknowledged, collectively-identifiable and worldly symbol of ancient glory, occupies the central role in the BRI paradigm. The enduring nature of the Silk Road, which animates the BRI, stems from the yearnings that are inherently human and not region-specific. Akin to Benedict Anderson’s concept of *imagined communities*, the

Silk Road evokes a strong sense of collective solidarity and (cross)cultural unity. Yet, its distinctiveness lies in its capacity to serve as a political or neoliberal alibi.

Anderson's concept reminds us that, in the case of nation-states, citizen-subjects are captivated by the cultural and "geographical common sense" of belonging (Radcliffe, 1996). Meanwhile, the Silk Road extends beyond the national scope into a global embrace, where global cultural heritage is mobilized to animate the minds and hearts of world-subjects (Radcliffe, 1996; Anderson, 2006). Grounded in the early memories of primordial globalization, the Silk Road spirit reflects human curiosity about the worlds beyond one's ethnic, religious and cultural frontiers, which allows it to become an intuitive and universally-shared dream. It melds together the curiosities for cross-border exploration with the desires of prosperous futures into an enduring cultural concept by excavating and repurposing the earliest memories of the foregone golden past.

To further position the Silk Road as a globally distributed narrative that embraces innate desires, vivid fantasies and an oversimplified history of early Sino-Western contact, we should not merely consider it to be an enchanting fairytale of the golden past, but rather a particularly persuasive, plausible and enduring imaginary reinforced by the flows of peoples, commodities and the instability of borders as well as the dreamy allure of ancestral connectivity. The following chapters further position the Silk Road as an enduring global cultural imaginary which emerged from the moment it was named as such, to consequently circulate in both academic and popular discourse worldwide. My focus in this chapter remains the "Silk Road" before the Silk Road, or rather the ways in which divergent ideas, meanings and memories of premodern connectivity and worldliness formed a collective dream that survived centuries to be revived and repurposed with the announcement of the BRI.

Collective dreaming could be said to be a natural property of individuals. In the *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*; 1982), Walter Benjamin uses Jules Michelet's epigraph that states: "Each

epoch dreams the one that follows” in order to highlight the intrinsic relationship between past and present, where invoking surreal, dream-like, and at times mythological past provides reproductions of a utopia that is carefully guarded within the historical present (Wolin, 2008). Reflecting on the nineteenth-century life and the new means of production under high capitalism, Benjamin sought to weave the idea of dreaming together with the concept of “collective unconscious.” To him, dreams could reveal more about reality, and especially about the future, than the reality itself since, as he argued, dreamers would usually seek “to both overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 46).

Under the conditions of high capitalism, Benjamin saw dreaming as a critical force of revolutionary awakening. Through collective dreaming, he suggested, the old and the new intermingled, which allowed the images from prehistory to triumph over the deficiencies and contradictions of industrial capitalism (whose promise for abundance and prosperity remained warped by private ownership of the means of production) (Wolin, 2008). Richard Wolin explains Benjamin’s ruminations by pointing to the Paris shopping arcades, which ultimately give name to Benjamin’s unfinished magnum opus. They, according to Wolin, represent humanity’s attempt to rid itself of the injustices of class society, or rather, what Bloch once termed as, “dreaming toward the future” (Wolin, 1994, p. xlvi). In spite of their promise, Benjamin saw them fail what they initially sought to accomplish. To him, they became a microcosm of capitalism, where both historical potential and promise of abundance intermingled with betrayal, growing inequality and overconsumption (Leslie, 2006; Lawrence, 2017).

Benjamin’s perception of the arcades lied in what he considered to be a pivotal moment of history, where modern society became more preoccupied with consumption than production. This collective dream of high capitalism, which dulled the senses of the world’s true nature, finds

an uncanny parallel in the allure of the Silk Road. While Benjamin urged for an awakening from the nineteenth-century dream of consumerism into a form of socialist utopia (Goldstein, 2006), his *Traumdeutung* (dream interpretation) of the Paris arcades is equally applicable to interpreting the modern-day materializations of the “New Silk Road.” Considering the allure of the Silk Road connectivity, it is both the romantic images of ancient prosperity as well as the future visions of wide-spread peace and progress that are both embedded within the BRI infrastructure projects and deployed as vehicles of collective dream that promises the Silk Road revival in hopes of a better future. Enveloped by its dreamy allure, the prophetic power of Silk Road’s primeval past does not necessarily point us toward a classless society (just as Benjamin’s notion of the awakening does), but it does promise a future akin to the pre-nation-state order, where both commercial and cultural flows weaved the society into a romantic fairytale of global connectivity.

This apotheosis of global antiquity, which attempts to fix deficiencies of modern globality, fuses romantic interpretations of the past with speculative promise of the future into a powerful collective dream which, similarly to the high capitalism of the nineteenth century, leaves “its traces in thousands of configurations of life, from permanent buildings to fleeting fashions” (Mertins, 1999, p. 197). While countless iterations of the Silk Road have largely served the role of keeping the idea afloat by reinventing, repurposing and commercializing it, the collective dream of premodern globalization and the aspiration to revive it, is rooted in the innate desires of cross-cultural contact, vivid fantasies of the worlds beyond, and the oversimplification of ancient history. Synthesizing theories of Freud, Jung and Marx, Benjamin assumed that if dreams are deriving from the unconscious (inspired by Freud) and if there exists a collective unconscious (inspired by Jung), there must be a collective form of dreaming (Goldstein, 2006, p. 53).

Jung's theories in particular provided the core for Benjamin's reflections on collective dreams, visions, ambitions and nightmares.⁴⁶ Emerging from the moment of collective trauma of the World War I, Jung's deliberations serve as a productive analytic to better capture the amorphous yet recurring spirit of the Silk Road.⁴⁷ As he built on Sigmund Freud's attempts to understand an individual's present behaviors by interpreting the past, Jung developed the idea of the "collective unconscious,"⁴⁸ which Benjamin adopted as a necessary condition for collective dreaming to occur. Following an extensive analysis of dreams, Jung discovered an uncanny universality of symbols, images and myths occurring in the psyche of his patients. The striking similarities across

⁴⁶ Since the advent of psychoanalysis in the 1890s, it was believed that humans carry their past with them through an explanation that the mind, just like the body, has its own history. Soon, connecting with the hidden, concealed and repressed desires became the drivers of an emerging field. While psychoanalysts largely agreed on the fact that a person's past and childhood experiences determined their future behavior, some went one step further and theorized that the ancestral past provides a basis for the human psyche. The key here was the unconscious mind – first coined by Friedrich Schelling in the late 18th-century, and later popularized by Sigmund Freud. The unconscious was understood as a reservoir of personal feelings, impressions, beliefs, urges, and memories that outside of one's state of awareness (Freud and Bonaparte, 1954; Bargh, 2014).

⁴⁷ Jung's reflections, especially those concerning patterns of dreams found in his patients, serve as a productive analytic to better capture the amorphous yet recurring spirit of the Silk Road. As he began to understand that societies tend to embrace "modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals," many of the dreams and desires he analyzed prompted him to suggest that "there is something behind these images that transcends consciousness" (Jung, 2013, p. 2).

⁴⁸ Jung's concept of the collective unconscious goes beyond the layer of personal desires, and is not unique to just an individual but rather it is shared by many (Werblowsky, 1973). In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961), Jung wrote about connecting with ancestral humanity, which prompted him to theorize about the "collective unconscious." It was in his dreams, where Jung found inspiration for this concept. Dreaming of a multi-level house where, with each descending floor he went back in time to a more distant past, Jung began to map out the human mind. Having reached the lowest house level (beneath the cellar), he discovered a cave with two human skulls which, to him, symbolized Adam and Eve. Jung's seminal dream serves as an allegory for the human psyche, where each floor represents a deeper level of the unconscious mind, and where the cave embodies meanings that belong to the foundations of the Western cultural history.

various subjects existed “independently of tradition, [and] guaranteed in every single individual a similarly and even a sameness of experience.”⁴⁹ Jung attributed his findings to the existence of an inner-most layer of the unconscious mind, where collectively-inherited meanings reflected rudimentary patterns common to all mankind (Jung, 1990, p. 58).

Connecting the similarities in symbols to a realm beyond the individual experience, Jung contended that in the same way as human anatomy was understood as a blueprint for the human body, there existed a collective unconscious that served as a blueprint for the human mind. It is there, where collective dreaming took place, and where collectively inherited forms and patterns of behavior (archetypes) would be stored irrespective of their subjects’ geographical location or a cultural difference. Such archetypes were signs that reoccurred cross-culturally, such as the “hero” or the “apocalypse.”⁵⁰ Given their ability to manifest themselves “imaginatively,” patterns of archetypal qualities became instruments that would consequently enable structuring and categorizing various sets of disjunctured yet similar meanings. In this sense, the archetypal qualities of the Silk Road do not only equip us with a heuristic tool that captures the dispersed collective dreams, myths and desires associated with the Silk Road times, but they also provide a means of understanding the concept’s fundamental allure. Following Jung’s assertions about the collective unconscious representing “millions of years of human development” (Jung, 2014, p. 315), it is helpful to consider the Silk Road as not a neatly-constructed term, but rather a set of

⁴⁹ The similarities in symbols or imagery which Jung discovered across numerous patient dreams were not necessarily linked to a regular transfer of ideas, but rather testified of a universal experience, where certain patterns found themselves ingrained in the psyche instead of being reproduced through individual experiences (Jung, 1998; Erskine, 2001; Baynes, 2015). To Jung, the collective unconscious was an anchor of collective dreaming.

⁵⁰ Some other examples of Jung’s archetypes include: *the mother, the hero, or the wise old man*, as well as the motifs of *the union of opposites, creation of the world, or the apocalypse* (Bär, 1976; Jung, 1990; Pietikainen, 1998).

ideas and desires that, with time, formed a powerful and enduring cultural reference—a collective dream to be achieved.

Toward Planetary Conviviality

Jia Zhangke's 2004 drama, *The World*, encapsulates a variety of individual insecurities and collective desires that emerged following Deng Xiaoping's era of economic opening. Set in the "Beijing World Park" which features duplicates of the world's most iconic landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids of Giza, and the Big Ben, Jia's film portrays the ultimate Chinese simulacrum of the Western world, where the theme park embodies a powerful allegory of globalization. In the movie, the Beijing World Park promises to "[show] the world without leaving Beijing" (Kao, 2015). Yet, in spite of this promise, the park represents a non-place, where central characters attempt but fail to form a community. In this sense, the park projects an emancipatory promise of seductive globality, which is simultaneously contradicted with its reality of the lived experience.

This dichotomy between the imagined promise and its real experience, captures ongoing and "obscene conditions of production of the global spectacle in the film," which in turn manufacture and sustain "global entrapment" disguised as the pursuit of a better (capital-infused) future through relentless integration into the global capitalist geography (Bordeleau, 2010, pp. 155–6). As a critique of the most intimate registers of globalization, *The World* does not only offer a commentary on China's growing incorporation into the global system, but also, if not primarily, it prompts us to question what China's contemporary attempts at worldmaking are; and whether these attempts seek to embrace the world, or whether they choose to contribute to a new vision and a new moral idea of the world.

The vision of globalization represented in *The World* highlights a form of individual and collective “hollowing,” where dissatisfaction with the global embrace puts the promise of a future built on spectacular accumulation of capital to the test (Bordeleau, 2010). In contrast, a vision of premodern connectivity represented by the Silk Road could not be more different. Its spirit does not forecast experiences of entrapment but rather projects “connective liberation,” where the “Third World” is not simply integrated into the new global economy, but rather is given an opportunity to co-create a common geo-economic future. In this way, the Silk Road remains an aspirational and egalitarian promise, whose emancipatory power does not only extend its membership to everyone who shares its global cultural capital, but it also offers an assurance that the failures of modern capitalism could be salvaged if only we revived the familiar ancient past.

By crafting such an inclusive vision of the future yet to come, the dream of Silk Road revival offers a vision of alternative globality where communities and cultures of the East-West divide come together in a seeming rhapsody of interlocking visions and memories of the glorious past. In other words, the Silk Road concept brings both coherence and zeal to the distant past in hopes of resurrecting the vision of a community of common prosperity amid the injustices of the global present. Imagined as “the very crossroads of civilization,” or even the origins of mankind (Frankopan, 2015, p. 15), which were “planted by Lord God” himself (Delumeau, 2000), the rhetorical power of the silk routes fuels its archetypal qualities as well as reinforces its nearly universal allure.

As an indisputable historical fact, the Silk Road’s capacity as a narrative has been integral to influencing, if not guiding, the moral character of human interactions throughout centuries (Light and Smith, 2005; Berleant, 2011, 2016, 2017). For instance, the dreams and ambitions of cross-border trade and connectivity have always coincided with the growing expansion of imperial

China⁵¹ (Frankopan, 2015, p. 42). This form of collective dreaming did not only produce a robust diplomatic infrastructure that placed the East-West connectivity (and the Silk Road exchange) at the heart of the commercial enterprise of the Chinese empire, but it also shaped some of China's Sinocentric political philosophy which placed cooperative and harmonious coexistence at its center. In this way, the Silk Road cannot be considered a mere historical fact, but also a powerful social aesthetic that combines deep history and magnetism of cultural heritage to convey an alluring and seductive vision of cross-regional and cross-cultural cooperation.

Expanding on Arnold Berleant's notion of "social aesthetics" to account for the ambience where aesthetic quality of a cultural object begins to carry social significance (Berleant, 2011, 2016, 2017), I consider the impressions and memories of the Silk Road as producing an integrated atmosphere (Ackerman, 1991; Pearson, 1991; Böhme, 1993; Korsmeyer, 2017), which carries a unique propensity to enchant and allure. The discourse as well as the visual and sensory experiences associated with the early cross-cultural exchange have produced a near-universal regard for the Silk Road which does not match another premodern transcontinental experience. By cultivating an image of belonging to a community of common past, where memories of peaceful relations and common prosperity are deployed to legitimate the future, the Silk Road connects distant territories both literally and imaginatively by integrating them into a distinct project of world-making.

⁵¹ Since Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the power of the Chinese imperial court continued to be centered around the contact with the worlds beyond its frontiers, which was manifested by diplomatic relationships that required foreign ambassadors to submit tributes to the Chinese emperor. This practice, also known as the tributary system, established a sophisticated system also known as *Tianxia* which pertains to the lands and geophysical space appointed to the Emperor that formed a worldview centered on the Imperial court and determined a hierarchy of peoples and places placed concentrically outward, with major and minor officials, common citizens, tributary societies and barbarians (Callahan, 2008; Wang, 2017; Suter and Bergesen, 2018).

The BRI, promoted through a rhetoric of primordial connectivity, “non-conditional” development and mutually-beneficial futures, is consciously positioned as the antithesis of the Washington Consensus—a US-centric international economic order manufactured by the Washington, D.C.-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and the United States Department of the Treasury (Roy, 1996; Williamson, 2004). Proclaimed as a more inclusive form of global development, the BRI is presumed to operate unlike IMF’s structural adjustment programs (SAPs), which imposed strict political conditionalities, deregulation and, often, promoted American liberal democracy (Hurt, 2017). Instead, the BRI promises a benevolent, non-Western form of development conducted under a regional umbrella. This form of “Oriental globalization,” as some have termed it (Nederveen Pieterse, 2017, p. 61) is not entirely unselfish, but rather is a natural product of the Chinese state transitioning from an export-led to a domestic demand-led economy (Nederveen Pieterse, 2017, pp. 40; 55), which occurs at the time of a continuous rise of China’s dominance in infrastructure construction, foreign investment as well as Asia’s growing share of the global economy.

This spectacle of extraordinary growth, unprecedented infrastructure-building and accelerated connectivity signals a two-fold message. On the one hand, it legitimates China’s new position as a rising geo-economic power “in a global constellation of nations” (S. X. Wu, 2015, p. 10). On the other hand, it promises a future of planetary conviviality led by China and based on romantic memories reminiscent of the Silk Road exchange. This divergence in perspectives, which creates both anxieties about China’s presumed desire to create counter-hegemony to the US-based system and a promise of a better globalized future yet to come, is mirrored by the scholarly and popular literature. Some Western scholars tend to utilize the “threat of China” rhetoric to focus on China’s growing significance in the global system (Roy, 1996; Gertz, 2000; Swaine, Daly and Greenwood, 2000; Broomfield, 2003; Zoellick, 2013; Allison, 2017), while

others tend to emphasize peaceful Chinese political culture (Xuetong, 2001; Pan, 2004; Glaser and Medeiros, 2007; Wang, 2009).

Since such polarity of thought does not provide concrete answers or analytical frames, I focus on the intangible and material power⁵² of the Silk Road concept to examine how it has allowed the Chinese state to deploy a unique form of heritage diplomacy which, promoted through a series of trade, development, territorial engineering projects and the language of connectivity, offers a fantasy of utopian globalization. With this in mind, the BRI projects a distinct world-making project, where the future prevails on the logic of a frictionless connectivity, and is grounded in the romantic histories of cooperative world order. By embodying the values and logics largely associated with cosmopolitan discourse, the BRI attempts to cast a return to an earlier global condition that predates the nation-state system and operates beyond the rising nationalist ideologies and hegemonic strategies.

⁵² Developing a concept of “material power,” Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett provokes us to recognize distinctive forms of agency and efficacy on the part of material forces (Bennett and Joyce, 2013). In this context, I utilize this perspective to see beyond the state formation or inter-state conflict, and look more closely at the intersection of historical narratives and fantasies about the future to interrogate China’s present-day diplomacy which is driven by cultural heritage and territorial engineering. While it is impossible to map out the exact workings of power, it is not unconventional to consider power as originating from continuously flowing and receding, dispersing and gathering as well as altering material and imaginary arrangements and combinations of meanings. Grounded in the work of Michel Foucault, I see the Silk Road’s power as dispersed, omnipresent and having no single source where it is manufactured or where it originates from (Foucault, 1972, 2000). In fact, the Silk Road aesthetic coincidentally reflects the nature of the ancient Silk Road itself, which routes, along with their beginnings or ends, have always been intricate—if ever possible to precisely determine. However, what is more likely to ascertain is the mutual subsistence of both facts and historical fabrication which bestow this narrative with a particular power that makes the Silk Road revival both persuasive and plausible. This very power has not only bestowed the Silk Road with a set of meanings, but also equipped many with the capacity to utilize the Silk Road itself for personal, commercial or political gain.

Cosmopolitan Silk Road

While both historians and scholars of ancient China have frequently referred to the ancient silk routes as *cosmopolitan* (Fewkes, 2008; Hansen, 2012; Morgan and Walters, 2012; Miksic, 2013; Chen, 2019), the fact is that little has been written about the Silk Road's cosmopolitan allure as an animating force behind the BRI – in spite of the semantic affinity that both concepts embody. Due to its rhetorical nature centered around the “highest ethical aspirations for what globalization can offer” (Calhoun, 2008, p. 427), or the various “projects that work towards planetary conviviality” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 157), the cosmopolitan ideal tends to be diminished to all things transnational or universal (Vilaça, 2020). In fact, the various uses of the concept tend to reinforce its “muddy” meaning, while projecting a concern for all humanity as a “holistic vision of global totality” (Calhoun, 2008, p. 431).

Originating from Greek, the notion of cosmopolitanism has been in use in the Western discourse since the fourth century B.C.⁵³ (Barker and Zorn, 2019), only to become a popular catchphrase of a truly global form of political governance in recent years (Held, 2009; Andrews, 2012; Archibugi, 2012). Historically, cosmopolitanism – an idea behind a *cosmopolis*, or a world design – found its roots in the moral and political discourse based on the very fact that all human beings are owed the same “in virtue of them sharing the same human nature” (Charvet, 1998; Vilaça, 2020, p. 9). The practical experiences of cosmopolitan visions varied, and at times implied

⁵³ Within time, the cosmopolitan idea became to be expressed in divergent ways (Gunn in Juergensmeyer, 2014, p. 402). Beginning with the late nineteenth century, when cosmopolitanism became a paramount component of modernity, to the twentieth century which saw an emerging paradigm of global flows, cosmopolitanism continued to illustrate the breaking down of national identities and the rise of transnational networks along with a broader desire for transregional alliances (Barker and Zorn, 2019).

a form of domination, especially when their outcomes were driven by an imperial or colonial imperative.⁵⁴

Following modern critiques of the cosmopolitan idea that condemned it for perpetuating Western hegemonies (Barker and Zorn, 2019), I explore the concept as a social condition which, at its core, implies a deep connection between individuals and the world (Pollock, 2000). Framing cosmopolitanism along these lines, allows it to be seen as an attitude, a style and an aesthetic (Calhoun, 2008), which is both negotiated (instead of being imposed, as if it was a universal blueprint), and ensures openness to alternative visions of the world (instead of articulating a universal worldview of moral or political kind). In this sense, I utilize the “critical” form of cosmopolitanism as conceptualized by Kwame Appiah, Giles Gunn and Walter D. Mignolo to position the term beyond the hegemony of liberal blueprints or abstract universalisms.

Critical cosmopolitanism, from both normative and sociological perspectives, eschews a single world and remains open to difference⁵⁵ (Shapcott, 2001; Delanty, 2006). In other words, it is both *critical* in recognizing, not the universality, but “diversality” of global designs (Mignolo, 2000, p. 743), and it is *rooted* in the dialogue among cultural differences, multiple localities and nationalities across varying scales (Appiah, 2010, p. 213). Associating cosmopolitanism with a profound re-organization of social life by global processes, the notion poses an ethical challenge,

⁵⁴ In this way, we can speak of a proto-cosmopolitan logic being deployed in the Spanish and Portuguese missionizing empires of the 16th and 17th centuries (which converted populations into Catholicism), the British and French civilizing empires of the 18th and 19th centuries (which “rescued” Others from “barbarian” customs and traditions), as well as the American and European modernizing/industrializing empires of the 20th century (which imposed rational calculation, efficiency and productivity as blueprints for modern life).

⁵⁵ This is conditioned by: (1) the historical experience of colonial and imperial world-making projects, (2) the notion that certain universalisms (e.g. democracy) are Western constructs, therefore projecting a blueprint for the rest of the world to be followed, (3) the empirical notion that single humanity does not exist given that both the human experience and its products are always embedded (Vilaça, 2020, p. 11)

which Giles Gunn captured by calling for the necessity of transforming the act of “living together with different so-called *Others*” into the “*possibility* of living together” (Gunn, 2013). In this way, each cosmopolitan position paints a particular promise of the world which follows a certain logic – and it is by uncovering this logic that one becomes capable of identifying the tools deployed to make any world-making project, such as the BRI, a reality.

In the case of the BRI, the romantic imagery of the earliest Sino-Western connectivity brings about the possibility of reviving a blurry memory of early connectivity. The vision itself is flexible and open to interpretations, acting similarly to what Isabelle Stengers once termed as *cosmopolitics*, or rather the logic that acknowledges the participation in “multiple, irreducible worlds” (Robbert and Mickey, 2013, p. 2). As a project of political and developmental kind, the BRI is hardly a blueprint. Instead, it operates on a bilateral agreement-basis which, animated with the romantic allure of the ancient Silk Road, is viewed as both divergent and liberating from the shackles of Western developmentalism and its hegemonic foreign aid practices (Jilberto and Hogenboom, 2010; Shimomura and Ohashi, 2013; Yingtao, 2014; Chen, 2017). In this sense, the BRI promises not to replicate the blueprints associated with the Washington Consensus, but to negotiate both development and connectivity needs with each new member of the revived Silk Road with seemingly few political conditions (Wang, Ozanne and Hao, 2014; Mattlin and Nojonen, 2015).

While the BRI’s apparent altruism to co-create a community of common future has been contested on multiple occasions (Carmody, 2017, 2020; Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2018; Reeves, 2018; Duara, 2019; Rawson, 2019; Brautigam, 2020; Gang and Kunrong, 2020; Lai, Lin and Sidaway, 2020; Matters, 2021), what remains both alluring and reaffirming is the unique vision that envelopes it. Rather than replicating norms of international conduct, the Silk Road spirit fuses historical facts and futuristic dreams in an attempt to portray a malleable worldview of desired future yet to come. This form of world-making, which bridges individual and collective

imaginations along with the dispersed policies and romantic histories, is grounded in China's traditional political philosophy (Foot, 2013; Zhang and Austin, 2014), as well as it mirrors the Chinese state's ambitions to sit at the high table of international politics as an equal player.

What cosmopolitanism reveals is that rules of the game for China are not guided by Western interventionism, but by the idea of virtuous leadership (Shih and Huang, 2013), which has the capacity to "transcend the political ideals and social systems of the West" as well as transform China into a moral, humane, authority (Jin, 2013, p. 179). Such an aspiration, as communicated through the BRI, opposes traditional hegemony.⁵⁶ Instead, it communicates a pursuit of a moral ground to alleviate the international critique of China's alleged thirst for power and its presumed threat to international stability (Yan, 2013; Vilaça, 2020). The BRI, as animated by the rhetoric of cosmopolitan past, serves such a role. As a grand vision of the Silk Road revival led by its commander-in-chief, Xi Jinping, the BRI represents the making of a benevolent authority, or what the Chinese International Relations scholar, Yan Xuetong, referred to as a form of power not necessarily backed by force, but rather having the ambition to create new moral norms by cultivating political friendships and mobilizing domestic and international support (Creutzfeldt, 2012; Yan, 2013, pp. 211–212).

The narrative that plots desirable futures with the use of romanticized past becomes an enlivening force behind the seemingly preposterous project of global re-connection. Reaffirming Ai Weiwei's statement that the "word is a sphere, [thus] there is no East or West" (Ai, 2012, p. 81), the BRI enacts a presumably cosmopolitan vision of the world. By promising a cross-cultural,

⁵⁶ According to Yan Xuetong, a Chinese International Relations scholar, the fundamentals of the notion of hegemonic authority are illegitimate. He supports his argument by referring to the ancient Chinese philosophy to claim that a hegemon tends to act with double standards by deploying a strong ethical stance which is upheld when the hegemon's, or its ally's, interests are at stake; and breaching this ethical stance whenever the hegemon deals with its enemies or when its national interests are at stake (Yan, 2013).

transcontinental, peace-ensuring and prosperity-spreading connectivity to the peoples and communities whose livelihoods have historically occupied a marginal position in both scholarly and popular discourse (Liu, 2010; Whitfield, 2015), its romanticized rhetoric of utopian globalization remains both alluring and enchanting. In other words, its rhetorical power poses a question: Who would not like to be a part of the glorious Silk Road? – Just as, “who wouldn’t want to be a citizen of the world?” (Calhoun, 2008, p. 433)

In this sense, the conception of the world as a revival of the golden past could be read as China’s attempt at becoming a *morally superior power* – one that does not intend to mirror the path of Western developmentalism, but rather one that wishes to create a seductive dream, through which common prosperity and peaceful co-existence could be attained and sustained. This ambition, partially manufactured by the Chinese state, follows a re-orientation of priorities of China’s foreign policy from purely economic (Callahan, 2013), to a more diverse form of diplomacy that utilizes both cultural communication and global cultural heritage to entice the world into China’s vision (Winter, 2019), and eventually, “present to the world a better social role model” (Cunningham-Cross and Callahan, 2011, p. 370).

This model of the world goes beyond the understanding of globalization as an increased economic interdependence, a form of “late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991), or a “condition of postmodernity” (Harvey, 1989). Instead, it attempts to captivate us with its project of world-making and world-extending, or what the French term encapsulates as *mondialization*. Usually translated into English as globalization, mondialization carries a deeper and more nuanced meaning. In contrast to the processes that both connect and universalize various aspects of everyday life, such as technology, politics, economy and even culture (Axelos, 2005), mondialization can be seen as “a process of becoming worldly that precedes any mere expansion of economic, cultural, and political phenomena” (Elden, 2006, p. 640).

Thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, have explored the ramifications of the difference between the two terms, and implied that “globalization” misses the idea of the “world” at its core (Derrida, 1976; Derrida and Kamuf, 2002; Nancy, 2007). It is from this understanding that I consider mondialization as a productive frame to understand the appeal of the world-making practice promoted via the BRI. In *The Sense of the World* (1993), Jean-Luc Nancy provokes the question inspired by increasing waves of globalization, namely: How to inhabit the world responsibly when other modes of world-making are unavailable? Beginning with a proclamation that humans have lost the transformative vision of the world once carried (e.g. in religious or philosophical texts), Nancy argues that modern globality deprived the world of *le sens* – its significance or purpose (Conley, 2014, p. 87).

Writing at a historical juncture (three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall), Nancy claims that the world lost an external point of reference, which served as a direction toward a better future. Instead, the blind technological and economic exploitation allowed the world to lose “its capacity to form a world” (Pettigrew, Raffoul and Nancy, 2007, p. 3), or to be anchored by the virtues that enabled a transformation to take place (Conley, 2014, p. 89). His profound nihilism is grounded in an ever-expanding agglomeration of markets, which Nancy perceives as spaces of play of capital that lead to nothing else but misery (Nancy, 2007, p. 43; Meurs, 2009, p. 39). To re-make the world, he proposes, the world should not only make sense, but also *be* sense (Nancy and Connor, 1997, p. 3; Conley, 2014, p. 88). In other words, the world should be participated in on account of circulation of meaning through thought as action in order to fulfill the stakes of the desire to create the world, and the impulse for the life itself (Conley, 2014, p. 96). For Nancy, the world-extending project is the one of plurality of worlds, where co-extending, co-expressing and co-arriving at the constellation of possibilities must represent value that is not expressed through capital (Conley, 2014, pp. 89–90).

The BRI, presented as a non-hegemonic vision of the world where equality and mutuality ensure a shared future yet to come, uses the rhetoric of common prosperity as not an end-goal but rather a means to a vision of a successful and peaceful co-existence. The purpose laid out in its vision is not grounded in an imaginary world, no matter how ambitious the dream of Silk Road revival seems to be. Instead, it provides meaning and promise to collective dreams of a better future by relying on the golden past infused with the intrinsic human curiosities and desires for a greater time to come, especially at the time of hopelessness with the direction of contemporary globality.

Since Nancy's remedy for today's world lies in reviving how "the world symbolizes in itself with itself, in which it articulates itself by making a circulation of meaning possible without reference to another world" (Nancy, 2007, p. 53), the BRI's vision of *mondialité*, or worldliness, seems to accomplish this very goal. Painting a vision of the re-connected world by referencing the romantic past of the very world itself, the Silk Road redux embodied by the BRI projects a collective dream to be realized, or what Nancy would call, a thought that "ex-scribes itself... that lets sense carry it away...beyond all signification and interpretation" (Conley, 2014, p. 89). By assembling both individual and collective dreams of a better future, the BRI offers a promise of renewal and rebirth of ancient civilization order against the brute fact of accelerated economic globalization. It opens a way for an authentic world-making project, or mondialization, to create a space in which, to quote Nancy, "a certain tonality resonates" (Nancy, 2007, p. 42) – and that tonality is the Silk Road imaginary.

II. The Invention of the Silk Road Imaginary

With the primary task of reinscribing the significance of cultural flows and the circulation of ideas, narratives and meanings into the research in humanistic social sciences, this chapter interrogates the emergence of the Silk Road idea and its consequential journey into becoming an enduring cultural imaginary. By tracing the birth of the concept from the crossroads of techno-scientific blueprints and fantastical myths, it sketches the history of an idea that moved across global circuits of geological knowledge to become a vision of a united and prosperous humanity. Beginning with the coinage of the term “Silk Road” in 1877, this chapter traces both the eastward flow of geo-economic logic to China and the legacy of one man who, as a powerful cultural actor, not only equipped the world with a term that would much later animate the BRI, but also inspired the promotion of frictionless industrialization in hopes of instilling entrepreneurial energy in the nineteenth-century China. Through geological imagination paved with steel and coal, the following maps the invention of the Silk Road imaginary, and its early movement across time and space.

The Birth of the Silk Road Idea

Although networks of exchange had existed for millennia, the ways of conceptualizing or visualizing them are relatively new. Similarly, the ideas of cross-cultural and transcontinental connectivity are not the products of contemporary processes of globalization. Instead, as Chapter I demonstrated, these ideas possess archetypal qualities that have become solidified in the materiality of silk at the peak of ancient Eurasian trade. Silk, in this instance, no longer remained

a cloth, but rather became both a commodity and a medium that formulated theories of unimpeded flow of tradable goods, ideas, peoples and religions. Over the millennia, the material commodity of silk became an object of imagination. It survived in a form of narratives that told stories of imperial prowess, national prosperity and opportunity, which transformed the Silk Road from a universalized spirit and aesthetic of interconnection into an enduring global imaginary.

In this context, it is both the archetypal structures of meaning and the stories of writers, explorers and diplomats which allowed the Silk Road idea to emerge as a coherent historical narrative. However, for the Silk Road to become an entity that is systematized and recognizable, it had to be named. Only then, it was allowed to be understood, told and circulated across distant geographies, as well as be mapped, visualized and deployed for political, geostrategic and commercial means. It is, therefore, its discursive creation, which allowed the Silk Road to become a narrative that subsequently transformed into a global cultural imaginary upon its circulation. This imaginary, offering multiple and endless reinterpretations of its historical reality, began to open up a possibility of a desirable future yet to come.

The idea of the Silk Road revival emerged as promptly as the term itself, which did not only shape the worldly imaginings of the East, but it also became an important element of China's historical and contemporary globality. Before the term "Silk Road" was coined, there was no single expression, or a vision, for what we now refer to as the ancient trading routes. Neither Greek, Latin, Sanskrit or classical Chinese provides us with a name which encapsulates the complexity of ideas and meanings that began to define the Sino-Western encounter (Chin, 2018). In ancient China, particularly during Han Dynasty, the traditional texts refer to regions or areas rather than "routes" when describing what we currently understand as the ancient Silk Road. These carried the name of *Xiyu* which translates to "Western Territories" or the "Western Region" (西域), which included terrain stretching westward of the imperial capital of Chang'an

(today's Xi'an) through Dunhuang (Northwestern Gansu Province), and all the way to the enclaves laying beyond China's cultural and ethnic borders: Kashmir and Iran.

In conceptualizing the routes, Chinese historical texts described the number of Chinese miles from a particular region either back to Chang'an, or to the Protectorate of the Western Region, which was the seat of the viceroy who ruled over the area (*Xiyu dubu*). At the same time, the peoples of the Central Asian steppes living along the ancient trade routes, never described them as such. Instead of referring to them as a unified geographical space of commerce and exchange, Central Asian sources tended to fragment the Silk Road into various dispersed paths, and refer to selected "roads" as ones leading to a next destination, for instance as in "the road to Samarkand," or the "northern" or "southern" routes that circumvented the Taklamakan Desert (Hansen, 2012, p. 7). It was only in 1877 when Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German colonial geographer and an uncle of the World War I fighter pilot Manfred von Richthofen, introduced the term *Seidenstraße*, which later translated into English as the Silk Road would appear in books and popular media to, eventually, start being used in China as a direct translation "Sichou zhi lu" (絲綢之路) in the 1970s, to finally become a commonplace in the 1980s (Whitfield, 2007, p. 202).

First featured in his own writing, the term subsequently entered the English language as the *Silk Road*, as well as began to circulate widely in both popular and scholarly discourse (first as "silk route," and later as "Silk Road"). Although usually expressed in the singular, the Silk Road has always referred to multiple overlapping pathways and transregional networks which flourished from around 100 B.C.E. to the fifteenth century, and allowed for the exchange and spread of silk, other goods, ideas, religions as well as disease between the cultures now labelled as the "East" and the "West." It still is uncertain whether Richthofen, consciously or not, decided to use a singular version of the term over the plural *Seidenstraßen*, or Silk Roads, in spite of being

aware of the multiplicity of historically networked routes of ancient connection. He, therefore, did not merely coin the term, but actually consolidated scientific inaccuracies of Greco-Roman geographers along with the fantasies of frontier exploration, to create a universal myth inscribed onto a map.

In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes once suggested that that popular ideas can be drained of their original meaning, and subsequently repackaged to produce myths (Barthes, 1972). Borrowing from Barthes, a myth does not simply imply a “an idle fantasy, a fiction, or a falsehood” (Grassie, 2010, p. 27), but rather it projects a sacred narrative that reflects the workings of societies and cultures that produce them, which can explain how the world “hangs together” (Dundes, 1984). Therefore, when stripped of its antiquity, the Silk Road has become an ambiguous story of prosperous and romanticized past that was open to interpretations and reinventions. From this point in history, the “patchwork of drifting trails and unmarked footpaths” that once defined the common conceptualizations of the ancient trading routes (Hansen, 2012, p. 8), was redefined and bestowed with a life of its own.

Named, and having gradually earned acceptance, the Silk Road idea progressively overshadowed Richthofen’s geological expertise that produced one of the most prolific studies of China’s geological composition and, most importantly, shaped our common modern-day understanding of the Silk Road. The Silk Road was not born at the exact moment when Richthofen coined the term and placed it onto the map of Central Asia. Its beginnings go back to a complex entanglement of his experiences as well as global shifts. Therefore, the discursive articulation of the Silk Road is a product of Richthofen’s scientific curiosity as well as the fantasies of his time as the turn of the nineteenth century, which heralded a critical juncture in global history that was characterized by a transnational discourse of national prosperity, territorial expansion and industrialization (Farrell and Brunero, 2018; Rosecrance, 1986). It was that

moment which shaped Richthofen's scientific preoccupation and, indirectly, contributed to the creation of the modern Silk Road.

Let me backtrack a little. To sketch the history of the Silk Road idea, one cannot overlook the history of the man that stood behind it. Richthofen was born in 1833 in Karlsruhe *O/S* in the Prussian province of Silesia (today's Pokój, Poland), exactly in the same year that brought the word "scientist" into the English language (Chiari, 2017, p. 9). Being a part of the Junker nobility, he did not follow his prescribed career in Prussian bureaucracy or the military (Engelmann, 1988, p. 5; Steinmetz, 2008, pp. 405–416), and instead developed strong interests in natural sciences, which brought him first to University of Breslau, and later, to Berlin, where he studied geology, physics and chemistry (Wu, 2015, p. 38). Berlin of the mid-nineteenth century was an intellectually-stimulating space which exposed Richthofen to a variety of Western and Eastern scholarly influences that furthered his deep interests in transregional geological explorations. He deeply admired Alexander von Humboldt from afar (Engelmann, 1988, p. 7), and having graduated from the University of Berlin in 1856, he joined the Imperial Geological Institute of the Habsburg Empire, under which he conducted extensive fieldwork in Tyrol, Transylvania, and Hungary (Drygalski, 1905, pp. 683–684).

At the time, the German states were politically unstable and the state funds for scientific explorations abroad were scarce, which prompted many German scientists to seek patronage from other European powers. This allowed many of Richthofen's contemporaries, such as Humboldt himself, to travel extensively and use modern scientific language to describe distant geographical regions. The year of 1858 brought sweeping changes in the field of modern geology with Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States signing the Treaty of Tianjin, which allowed for the opening of China to diplomatic missions. Preoccupied with the prospect of losing trade opportunities as well as international advantage, Prussia decided to lead the expedition to

East Asia (1860–1862) to discuss the terms of trade agreement with China, which was piloted by Richthofen sent on behalf of the German Customs Union (Wu, 2014, p. 345).

Upon his return to Europe in 1862, Richthofen temporarily relocated to San Francisco to continue his geological career, which coincided with the discovery of golden flecks in the stream nearby Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California that later became known as the Californian Gold Rush (Mattern, 2004). Lured by the region's "untold riches" and the prospects of "dark, unexplored corridors" of possibility (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 85), Richthofen, like many gold-seekers, was drawn to the American West, which was reinforced by an increased federal sponsorship of geological surveys in the region. This allowed him to remain in the U.S. for the next six years during which he continued his geological explorations to produce a series of state-funded reports on the natural resources and mines in both California and Nevada (Wu, 2014, p. 347). It was then when he first-handedly experienced the power of speculative capitalism as well as mineral wealth, which resonated with him deeply in his subsequent geological explorations.

Geological and energy research at the time went hand in hand with the rapid industrialization, development of transportation infrastructures as well as the growth of natural sciences (Ballantyne and Burton, 2014; Headrick, 2012; Ray, 2003; Rosenberg, 2012). The Westward expansion of the United States became an iconic example of these circumstances. Facilitated with the railroad construction that incited the nation with dynamism and a desire for progress (Nye, 2004, p. 2), the move Westward seemed to correspond with the expansion of Euro-Western empires that relied on scientific research and technological breakthrough to support, justify and legitimize their imperial projects. Richthofen became an active agent embedded within that historical moment. Observing the movement of migrant workers from China to the United States

to construct the Transcontinental Railroad,⁵⁷ he was encouraged by the American geologist Josiah Dwight Whitney to return to China, to perform the first large-scale geological survey of the Chinese nation (Richthofen and Tiessen, 1907).

Such project had never been completed. Therefore, its practical implications attracted many, including the Bank of California, which sponsored Richthofen's exploration of East Asia. With their financial support, and inspired by his experiences in the America, Richthofen set sail for Shanghai to "to conduct "geological research on the mountains and to investigate some coal deposits" in the Chinese interior (Richthofen and Tiessen, 1907, p. 29). This mission would begin his acclaimed career and, consequently, establish his reputation as a scientific authority on China. His fieldwork in China (1868 to 1872) culminated with a five-volume atlas entitled *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien (China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon; Thereafter: China)*, that used the term Silk Road for the first time in history (Hansen, 2012, p. 7).

In his monumental study, Richthofen relied on the works of Greco-Roman geographers, Ptolemy and Marinus, whose maps became the basis of European cartography. Using the terms *die Seidenstraße des Ptolomaeus* (Silk Road of Ptolemy) and *die Seidenstraße des Marinus* (Silk Road of Marinus), Richthofen demonstrated his appreciation for his scientific contemporaries while indicating the Eastern-most limits of Greek and Roman knowledge (Chin, 2013, 2018, 2019). Controversially at the time, Richthofen's Silk Road suggested that what was known by the Greeks and Romans was insufficient in capturing the totality of the Eastern landscape. With this rather unconventional statement (we speak of the nineteenth-century Euro-Western academy), his reproduction of the mythologized rendering of Greco-Roman antiquity is not ironic, but rather

⁵⁷ See the "Manifest Destiny" section of this chapter for more information.

falls within the larger historical continuum of both innovative forms of mapping as well as fantastical desires of transregional connection (including those of King Mu and Zhang Qian), which he anchored discursively in a single term: *die Seidenstraße*, or the Silk Road.

The Rhetoric of the Future

Recent humanistic scholarship concerned with the modern economy has focused on the rhetoric of the future (Chin, 2018). Anthropologists such as Caitlin Zaloom and Arjun Appadurai have illuminated the role of rituals and performative language in the calculation of derivatives, future's contracts and risks that are so central to contemporary finance and globalization (Appadurai and Stenou, 2000; Appadurai, 2005, 2013; Zaloom, 2009, 2018; Chin, 2018). Even Timothy Mitchell has described the historical rise of the U.S. economy as a device for embedding present political life in a future viewed as the calculated national balance of wage earners and consumers on the one hand, and business and banking on the other (Mitchell, 2014; Chin, 2018). However, this acceleration of temporality in a form of unpredictable future is not a novel phenomenon, but one which has already been an enduring credo in Richthofen's times, when the social and cultural change accompanied economic expansion.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the world had become interconnected at a level that went beyond the common understanding of transregional relationships of the past (Sturm-Lind, 2018, p. 7). Connecting up the modern world through the steamships, which came into practical usage during the early 1800s, as well as the already widespread railroad and the telegraph, helped to standardize units of modern time and space, and to produce maps that displayed the physical infrastructures of connection. The complexity and sheer amount of transcontinental exchanges invited some to consider the second quarter of the nineteenth century as the beginning of a truly

global era (McKeown, 2007), which did not only signal a more integrated world-system, but also saw the birth of science as a profession (Livingstone and Withers, 2011).

Science and scientific reasoning have defined the spirit of modern age. Replacing the former idea of a “natural philosopher,” the new term “scientist” was coined by a Cambridge University historian and philosopher, William Whewell in 1833, who, interestingly similar to Richthofen’s personal longings, historical records and expeditions, used a discursive creation to comprehend contemporary developments and encapsulate the rapid dynamism of his times. Shortly, science would become an integral vehicle of the nineteenth-century globalization. In spite of the fact that observations of the natural world had existed since classical antiquity, and that the scientific method had already been used by scholars such as Ibn al-Haytham or Roger Bacon in the Middle Ages, science was no longer a domain of “natural philosophers.” Instead, it became a voice of reason, truth and progress, which many saw in Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, Dmitri Mendeleev’s formulation of the periodic table, and Michael Faraday’s contributions to the study of electromagnetism (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2012, p. 596; Shaver, 2018).

But apart from pushing the frontiers of knowledge, science began to conquer the physical landscape by pushing the frontiers of possibility. Promising a future defined by world trade and transregional transportation, the nineteenth-century world saw the debut of the first successful steam locomotive in 1814, the invention of Charles Goodyear’s vulcanized rubber in 1839, and Karl Benz’s first applied internal-combustion engine that was introduced in 1885. The march toward the future was led by scientists, engineers and technocrats. Alongside these developments, an ensemble of ideas, norms and socio-cultural logics emerged, which positioned science as the vehicle toward new transportation and manufacturing processes that incorporated machines, mineral resources and steam power.

These transformations produced visions of the future accessible to everyone which were presented in a form of the now antiquated genre of world transport history (Chin, 2018, 2019). Such narratives about human progress incited a revival of traditions of the “Age of Reason” and the “Enlightenment” by stimulating debates about the roles of natural resources, innovation, development, trade and economic growth (Middell, 2018). Trade, however, seemed to encapsulate all, as it stimulated new routes of exchange and economic growth as well as it was stimulated by different geographies of demand for and supply of natural resources. While the idea of the world market had begun to emerge during colonial rivalry, it was the nineteenth-century trade which accelerated the rise of a transnational supply chains and mechanized factory systems due to the energy transition to large-scale use of fossil fuels (McNeill, 2001; Richards, 2003).

Whether by agricultural or industrial revolutions, mechanization of transport, or by imperial frontier projects—inclusive of mining, plantation and settler-colonialism—the farthest and impenetrable world regions became embedded in a new system of global trade entanglements (Moore, 2010a, 2010b). These new realities found their way into the language of the era. Beginning with the industrial revolutions that began the Anthropocene, industrialists themselves produced forms of *longue durée* histories that narrated man’s reshaping of his environment through infrastructures of connection (Chin, 2018, 2019). These stories of world transport established new spatial frameworks that would later reemerge in the contemporary Mediterranean Studies or the Silk Road Studies (Chin, 2018). The nineteenth century also brought a genre of science fiction which emerged as a way “to integrate earlier modes of future consciousness” through mythic narratives that were informed by scientific and technological projections (Lombardo, 2011, p. 174).

Jules Verne's lesser known novel⁵⁸ becomes an iconic illustration of the rhetoric of the future. Describing the journey of a French foreign correspondent along the "Grand Transasiatic Railway" from Uzun Ada, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, to Peking, Verne equipped his story with geographical and scientific detail against a futuristic plot. The actual Trans-Caspian Railway which construction begun in 1879, and along which the characters in the novel travel, never reached past Tashkent and Andijon. In fact, Kashgar would become connected to Eastern China only in 1999. In spite of this, Verne voiced the imaginations of the time, and projected a vision of a continuous rail line across Eurasia to the Chinese capital, at the time when no such connection existed.

Richthofen's work is deeply rooted in the new forms of perceiving the world that were particular to his times, when scientists were believed to be able to "grasp and hold a knowable future" (Clavin, 2014). In 1892, American economist Irving Fisher described his profession as an effort to "see better" and "further." To him, "the first explorers used unaided vision," while the evolution of mathematics bestowed societies with "the lantern by which what before was dimly visible now loom[ed] up in firm, bold outlines" (in Yueh, 2018, p. 96). In this context, a figure of an economist-scientist began to convey the spirit of the Western "economic miracle," as the ideas of scientific progress and modernization had taken hold.

Against this backdrop, Germany of the nineteenth century had been experiencing a widespread industrial development (Berghahn, 2005; Borchardt, 1991). This was mainly attributed to the Prussian tariff of 1818, which treated pig iron imports as a raw material and stimulated the long-term development of the iron and steel industry (Breuilly, 2019), as well as the growing and

⁵⁸ Jules Verne, *The Adventures of a Special Correspondent among the Various Races and Countries of Central Asia, Being the Exploits and Experiences of Claudius Bombarnac of "The Twentieth Century,"* Extraordinary Voyages #38 (First UK edition: London, Sampson Low, 1894).

more organized power of the “state” across Europe in promoting economic growth (Spielvogel, 2020, p. 705). New methods of rolling and shaping steel allowed the construction of lighter ships and better railways (Spielvogel, 2020, p. 705), which redefined the nineteenth-century Europe. By the end of the century, German cities became “complex economic organisms” with advanced infrastructures that allowed for a massive expansion of commercial enterprises as the *Nowelle Richesse* used their disposable income to purchase material goods (McElligott, 2001, p. 129).

This potent synergy of practical motivations, imperial interests and commercial enthusiasm informed much of Richthofen’s work, which rendered him celebrated in the West for pioneering scientific exploration of East Asia, and vilified in China for “opening the floodgates of imperialism” (Wu, 2015, p. 1). Grounded in the legacies of both Marinus and Ptolemy (Chin, 2013, p. 198), Richthofen’s idea of the Silk Road revival was visualized only with the publication of his master geological survey, *China* (Fig. 13). It is there, where the singularity of the Silk Road (both discursive and visually represented) helps us explain the complexity of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with scientific progress that existed simultaneously with the allure of connected and prosperous future that often undermines scientific impartiality.

As a result, Richthofen’s own metaphor for his Silk Road calculations was one of “stereoscopic vision” (Chin, 2018). Drawing on the Greco-Roman antiquity, Richthofen recounted Ptolemy’s geographical method in rendering the ancient Silk Routes, which had failed to represent the earth’s curvature while maintaining all distances proportional.⁵⁹ Richthofen’s *Seidenstraße*,

⁵⁹ In his texts, Richthofen introduces a metaphor of stereoscopic combination when he explains how his mapping of the Silk Road is a better interpretation of Ptolemy’s data. Richthofen draws on Henry Yule’s description of Ptolemy’s technique of seeing with each eye that, arguably, did not allow him to unify two distinct pictures into one, therefore creating unsound and not specific representations of the Silk Road. In this way, Richthofen began to use stereoscopic device instead of a binocular, which allowed him to “describe the way in which human vision accommodates the slight parallax of the two eyes” (Chin, 2013, p. 203).

therefore, attempted to replace the narrow scope of Ptolemy's "binocular vision" of the ancient silk routes with the one of a stereoscope (Chin, 2013, p. 203), which symbolized a fusion of geological knowledge that incorporated Chinese records in a seemingly altruistic rendering of the ancient trading routes. Having consolidated both ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman data, Richthofen produced an illusory yet visual emplotment of time suspended between both past and future in the shadows of the haptic present (Chin, 2013, p. 203).

While this maneuver allowed Richthofen to correct Ptolemy's inaccuracies, it also, metaphorically, "transform[ed] the issue of cartographical mapping into a problem of seeing" (Chin, 2013, p. 205). It offered a contradictory logic that projected modern progress via an enduring historical myth. In his 1877 map of Central Asia, Richthofen provided an overview of transport connections spanning the years of 128 B.C. to 150 A.D. in an effort to use this geographical data to plot out an ambitious plan for a railroad connecting China with Europe. The map itself represented the ancient silk routes in a form of a single red line running horizontally between its left and right edge, and piercing through the modern-day city of Xi'an, China. This illustration was supplemented with a network of less-prominent blue lines, which represented information that he obtained from the Chinese sources, particularly coming from the Han Dynasty's Annals (Chin, 2013, p. 199).

While the discursive and geographically-rendered singularity of Richthofen's Silk Road does not correspond to his appreciation of the historical reality, his representation belongs to the first modern European maps of Central Asia that asserted the scientific value of classical Chinese texts (Chin, 2018, 2013). In this context, we can suggest that Richthofen, perhaps unintentionally, reproduced some of the intricate fantasies and imprecisions associated with the ancient trading routes in his discursive and geographical creation of the Silk Road. This rendering, subsequently, framed the Silk Road was less of a bridge between East and West, as it is imagined today, but

rather a physical and measurable route stretching from Eastern China through Xi'an to beyond Bactra (today's Balkh, Afghanistan).

This measurable quality that inscribed physical landscapes with visions yet to come stemmed from a feature of maps identified as “graphic tools of colonization” (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 120–121). Utilizing both Western and Eastern sources, Richthofen attempted to promote and legitimize a German imperial blueprint for railroad construction, which intention was to extract mineral deposits to facilitate China's nation-wide industrialization by the German state (Chin, 2019, 2018, 2013; Wu, 2014, 2015). While maps frequently contain meanings that reinforce specific interpretations of history (Harley, 2002), the process of widespread mapping, particularly during the nineteenth-century Europe, ultimately led to changes in the ways people perceived abstract notions of national boundaries as well as the meanings and uses of national resources (Winichakul, 1997, pp. 129–131). Therefore, this measurable Silk Road inscribed onto Richthofen's map employed the romantic language of historical prosperity, which, interestingly, was legitimated with the logics of scientific precision, geological innovation and capitalist progress.

The Railroad Letters

Notwithstanding his sentiments or motivations, Richthofen's greatest contribution to modern Silk Road Studies lies in the fact that he bestowed China with the Silk Road in its current articulation, just as he provided the world with the notion that Silk Road can be revived. Silk Road has never been in possession of a single region, empire or a nation-state. However, only when it was named as such, it had periodically been claimed by China as their own (Wood, 2016). Richthofen solidified a vaguely-connected set of ideas of cross-cultural encounter, transregional

connectivity, prosperity, opportunity, and peaceful co-existence with a name that would subsequently capture minds of individuals worldwide.

In many respects, Richthofen's legacy resembles the achievements of Johan Gunnar Andersson, a Swedish archaeologist, paleontologist and geologist, who reconstructed China's antiquity through his unprecedented discovery of the teeth of "Peking Man," which gave rise to Chinese archeology in the 1920s.⁶⁰ Ironically, both Andersson and Richthofen became vectors of Western scientific knowledge transfer into China, which happened at the time of an ongoing Western plunder of China's riches with "caravan-loads of priceless treasures" taken from "the temples, tombs and ruins of Chinese Turkistan [that] have been carried off to foreign museums and are forever lost to China" (Hopkirk, 2001, p. 1). In spite of the similarities between the two scientists, Richthofen's story is much more nuanced.

Although, the five heavy leather-bound volumes of his masterwork *China* provided a formerly non-existent compilation of geological knowledge of the nation, the work itself never approached its presumed praise. In spite of the efforts of the German Colonial Office, Richthofen's *China* was initially published in German and it had never been translated into English, which restricted its dissemination to the narrow circles of German-speaking academe. Projected to revolutionize modern geology in China as well as the state's natural resource management, Richthofen's master

⁶⁰ See: *Children of the Yellow Earth* (1934). In 1914, Andersson was invited to China as mining adviser to the Chinese government. It was then when Andersson assisted to train China's first generation of geologists. Several years later, in 1921, he identified traces of quartz which was not local to the area, therefore, realizing that this could have indicated the presence of prehistoric man. Further excavations in 1923-1926 allowed Andersson to announce the discovery of two human teeth, which were later identified as the Peking Man. Having discovered Neolithic human remains in the Henan Province along the Yellow River, Andersson reconstructed the region's prehistoric past. This produced a major archaeological breakthrough not only for China, but also for the world in advancing the scientific process of archeological excavations and historical knowledge production. In fact, Andersson's work expanded to other provinces, such as Gansu and Qinghai, which resulted in a publication of numerous books, papers and documents in 1923-1924 that translated to many languages and circulated widely (Andersson, 1934).

survey of the nation never directly reached either Chinese students or the Qing officials (Wu, 2014, p. 353). In spite of this, Richthofen's explorations still carried widespread impact.

Prior to compiling his masterwork *China*, he produced a series of reports on the nation's mineral wealth between 1870 and 1872 which he sent to the British and American-controlled Shanghai Chamber of Commerce. Although it was only in the late Qing dynasty when the state officials and Chinese geologists began to familiarize themselves with his work (Wu, 2014, p. 535), Richthofen's reports, began to circulate widely in the Western circles. Originally written in a form of eleven letters, they were published in the 1872 issues of *North China Herald*, a leading English-language newspaper in China at the time, and examined in great detail the geological composition of Hunan, Hubei, Henan, Shanxi, Zhejiang, Gansu, the areas of Nanjing, Sichuan, Zhili, and Mongolia (Wu, 2015, p. 61).

Astounded by vast natural resources while leading the German geological exploration of mainland China, the letters remained the only English-language documents produced by Richthofen. Across eleven of them, which laid out the ground for his masterwork to be published five years later, he presented an elaborate plan of extracting coal from China's rich deposits in the imperial quest to build a transregional railway "from the German sphere of influence in Shandong through the coalfields near Xi'an all the way to Germany" (Hansen, 2012, p. 8). This aspiration, preceding Richthofen's coinage of the term *Seidenstraße* in 1877, appeared as a series of benevolent suggestions in his earlier work, which was most visible in his letter on the Province of Hunan.

It is there, where by classifying the region's geological makeup, Richthofen discussed the affordability, yet slowness, of water-based transportation systems which, to him, were highly inefficient and hindered China's economic progress. This criticism allowed him to call for "an introduction of modern means of conveyance," which could not only benefit the region's economy but also the local peoples (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6). Initially, his proposal for the

transcontinental railway was never explicitly stated, but rather became a reoccurring theme across his letters that was found side-by-side his geological analysis. Purposefully legitimizing the German railway project, Richthofen believed that China could industrialize and catch up with its Western contemporaries only if the nation embraced the need to capitalize on its natural wealth.

By meticulously counting the number of vessels on Chinese riverbeds, along with their limited capacity to transport tradable goods, Richthofen advocated for simultaneous establishment of industrial coal-mining and improvements in land-based transportation to facilitate Western-style modernity and development in China facilitated with coal exports. Inspired by, and in response to, the cross-country railway in the United States completed in 1869 (Bain, 2000), he envisioned connecting Asia with Europe as a matter of national importance (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6). In the “Letter on the Province of Northern Shensi,” Richthofen began to map out the project, which he expressed by saying that “little doubt can exist that, eventually, China will be connected with Europe by rail” (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6). His vision was accompanied with the language of early transnational supply chains, where a rail, which could connect Suzhou and Zhejiang Provinces in the Eastern China, with Xi’an, Shanxi Province, and Lanzhou, Gansu Province all the way to the Western “populous, productive and large commercial countries,” would benefit both China and the world beyond its borders (Richthofen, 1870).

“It is a remarkable coincidence,” he added, “that this whole road, including the Pelu [Beilu, “the northern route” around the Tarim Basin], is well provided with coal” (Richthofen, 1870). Richthofen’s vision, which provided a background to his letters, seemed to coincide with the coal-rich route in northwest China that represented a series of possibilities for Sino-Western connectivity, including a bold proposal for a modern railway connecting Europe with China. In spite of its grand scope, the idea itself did not seem too eccentric at the time, when a Harold Innis, praised long-distance railroads as “uniting environment, technology and nationalism”

(Maier, 2016, p. 205). In politics, however, British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, famously remarked that “small kingdoms are marked out by the destinies of the world for destruction...[and] the great organizations and greater means of locomotion of the present day mark out the future to be one of great empires” (Maier, 2016, p. 205).

In this context, the nineteenth-century notions of railroad-connectivity became scientifically and politically-justified visions of worldliness. Against this backdrop, Richthofen was determined to promote his vision of a transcontinental railroad. In a series of lectures delivered in Berlin in the 1890s, he claimed that since “people have overcome natural obstacles with the [railroad],” “the dependence of mankind on geographical conditions is now minimized,” and mountain ranges, swamps and deserts can be crossed and conquered with the aid of modern transportation (Richthofen, 1908, p. 230).

However, Richthofen’s ambitious drive for modern connectivity and industrialization could have already been seen in his letters. It is there, where his promise of speeding up the transregional trade, local industry as well as maximizing transportation capabilities coincided with a particular moment of the European, Russian and American interventionism in China, where imperial motivations found their disguise in the discourse of progress and industrialization. Richthofen was not a precursor of this movement. It is believed that the ideas of Western-style development and industrialization were carried to China by the English explorer named Thomas Wright Blakiston, who in 1861 traveled up the Yangtze River going much further into the Chinese interior than any Westerner before him (Yong et al., 2016, p. 400).

Blakiston’s explorations heralded the beginning of an era of “the development of China for science,” as he advocated for a “full practical exploitation through world-traffic” along with the need for technological progress to transform China into “arena of competition” (Chin, 2013, p. 209). Envisioning the worlding of China, or rather its full integration and incorporation into the

world-wide circulation of capital, Blakiston was the first to promote the ideas of capital accumulation in China, which would later take the turn of exploitation of natural resources in order to facilitate global market competition. However, his attitude and motivations remained highly distinctive from those of Richthofen. While Blakiston saw China as an isolated space to be transfigured, if not conquered (Chin, 2013, p. 209), Richthofen's attitude toward Chinese modernization was different. His work showed a strong inclination toward China as a region of unrivaled mineral wealth which ought to be utilized in creating an "important future" (Chin, 2013, p. 209; Eitel, 1889)

In spite of Richthofen's seemingly amicable attitude, he, just as Blakiston, necessitated and justified China's self-exploitation as the means for facilitating its economic opening. The physical representation of this logic of capital and capture was presented by a German diplomat to China, Max von Brandt, who in 1899 mapped the scramble for China, or rather both ongoing and projected railroad initiatives that were pursued by the major powers, inclusive of Germany, the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Japan and Belgium, in China (Fig. 14). These railroad projects were never solely foreign, but always involved Chinese partnerships. Nevertheless, as Tamara Chin pointed out, the railway treaties by these foreign powers or private syndicates "enabled or followed territorial encroachment and involved loan agreements that gave the Chinese government the right to repurchase the lines only after a set number of decades" (Chin, 2013, p. 214).

Eerily resembling the criticism looming over certain past and present Belt and Road projects (Akhter, 2018; Balding, 2018; Changhoon, 2017; Djankov and Miner, 2016; Ferdinand, 2016; Mações, 2019; Miller, 2017), that form of territorial capture by foreign powers was partially legitimated with the nearly universal appeal of global connectivity. Those railways, which reinstated the ancient Silk Road city of Xi'an as an important hub of the Chinese railway network

(Chin, 2013, p. 214), allowed Richthofen to highlight China's commercial capabilities as well as "the potential significance of future lines running west from Xi'an" (Chin, 2013, p. 210). While Richthofen envisioned reviving the Silk Road between modern-day Balkh, Afghanistan, and China's Xi'an, he might have never hoped that his idea would later provide the basis for an important Europe-China connection, which would be revived during the imperial rivalry among the Russian, British and Qing empires under the name of the Great Game (1813 – 1907) (Chin, 2013, p. 210-11). This idea of Sino-Western connection would consequently reemerge years later with the announcement of the BRI in 2013. In this manner, Richthofen's letters did not only correspond with an era of global scramble for railway concessions, but they provided a vivid example of an industrial history and projected the modern idea of reshaping physical landscape through infrastructures of connection as well as narratives of historical revival, which would soon become a global imaginary.

Imagining the Prosperous Past

At the time of Richthofen's geological surveying, the nineteenth-century industrialization necessitated synchronizing and connecting up the premodern world into a coeval space-time (Chin, 2013, 2018, 2019). During the nineteenth century, industrial geographers retroactively bestowed the notions of modern traffic and communication with a more ancient history, just as geographical societies and maritime trade schools began to teach a new, now discontinued, genres of world trade history and history of world transport (Chin, 2018; Gunn, 2017). These narratives that spanned millennia were, in fact, histories of connectivity. They imagined a bygone prosperous time, and gave modern infrastructure a deep past by placing ancient canals, urban structures and

colonial railways in the same narrative as modern trade infrastructures and supply chains (Chin, 2018; Rodrigue, 2016).

During the time, a less prestigious genre of global transport history emerged as it presented “a more coeval ancient world,” which “synchronized multiple Western and non-Western textual traditions into a spatial temporally standardized, interconnected antiquity, even if for colonial or capitalist ends” (Chin, 2018). Richthofen’s work belongs to this category. As he cultivated the future-oriented visions of the nineteenth-century Western modernity, he was also deeply appreciative of the classical Chinese texts and their scientific value (Chin, 2018, 2013). In spite of that, his Euro-western scientific training and experiences of American frontier and speculative capitalism, did not remain insignificant.

Inspired by the German state’s bold ambitions and the power of commerce and innovation, Richthofen became the first modern Western scientist who was responsible for both “mathematically rearranging pictures of [Chinese] landscape” (Chin, 2013, p. 205), and instilling the notions of industrialization-driven prosperity, opportunity, and ambition into China. In line with the nineteenth-century rhetoric of grasping the unknowable future, Richthofen did not only explore new avenues of communicating about China’s geological composition, but also, transferred the ideas of Western modernity into China which he rendered as a space to be mined, exploited and re-engineered in order to accommodate a revival of transcontinental connectivity.

This ethos emerged as a larger attempt to consolidate the histories of deep past to inscribe them into the modern visions of connectivity, which continues today. Some, throughout the years, replaced the dominant logic of continental territoriality with the one centered on the ocean. Starting with Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) which challenged the preconceived logic with a description of the Pacific as “the tide-beating heart of earth” (Melville, 1983, p. 491), to the more recent oceanic attitudes put forward by a Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa in his essay

“Our Sea of Islands” calling for a departure from the eighteenth-century colonial logic (Hau’Ofa, 2008, p. 32), there has been a visible reconfiguration of perspectives that grew out of, and were directly linked to, seaborne trade and navigation (Gunn, 2017).

These new frames of thinking went beyond merely circumscribing remote regions into the world. They demonstrated that coasts and shores remained inherent elements to the world’s anatomy as they celebrated both the histories of human beings as well as the shifting planetary webs of commerce and accumulation (Carson and Hubbell, 1998; Gillis, 2015, 2012). In this way, these new perspectives on the Mediterranean, and on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans considered global trade as a central structure that defined worldly relations and began to make world economics a shared narrative of human progress. This narrative, also associated with modernity and global connectivity, has gradually become an inherent part of, what I call, the Silk Road imaginary, which largely influenced its circulation.

The value of an imaginary as analytical concept, and methodological lens, lies in its paradoxical nature of nearly universal and socially accepted identification, which simultaneously coexists with a multitude of interpretations attached to it. It mirrors the essence of the Silk Road idea in being obscure and deceptive as to what it implies. While the imaginary itself is one of those concepts which we intuitively use and know, the term often slips into a repertoire of vague significations. Silk Road, in a similar manner, evokes familiarity and captures public imagination, yet offers little explanation, which was well expressed by Susan Whitfield who called for the need to reconsider the “usefulness [of the term Silk Road] before rejecting” it altogether (Whitfield, 2015, p. 21).

Filtering through the Silk Road’s idealism and its historical fabrication, I apply the concept of an imaginary to the Silk Road idea as it was elaborated by Charles Taylor and Cornelius Castoriadis, whose expositions are both meaningful and productive. Taylor, explaining the ways in which ideas are capable of shaping societies, defined an imaginary as an outcome of “the ways

in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). With an example of Western modernity, which was “at first just an idea,” Taylor suggested that it, eventually, provided societies with a new moral order that shaped “large strata, and then whole societies,” only to become “so [*sic.*] selfevident that we have trouble seeing it as one possible conception among others.” (Taylor, 2004, p. 2).

Understanding imaginary as a glue that keeps society together, Taylor does not understand imaginaries as aligned with the term’s common interpretation which is that of mirroring, but rather conforms to Benedict Anderson’s seminal remarks on nations as imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). He refers to imaginaries as essential structures of reality. However, his conceptualization does not clarify the imaginary’s relation to derivatives of the term, such as “image,” or “imagination,” which the notion of an imaginary, at times, tends to erode to. Castoriadis detangled this complexity by offering a conceptualization of an imaginary which is not “an image of,” but rather “the unceasing and essentially undetermined (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of something” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 3). He, therefore, never equated it with imagination, nor saw imaginary as peripheral to the sensory experience of the world. Instead, Castoriadis claimed that “what we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are [imaginary’s] works” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 3).

Hence, it is important to maintain a distinction between imagination and imaginaries, which would allow us to further understand the concept in relation to the Silk Road idea. It is often agreed upon that imagination is seen as a mechanism, or a force, through which we are capable of narrating future (Lennon, 2015). After all, as Ciara Bottici brilliantly noted, nothing can be represented or materialized before it is conceptualized or imagined (Bottici, 2014, p. 90). Imaginaries, therefore, become vehicles for imagination that equip them with ideological basis

which, by operating beneath the level of conscious thought, engage in “justifying, normalizing, [and] rationalizing ideas” (Gunn, 2017a; Mannheim, 2013). Their unique capacity brings them closer to an ideology, rather than a fantasy, since they do not only promote certain beliefs, values or beliefs, but they also render themselves “self-evident and apparently inevitable” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 5).

In this manner, Taylor suggested that imaginaries, or systems of ideas and symbolic images, enter both the consciousness and the unconscious of individuals to subsequently become materialized and legitimated through public actions and, therefore, recognized by societies as corporeal entities (Taylor, 2004). Castoriadis, in a similar vein, claimed that “history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 71). An imaginary, therefore, becomes a vehicles which could “weave together the sensory present with what is past, the projected future, and the spatial elsewhere [to create] a world for us” (Lennon, 2015, p. 2). Or, as Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar put it, people live among imaginaries which are penumbral to them because “it is through the collective agency of the social imaginary that a society is created” (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 7).

Never merely Chinese or Central Asian, the Silk Road should be considered an enlivening cultural imaginary. Throughout the years since its discursive creation, it became a form of worldly mythology which ability to connect premodern past with modern sensibilities allowed it to plot near-distant futures grounded in the geo-economic logic as well as the rhetoric of scientific precision, technological might and capitalist progress. Today, the Belt and Road does not evoke nearly as much familiarity as the Silk Road does. Hence, the Silk Road holds a compelling discursive power which wide recognition stems from a complex arrangement of meanings about the Sino-Western connectivity that remains universally appealing. The Silk Road imaginary brings

the symbolic, the fantastical and not-yet-existent to the forefront of social experience with the belief that ideas create what lies, or emerges, in front our eyes.

Without a doubt, entering the twenty-first century, Richthofen's Silk Road expanded its meaning to a narrative that made the modern future more comprehensible by romanticizing the ancient trading routes as "our" civilization—just as the Silk Road idea reminds us of the bygone prosperous times in signifying an organic form of belonging to the commercial and political networks that stretch across Eurasia. Grounded in this enduring idea, the Belt and Road Initiative, as the largest venture of its kind in history, is a palimpsest of two maps: the new and the old Silk Road (Chin, 2013, 2018, 2019). It constructs a modern legacy of the nineteenth-century "world economic" logic as it plots out a revival of the ancient network through modern railways, shipping routes, and financial agreements for trade and information exchange across Asia, Africa and Europe—but not the U.S. (Chin, 2013, 2018, 2019).

BRI's rhetorical mode is one of the revival, or prolepsis, as it persuades by telling us that a proto-globalized connectivity had existed long before the twenty first century—that connection implies "re-connection" (Chin, 2013, 2018, 2019). This language is not original, but mirrors Richthofen's story of wonder and awe for the ancient system of commodity exchange which enabled him to produce a precedent for the idea that the Silk Road can be revived. This had been visible in his strong belief that China could return to its commercial and political might of the times of cohesive trade infrastructure networks under the Ming, Han and T'ang Dynasties. It is this abundant and prosperous past that inspired Richthofen to call for the Silk Road revival.

Even though today Richthofen's name remains narrowly associated with the coinage of the term *Seidenstraße*, many scholars of the Silk Road seemed to overlook the role of Richthofen as a vector of knowledge circulation. Yet it was him who provided the foundation for the Silk Road imaginary. His letters circulated at the time of increased scientific activity, first entering China and

then finding their way to the West, at the time when transnational imperatives of supply and demand inspired a deep dive into the past to reorder both present and future. This ethos led to an emergence of “world economics” in 1914, precisely at the time when the world’s first Institute of World Economics at the University of Kiel, Germany was created (Van der Linden and Lucassen, 2012, p. 408).

First christened as the “Royal Institute for Maritime Transport and World Economics,” the institute’s name captured the earliest articulation of the world economy as a science of connectivity which, in its calculation of world trade, was driven by the geological notion of a terrain (Chin, 2018, 2019). As a newly established discipline, whose abstracted models of economic temporality transcended national borders and promoted histories of global commerce, world economics aimed at constructing a coherent narrative that crept into Richthofen’s geological surveys and, consequently, grounded his nineteenth-century scientific reports within a deep past of transcontinental exchanges as well as the value of terrain. In this manner, to fully sketch the emergence of the Silk Road imaginary, it is necessary to refocus our attention from Richthofen—the wordsmith, to Richthofen—the agent of both economic and scientific knowledge transfer into Asia.

Geo-economics of Prosperity

The rhetoric of economic prosperity achieved through greater connectivity became a driving force of Richthofen’s work that pieced together a series of geological assessments with his romantic longings. In one of his letters devoted to the Hunan Province, Richthofen continued to call for Silk Road revival and claimed that, against its falling production of silk, Xiangtan “owes its past and present commercial greatness to a concurrence of peculiar circumstances” (von

Richthofen, 1870, p. 11). As he suggested that some regions ought to take industry-centered approach due to their prime geographical location (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6), Richthofen evoked the region's former prosperity and alluded to the vibrancy of transregional exchanges dating the Silk Road antiquity.

He was convinced that his expedition would open up the Chinese economy to the rest of the world. Inspired by various instances of spectacular accumulation of wealth, inclusive of his experiences in the American West, Richthofen injected a particular sense of curiosity into his presumed trajectory to national prosperity.⁶¹ As he became convinced that trade connectivity and mineral resources were the only means of securing China's prosperous future, Richthofen published a series of maps in 1885 which, unlike other renderings of China, recorded minerals that laid beneath the surface of rivers and mountain ranges. These maps would soon make a significant visual impact on the locals and constitute a blueprint of Chinese mineral treasures (Wu, 2014, p. 351).

In an effort to fuel China's economy, Richthofen framed Xiangtan as the historical portal that promised a revival of the region's long glory. In one of his letters, he attested that "a great future may be confidently predicted for the Lui-river coal field, provided a market can be found for its abundance of excellent anthracite" (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6), which allowed him to place anthracite, or pure carbon, at the beating heart of the Chinese national potential. Although Richthofen failed to realize his project of a transnational railroad that would facilitate export-

⁶¹ This curiosity would later become theorized by Kenneth Pomeranz when he coined the theory of "Great Divergence," or rather an explanation as for why in the nineteenth century the Western world surpassed its pre-modern growth constraints and eclipsed Mughal India, Qing China, and the Islamic World during (Pomeranz, 2009). According to Pomeranz the combined role of institutions, colonial enterprise, and resource extraction and innovation were the factors that explained why the West emerged as largely powerful and prosperous (Pomeranz, 2009).

driven industrialization of China, this early vision of a global value chain became synonymous with a revival of the ancient Silk Road connectivity as a natural path for economic opening.

In this way, the notion of the Silk Road revival became a necessary step in China's incorporation into the global community of nations, where natural resources began to reign as the source of modernization, prosperity and power. Promoting labor productivity and capital expansion, Richthofen wrote an enduring story of China's bygone potential. His vision of maximizing China's commercial capacity was legitimated with both scientific logic and the neo-Confucian ethics,⁶² which recently found their way into the rhetoric surrounding the BRI (Yan and Sorenson, 2004). Apart from transferring geological knowledge into China, it is often overlooked that Richthofen became a vector of geo-economic thought transfer into the nation.

Generally understood as a practice of pursuing strategic aims—here by imperial powers—with economic means, geo-economics implies achieving political goals by exploiting increased trade interdependence with economic tools, such as sanctions or trade arrangements (Chin, 2018; Wigell, Scholvin and Aaltola, 2018). While this practice has become a commonplace in contemporary times, and is intensifying amid the ever increasing state interdependence (Ziauddin, 2019), it is useful to consider geo-economic thought as a tissue connecting the Silk Road idea with the BRI, which could shed light on the discursive and material powers of the Silk Road imaginary.

It does not come as a surprise that in the United States geo-economics has recently become associated with the ongoing “trade war” with China as President Donald Trump styled himself as the “tariff man,” and a defender of “number one economy” (Boucher and Thies, 2019; Kirby,

⁶² Here, I refer to values which incite the rhetoric of benevolence, tolerance and sympathy for one another, while also pertaining to the collectivist principles of cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and mutual support.

2018; Krugman, 2019). In Asia, by contrast, the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative takes the center stage in China's geo-economic revival as it represents itself not as a challenge to U.S. hegemony, but as the renewal of an older, 2,000-year-old civilizational order. In spite of the more modern manifestations, the articulation of geo-economics as a political concept dates back to the end of the Cold War when an adviser to the U.S. government, Edward Luttwak, conceptualized the term (Chin, 2018).

Luttwak saw geo-economics as “the logic of conflict in the grammar of commerce” since, he argued, major world conflicts have primarily been played out through and over embargoes, tariffs, and economic regulations (Chin, 2018; Luttwak, 1990). This did not discredit the term geopolitics, but rather refined it. Geo-economics would soon become adapted by German scholars who used it to describe conceptual representation of the links between geology and practical economy, especially in the field of mining (Stergiou, 2016). Consequently, the linkage between resource extraction and prosperous future was established in 1925, when a German right-wing economist, Arthur Dix, published his first manifesto about the concept entitled *Geoeconomy: Introduction in Economic Study of the Land*, which discussed the geo-economic thought as a key to restoring Germany's place in the world after World War I (Dix, 1925).

Like Luttwak in 1990, Dix in 1925 saw the world entering a new global epoch following the historical decline of the geopolitical tug of war over territory reminiscent of the World War I (Chin, 2018). The notion of geo-economics, therefore, shifted the attention to a widespread, practical and entrepreneurial utilization of geological terrain, inclusive of the minerals and natural resources concealed by it, to both utilize the growing importance of global supply chains, and to maximize the output of human effort in improving the living standards globally (Chin, 2018). This worldly vision of spatial, temporal, and political reordering was particular to the nineteenth-century modernity, which was consequently weaved into Richthofen's narrative as he

operationalized coal, among other minerals, as an asset of China's geo-economic restructuring that promised the nation to restore its place in the world by entering the global network of supply chains.

Richthofen's sentiments, even though grounded in his deep appreciation for Chinese culture, emerged partially from imperialist incentives of the German Colonial Office and the sponsorship of a commercial bank (Wu, 2014), which attempted to convince the occupying powers about the properties of Chinese coal. Seemingly altruistic, Richthofen's letters resembled a form of business intelligence which drew upon the realities of trade-controlling Canton System (1757–1842) in applauding the Silk Road regions,⁶³ and promising their revival, even if through imperial capture or foreign involvement,⁶⁴ to develop industries, railroads and telegraphs that would “open China

⁶³ Throughout his work, Richthofen applauded the Silk Road regions for their prosperous past, missed opportunities or uncanny “civility.” Here, Richthofen referred to his perceived worldliness of the “Silk Road region.” In his letters, he equated people who had easy access to the other provinces as more civilized, pleasant and less savage: “I have not met anywhere in China with people more inoffensive and good natured than those inhabiting the banks of the Han. I have not experienced the slightest attempt at an insult, nor even an unpleasant word, from them; they never crowded to satisfy their curiosity, and met me with civility everywhere, forming in every way a remarkable contrast to the people of Hunan, not excepting, however that they are less cleanly in dress and habits” (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 4).

⁶⁴ Richthofen often called upon the need of foreign involvement in China's strive for modernization, industrialization and worldliness. To him, it was an effort of many, which advocated for Germany's imperial capture of China to secure China's robust and prosperous future. His deep belief in the value of efforts that he saw as collaborative and uninhibited by geographical distance was most visible in the “Letter on the Provinces of Chekiang and Nganhwei,” where Richthofen believed that the process of economic development “offered mutual economic benefits to the colonizer and the colonized” (Wu, 2015, p. 49). In the letter, Richthofen tended to glorify silk production as an icon of Chinese artisan industry. By romanticizing it, he claimed that industrious regions render people better more behaved, more in touch with culture (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 6). Discussing the growth of mulberry plants and the production of silk cloth that utilized the skill and labor of many, Richthofen pondered over the possibility of collaborative enterprises constituting a new paradigm of international relations informed by common understanding and driven by science. The production of silk, if ever fully industrialized, he said, “could probably be considerably enhanced, both in China and Japan, if the inhabitants of the two countries could interchange their experiences” (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 9).

to world trade and civilization” (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 9). This form of allegedly collaborative enterprise, as it was seen by Richthofen himself, mirrors the rhetoric of mutually-beneficial ventures, which now lies at the core of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In spite of that, Richthofen’s transfer of Western scientific and economic knowledge into China has remained as unquestioned as the Silk Road idea itself. Forgotten for decades, Richthofen became one of the first proponents of the scientific and geo-economic rhetoric in China, which impacted the spatial-temporal frameworks with which scholars in humanistic social sciences tend to narrate the premodern past, including the Silk Road antiquity (Chin, 2018). Relying on a vivid imagery of the “sprawling web of interconnections” to retell the ancient history of the “riches of the world” (Frankopan, 2015, p. 209-216), Richthofen understood his role in advancing Chinese geology.⁶⁵ Yet, it is safe to assume that his ideas took on a life “beyond what he himself might have imagined” (Wu, 2014, p. 343).

Just like Western modernity which, from earliest moments of its emergence in the mid-fifteenth century, encompassed ideas of national prosperity, self-governance, secularism and the public sphere to eventually become emblematic of the collective imagination of the West (Taylor, 2007), the Silk Road became an enlivening historical concept that began to signify the Oriental riches and the endless possibilities enabled through infrastructures of connection as re-presented in symbols, myths and legends. Silk Road imaginary did not only replicate the universality of its qualities, just as it was in the case of modernity that became an essential part of Western social

⁶⁵ He explicitly noted that when he criticized the Jesuit knowledge of China. When analyzing the mountainous area of the Yunnan Province, he proclaimed that “even the early Jesuits [*sic.*] appear not to have been acquainted with the important passage of Nanchau,” which, only when utilized to its fullest, he claimed, could have increased connectivity across uneven geographies of China (von Richthofen, 1870, p. 3).

existence, but the geo-economic logics embedded in the Silk Road revival transformed the idea into a corporeal entity that began to circulate across distant geographical distances.

Solidified as a vaguely-connected set of ideas of cross-cultural encounter, transregional connectivity, prosperity, opportunity, and peaceful co-existence, the Silk Road imaginary began to determine public attitudes toward Central Asia as a corridor of exchange as well as China as a space of Oriental riches, which could enable prosperity to trickle down various pathways of the newly revived Silk Road connectivity. This ethos, inclusive of the romanticized geo-economic logic of prosperity, reshaped spatiotemporal conceptions of Chinese nationhood as well as foregrounded China's inevitable dependency on the global supply chains. It also became a fuel that enabled the Silk Road imaginary to circulate—first within China and later beyond its borders to, consequently, become embraced by the Chinese state in its contemporary economic development- and infrastructure-oriented foreign policy.

Flowing Eastward: From Coal to the Silk Road Imaginary

Too often, research in humanistic social sciences has obscured the significance of flows and the circulation of ideas, narratives and meanings, inclusive of both the archeological accounts of the Silk Road and the historical records of industrial modernity. These idea-flows have amplified those archives and constituted integral parts of history in the making. Richthofen's fantasies that existed side by side his geological analysis, unravel the cultural nuance of travelling ideas, which allows us to reclaim the global history of the Silk Road by following how the idea itself diffused across global circuits of geological knowledge. Beginning with the Eastward flow of geo-economic logic to China, through tracing the Westward flow of the Silk Road idea, the story of

the Silk Road escapes the constraints of premodern historiography or archeological research, and becomes a global history of ideas in motion.

Residing in certain archetypal structures of feelings, the Silk Road imaginary transcends the concepts of nation-state, or even culture per se. As conditioned by its discursive construction and narrativization, we may suggest that it was created to free-flow. However, its global circulation would not had been possible without the materiality of coal as well as international circuits paved by carbon exports. Coal, as discovered and praised by Richthofen, did not merely allow for a transfer of Western geological knowledge into China, but it has also opened up new possibilities of diffusion through its pathways of circulation. This brought the notions of capital expansion, mineral extraction and labor productivity into China as well as projected the value of Chinese riches to the outside world across newly formed global circuits. In doing so, there has been an intricate relationship between Chinese natural resource extraction, or coal in particular, and the Silk Road imaginary.

Just as his fantasies and romantic visions of Silk Road revival became weaved into Richthofen's geological assessments of coal, the Silk Road imaginary seemed to have entered the global networks of circulation and exchange via Chinese coalmines. Fused together with the geo-economic logic of extractive capitalism, the promise of transregional connectivity, prosperity and opportunity reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road, was manifested with the Chinese coalfields which, Richthofen believed, would "belong with the best and because of their location could become very important" (Richthofen and Tiessen, 1907, p. 29). This strong belief referred to the prospect of unlocking untapped energy supplies that could fuel China's industrialization and energy needs of the rest of the world.

While Richthofen never discussed energy in a traditional sense, he frequently spoke of an entrepreneurial kind of energy that and could be utilized as a fuel essential to building national

prosperity. A region which drew his attention in this regard, and a site which would prove particularly important in instilling the geo-economic logic in China as well as facilitating the flow of Silk Road imaginary, remained Manchuria (*Dongbei*), or the Northeast region of modern China and Russia. Manchuria, along with regions that stretched across Eurasia, was both rich in coal and featured prominently in Richthofen's work as an example of resource-rich area that once belonged to the ancient silk route which extended all the way to Japan (Endo, 1932, p. 7; Esenbel, 2017; Richthofen, 1870; Richthofen and Tiessen, 1907). It is there, where Richthofen's fantasy remained afloat.

As early as in 1870, Richthofen published an article in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, where he recounted copious reserves of limestone in Manchuria, which were a subject of his "practical interest," given the fact that their "thickness of many thousand feet [was], lithologically, exceedingly varied" (Richthofen, 1870, pp. 411, 112). While limestone is not combustible and does not possess properties of coal, Richthofen believed that all its reserves in China could "underlie [*sic*] the coal and iron-bearing formations" (Richthofen, 1870, p. 112). Displaying the geo-economic logic that promoted economization of natural resources, Richthofen's analysis did not merely survey Chinese landscape, but it offered a promise of national prosperity legitimated with scientific language, technological acumen, and justified with blueprints and plans.

Richthofen's high praise for the Chinese mineral resources finally became a narrative that spread among Qing officials and Chinese merchants, which allowed his ideas to be further transformed into an enlivening imaginary. His appreciation of China's mineral wealth, however, was not unselfish, but rather driven by the logic of capital accumulation. Guided by the German seizure of Tsingtao (Qingdao, Shandong) in 1897, his journeys connected industrializing Europe in search for energy supplies with a growing conversation in China about the necessity to control natural resources within the nation. Therefore, Richthofen's iron railroad became a leading

principle for the “competitive German blueprint for a commercial railroad linking China with Europe, designed at a time when the Qing government opposed foreign railway construction” (Chin, 2013, p. 196).

While many of the Qing officials, threatened by Western infiltration of Chinese traditionalism, opposed foreign-built railway projects,⁶⁶ Richthofen’s vision of industrialization through coal mining and infrastructures of connection became a politically powerful doctrine. During his visit to China, the ideas centered around railroad connectivity seemed to have resurfaced along with concerns about national security, which prompted the late Qing and Republican China to consider building railways for both national prosperity as well as territorial defense (Fig. 15) (Leung, 1980).

During that time, a reformist Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) advocated for defending frontier regions of Xinjiang against Russia with railways, while Ma Jianzhong, an official, scholar and international law expert working with Li Hongzhang, proclaimed that “only railroads will be able to annihilate [foreign] appetites for our frontiers and to provide protection for our country,” therefore appealing for construction with “no delay” (Ma in Chin, 2013, p. 212). Although a nationally uniform system of railways would “remain elusive” at that point (Grant, 2019, p. 12), the speed of the railroad construction would strikingly expedite after 1877, which coincided with both the defeat of China during the Sino-Japanese war and German’s annexation of Qingdao (Chin, 2013, p. 212).

Although the Qing court was well-aware of Richthofen’s published work, his name was not mentioned in China for nearly half a century. Only in the early 1800s, provincial bureaucrats Zeng

⁶⁶Liu Xihong, the diplomatic representative from China to the Court of St James’s in 1875–1876, and the Chinese ambassador in Berlin in 1877–1878, experienced trains while serving abroad and became one of the first opponents of railway construction in China (Elleman and Paine, 2019, p. 205; Mühlhahn, 2019, p. 125).

Guofan (1811–1872) and Zuo Zongtang (1812–1885) mirrored some of Richthofen’s logic. Following the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1871), they wished to establish arsenals and shipyards in China to compete with the military advantage they saw in the West, which relied on fuel as well as on the availability of coal (Wu, 2014, p. 355). In 1878, the imperial censor Cao Bingzhe continued this line of thought by claiming that the major flaw in the Chinese modernization plans was an inadequate balance of technology transfer into China, and China’s heavy reliance on foreign raw materials (Wu, 2014, p. 356).

At the end of the nineteenth century, China’s outlook on industrialization began to change as it incorporated Richthofen’s visions of carbon extraction. Li Hongzhang, an influential general and diplomat in the Qing imperial court, opened the Kaiping Coalmines in Zhili (now Hebei province) in northeastern China which, in 1881, led to the first-built railroad in China to transport coal up to ten kilometers (Carlson, 1971). The new coalmines became the first materialized instances of Richthofen’s visions of prompt coal mining as well as a long-distance railroad connection, which coincided with foreign interests in China that projected the importance of energy to both imperial powers and the colonized (Headrick, 1988, pp. 260–268).

At the turn of the twentieth century, international pressures and domestic disturbances prompted the impoverished Qing government to allow local merchant-officials to mine in Fushun (Manchuria) (Dong, 2015). In the late-Qing period, the Manchurian coalfields drew much interest in Russia and Japan, which led to an influx of capital flowing into the region (Ben-Canaan et al., 2014; Nield, 2015).⁶⁷ Interestingly, Japanese involvement in Manchuria produced a

⁶⁷ To a large extent, it is due to this development and Russian shareholding, that the Japanese empire claimed Chinese mines as well as Russian railway concessions in South Manchuria, following the victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) (Seow, 2014, p. 3). Louise Young has recounted the increased imperial interests in Manchuria in *Japan’s Total Empire* (1998), where she argued that various sectors of Japanese society had a deep interest in Manchukuo, or the puppet state of the Japanese Empire, which subsequently mobilized the imperial project. This led

technocratic vision for remodeling of the Japanese state (Seow, 2014, p. 28), which turned the site into a laboratory for “reform bureaucrats” to test the Japanese economy (Mimura, 2011).

Following the transfer of Japanese experiments in Manchuria back to Japan, a technocratic logic emerged which, understood as “scientific nationalism” or “technological imaginary,” converged science and technology with the state and neo-imperial enterprises (Mizuno, 2008; Moore, 2013). This logic animated Richthofen’s Silk Road idea since it was only through the geo-economic imagery of resource management, utilized by the Japanese in their state-building project, that allowed Richthofen’s visions to materialize.⁶⁸ As a reaction to the peril of imperialism, Chinese officials, scholars and engineers transformed the scientific discourse of coal energy into a capital-oriented narrative of minerals as sources of widespread wealth and power (Wu, 2014, p. 362).⁶⁹

Zheng Guanying (1842–1922), a Chinese reformer and critic of Western imperialism, argued in 1892 that major empires, such as Great Britain, relied on mineral resources to attain wealth,

to large parts of Japanese population becoming complicit in constructing their empire in the light of an industrial fantasy of Manchuria that began to reorder Japanese society (Young, 1998).

⁶⁸ When the Chinese Nationalist government and its technocratic National Resources Commission took control of Fushun, which was subsequently taken over by the Chinese Communists towards the end of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), the Fushun coalmines became central to the developmental narrative of the new socialist state, inclusive of the ambitious First-Five Year Plan (1953-1957) (Seow, 2014, p. 4). It was this imperial encroachment carried out by Germany, Japan and others, which instilled a relentless pursuit of industrial modernity. Consequently, Fushun coalfields had a sizeable influence in Manchuria, where they powered railways that expanded Japanese territorial ambitions, as well as fueled industry and electrification necessary to the new urban areas (Seow, 2014, p. 5).

⁶⁹ Beginning with the Qing period (1644-1912), up until to Republican China (1912-1949), Chinese intellectuals tended to compare China to a poor man “sitting unknowingly upon great treasures while thieves attempted to snatch them away” (Wu, 2014, p. 358). This critique referred to the imperial scramble within China and to the opposition of exploitation of nature supported by leading Chinese officials and reformers in spite of the fact that Chinese state was aware of its mineral wealth. Coal mining, in particular, was banned in the Qing period “for reasons ostensibly geomantic” since many mineral-rich sites, such as Fushun in the Liaoning province, lied in close proximity to imperial mausoleums which were highly protected (Seow, 2014, p. 3).

power and prosperity. Indirectly referring to Richthofen, and directly citing from his letters, Zheng reminded his readers that “once a Westerner said [that] “Shanxi has coal deposits across 14,000 li, with approximately 73 hundred million megatons of coal. If all countries under the heavens use 300 megatons of coal per year, then Shanxi alone can supply the world for 2,433 years” (Richthofen, 1870, p. 43; Zheng, 1998, p. 381).

Influenced by Richthofen, Zheng advocated for China’s industrialization and argued for the exploitation of Shanxi’s coal to both create modern Chinese nation, and for the world to be fueled by its power. Following many references to Richthofen’s work, the Qing officials sponsored several study-abroad programs for local students abroad, in the United States and Germany, to study mining sciences (La Fargue, 1987). This intellectual exchange was rooted in the 1870s, when Japan imitated German educational and legal reforms, which turned Japan into a preferred destination for Chinese students looking for Western-style schooling (Montgomery, 2000, p. 217).

This led a group of Chinese mining students in Japan to discover Richthofen’s volumes and maps at the library of Tokyo University in the early 1900s, which prompted them to disseminate this knowledge with the founding of the Chinese Society of Mining Engineers as well as *The Gazette of Chinese Mineral Resources*. They rendered Richthofen as someone who “alerted the world to China’s mineral wealth” and highlighted the nation’s “territory, the abundance of its products, and the wealth of treasures in the ground” (Wu, 2014, pp. 358, 361; Xiao, 1923, p. 7). In another instance, a Chinese student Zhou Shuren (1881–1936) compiled a list of geological surveys of China completed by foreigners and listed Richthofen as the one who proclaimed China to be the world’s “number one coal nation.” Although Zhou criticized Western encroachment on Chinese natural resources, he evidently believed that coal, along with the other minerals, were decisive to the economic destiny of China facing a newly emerging industrial world order (Wu, 2014, p. 359).

This march toward industrial modernity, paved with coal, continued for the next decades, which created a strong dependence of the industrialized and industrializing world on fossil fuels. China, in particular, has proven to adopt this trajectory, given that coal has continued to furnish its increasing energy needs (Hao and Baxter, 2019), and that, in the last ten years, China's consumption of coal increased from roughly a billion tons to nearly five billion tons (CSIS, 2020). While the main focus of this dependence has primarily involved environmental consequences and high numbers of mining accidents (Perry, 2012, p. 274), it is difficult not to draw parallels between modern-day China and the experiences of early geo-economic logic of extractive capitalism that entered the nation in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. In this context, Manchuria anchored the Silk Road idea politically and ideologically. The region promised a feasible solution to the energy crises throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Ben-Canaan et al., 2014; Dernberger, 1969; Seow, 2014; Wilson, 2003), which allowed the state to carry out experiments with new extractive technologies, such as open-pit mining (De Crespigny, 1971; Seow, 2014; Volti, 2019).

Writing more than a hundred years earlier, Richthofen believed that China's inability to capitalize on its mineral potential prevented the nation from industrializing, and contributed to its underdevelopment. Once this was addressed, he believed, China's coal sediments could lead to the "material and spiritual change of this [Chinese] empire of four hundred million souls" (Richthofen and Tiessen, 1907, pp. 28–29), which positioned him as both a visionary and an expert who wished to fill in the presumed gaps of Western and local knowledge with the language of geo-economics and the grammar of capitalism. Therefore, Richthofen became a powerful cultural actor who instilled the nineteenth-century China with the idea that both entrepreneurial energy as well as the energy extracted from resource mining could be sources of national wealth and power.

III. The Making of a Cross-Cultural Imaginary

Produced through romantic storytelling, re-appropriation, and visions of infrastructures of connection, the Silk Road began to circulate across vast geographies to become an enlivening historical concept and a cross-cultural imaginary. Following the Eastward flow of geo-economic logic to China, I trace the Westward movement of the Silk Road idea, its re-articulation as well as its return to China to demonstrate the ways in which widespread circulation of the term transformed it into a popular icon of cosmopolitan connectivity. Justified by the geo-economic logic, promoted with the promise of progress, wealth, prosperity and peaceful coexistence, and turned popular, the Silk Road idea acquired explaining, justifying and legitimating qualities by recycling historical reality, mobilizing shared memories, and mediating collective dreams. As a vehicle for conceptual change that promised a worldly dream of a desirable future yet to come, the Silk Road escaped the constraints of premodern historiography or archeology. Instead, it became an embedded history of a global idea in motion. This chapter sketches its movement.

Toward a Cross-Cultural Imaginary

Shortly after Richthofen's publication of *China* featured the term "Silk Road" in 1877, the concept itself began to circulate in the Anglophone scholarly and popular discourse. One of the first known uses of the "Silk Road" in language different than the original German belonged to the British *Geographical Magazine* in 1878, where a railway engineer and a foreign advisor to Japan, Richard Henry Brunton, discussed the "ancient silk-traders' route" which connected dispersed trading regions of Asia (Brunton, 1878, pp. 10–16). Next, followed the French use of the term by

geographer Élisée Reclus in his compilation *Nouvelle Geographie Universelle* in 1882 (Reclus, 1882, p. 104), only to reappear in original German—*Seidenstraße*—with the publication of *Zur Geschichte des Antiken Orienthandels* [On the History of the Ancient Oriental Trade] by a German sinologist Friedrich Hirth in 1889 (Hirth, 1889). The term soon began to circulate within various geographical and orientalist circles which spirit began to captivate people’s minds worldwide.⁷⁰

Ever since Richthofen coined the term Silk Road in 1877, the journey that it took across time and space bestowed the Silk Road idea with its unique qualities, and elevated it to an imaginary status. However, every time the term *Seidenstraße* was used and every language or genre that appropriated it reinvented the Silk Road idea. These numerous revivals, in spite of their various motivations, continuously updated the popular understanding of the Silk Road in multiple and endless reinterpretations of its historical reality. The ideas of cross-cultural and transcontinental connectivity became solidified in the materiality of coal which no longer remained a valuable mineral, but rather became both a commodity and a medium that formulated theories of unimpeded flow of tradable goods, ideas, peoples and religions. Similarly to the material commodity of silk becoming once an object of common imagination, coal rendered the Silk Road a myth, narrative and a socio-political and cultural imaginary.

Deploying pro-globalization rhetoric, the Silk Road has always been grounded in the archetypal patterns and collective dreams of imagining the romanticized and the inaccessible, only to circumvent the globe and reemerge at moments of extraordinary globality. Just as borders have enabled religions to circulate widely, the increasing waves of deterritorialization, or rather a growing detachment from territory, has enabled many ideas to float “free of any particular interpretive frame of reference,” which, in consequence, allowed them to “spread outside or

⁷⁰ See Appendix B: The Chronology of the Silk Road.

beyond the circuits of inherited knowledge” (Gunn, 2013, p. 4). This dynamic, enabled by modern processes of globalization, is particular of the Silk Road imaginary.

Precisely during the increased state interdependence, the collectively inherited knowledge of the Silk Road began to evolve as conditioned by its narrativization, endless reinterpretation, and global circulation that bestowed it with an ambiguous nature and a mythical character. Reemerging at moments of extraordinary globality, the Silk Road idea transformed every time it changed geographies, hands, and manuscripts. Even upon its narrativization, the Silk Road remained unsettled, nonlinear, and infinitely complex. In spite of that, it always represented a form of nostalgia for the prosperous past and “a perceived time when universalism was a norm” (Thorsten, 2005, p. 301). The popular imagination of the Silk Road—as represented by Oriental travelogues, feature films, coffee table books and diplomatic discourses—explicitly romanticizes the ancient trading routes as “our” lost civilization. Notwithstanding the circumstances, the Silk Road idea seems to present itself to be of “our time.” Always evolving due to its wide-spread circulation and commercialization, but remaining the same at its core, the Silk Road crossed uneven geographies and reached distant shores, yet it remained a universally enduring cultural concept.

Its universality has partially been enabled by the ideas it encapsulates and the stories which narrate its existence, but also by the steady and increasing waves of globalization that allowed it to flow across newly formed global circuits. Analyzing contemporary globalization, Arjun Appadurai once argued that the newly interwoven world could be better understood in terms of global flows (Appadurai, 2013, 1996, 1990), which possess an uncanny ability to capture the world’s “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot be understood in terms of

existing” modes of thinking⁷¹ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296). These global flows constitute a lens which I utilize for tracing the Silk Road’s movement throughout various moments of modern history.

In his essay entitled “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Appadurai analyzed the European Enlightenment and its underlying ideas of “‘freedom, ‘welfare,’ ‘rights,’ ‘sovereignty,’ representation’ and...‘democracy,’” to suggest that its global spread should not be attributed to the workings of nation-states or the individuals, but rather to a networked system of scapes, or flows of information and meanings (Appadurai, 1990, p. 300). In pursuing his argument, Appadurai re-inscribed some of the global transformations of the past centuries onto a new cartography of global economy composed of five scapes, or spatial constructs, that constitute the building blocks a new globality (Appadurai, 1990). These new dimensions of global cultural economy included *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes* and *ideoscapes*—with each prefix pertaining to a distinct type of flow, transfer, or circulation. Scapes, therefore, become understood as conceptual dimensions of global culture, which signify both flows and the effects of these flows.

Opposing the modern tendency of binary logics, Appadurai prompted us to rethink the complexity of global entanglements, and suggested that the new chaotic reality could only be mapped—if ever comprehended—with scapes, which have been products of global processes as well as “constituted by historically situated imaginations of persons and groups around the globe” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297). Following to this logic, Appadurai’s concept of scapes emerges from within a particular socio-historical circumstance of increased global connectivity and growing

⁷¹ Surveying previous models of binary thinking, Appadurai suggested that the paradigms of push-and-pull, center-and-periphery, or consumer-and-producer are incapable of capturing the totality of the contemporary global experience (Appadurai, 1990).

state interdependence as it reconsiders the accuracy of nation-state as a reliable unit of analysis, and prompts us to consider the ever-changing network of flows, and their effects, in mapping the new intrinsically complex and chaotic global reality.

In this way, the concept of scapes opens up an opportunity to further re-examine the idea of “flow” as not merely an economic process of capital transfer, but rather as one that lies at the tangled intersections of temporal, cultural, and social factors (Appadurai, 2013, p. 23). Therefore, it is productive to consider the Silk Road as an imaginary as well as an *ideoscape* to accentuate the assemblage of ideas of transcultural connection which rendered it a dynamic cultural product, as well as to draw the attention to “life histories” embodied within the Silk Road idea as it moved across global circuits as a spatialized narrative of wealth, prosperity, opportunity, peaceful relations and cross-border connectivity (Appadurai, 2013, p. 23).

These histories in particular, we may suggest, could shed light on how the Silk Road revival was used as a catalyst of change to promote, justify and legitimate scenarios of a foreseeable future yet to come. Let us take the polysemic concept of *keda* used by Massim communities of Papua New Guinea to explain this logic further. Implying a road, route, or path, the term *keda* implies both the ways in which objects crossed distant territories, as well as it captures the sociopolitical links between humans, ideas and objects in circulation. In this sense, ideas, just as commodities, acquire their value through movement and exchange. It is, therefore, the histories of things in motion that shape both the ideas and commodities that flow, and tend to bestow those who hold them with “wealth, power, and reputation” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 24).

The circulation of stories about the Silk Road, similarly to the movement of commodities along the Silk Road, played an integral role in shaping the contemporary Silk Road imaginary. In this context, the notion of an ideoscape, seen as a building block of the new global reality, does not obscure our understanding of the Silk Road, but rather it illuminates its capacity to circulate

across time and space as well as acquire explaining, justifying and legitimating qualities in recycling historical reality and producing compelling visions of the future. Through various forms of romantic storytelling, its re-appropriation as well as discursive and ideological construction resonates with the ways in which the narrative of the Silk Road has been utilized as a tool of legitimizing political, strategic, and commercial aims.

Flowing Westward: The Worldly Manifest Destiny

Although Richthofen's Silk Road received short-lived attention in China, the spirit of his idea became later ingrained in the Chinese national ideal. Along with China's continued efforts to mine coal, the concept of the Silk Road disappeared from the popular discourse in Asia to be briefly revived in the 1920s and, subsequently, become a new geopolitical narrative in the post-Soviet era for international actors to promote their interests in Central Asia (Aytekin and Mikail, 2016; Fedorenko, 2013; Laruelle, 2015). Circulating across time, space and various domains of human experience, the spirit of the Silk Road would move across disjunctive environments, historical inconsistencies, and cultural specificities as a romantic as well as persuasive, plausible and enduring narrative of global connections and indomitable ambitions.

Its Westward flow was not accidental, but rather driven by anti-imperialist sentiments in China and the fact that term "Silk Road" entered Western languages and immediately became an Oriental object of Euro-Western adoration by adventurers, artists and scientists alike. Associated with the notions of wealth, prosperity, opportunity, ambition and peaceful relations, the Silk Road spirit began to provide templates and blueprints for the foreseeable future that aspired to make the world more meaningful. Unconstrained by territory and grounded in the worldwide industrialization efforts, the Silk Road spirit resurfaced during the Californian Gold Rush and the

American rail development on the other side of the Pacific Ocean—in the United States of America. It is there, where the Silk Road imaginary would align itself with Richthofen’s early experiences in the American West, and soon become amplified to a powerful vision of global connectivity reminiscent of the Belt and Road Initiative.

When Richthofen conducted his studies in California and Nevada, the United States was still an overwhelmingly agricultural nation. However, the ongoing California Gold Rush (1848–1855) would already project monumental changes in the U.S. and beyond. Having occurred between the First and Second Industrial Revolution, the Gold Rush played a significant role in transforming the nation’s economy and society, with approximately 300,000 migrants moving to California in search of the precious mineral. Benjamin Mountford and Stephen Tuffnell have observed that the discovery of gold in the U.S., but also in South Africa and Australia, demonstrated “the accelerated mobility of goods, people and ideas,” as well as marked a transition to capital-intensive and corporate mining. The intensified movement of people, shift in technologies, labor regimes, and destruction of indigenous communities created a paradox of concurrent “creating and destroying” (Mountford and Tuffnell, 2018, p. 7), which mirrored the ongoing Western imperialism in Asia.

These events, occurring on both sides of the globe, would eventually produce romantic tales of the American *Wild West*, and the *Oriental East* distributed across gradually thickening transnational networks. From the rise of domestic textile production in the U.S., to the increased exports of the Appalachian ginseng and Missouriian lead to China in exchange for porcelain and tea, the nineteenth-century economy was entering a global era (Ennals, 2013; Kenwood and Loughheed, 1971; Martin and Gillett, 1992; Patty, 1974; Wong, 2016). With this increase in worldwide connectivity, imagination began to play an increasing role, especially in the ways people imagined themselves against the new realities, and how a path toward progress was both imagined

and enacted (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 5–8). These new forms of imagination were accompanied by revolutions in communication technologies, with the introduction of the first telegraph line and daily newspapers, as well as the explosion of new roads, railroads, and steamboats, which foreshadowed the unprecedented rise of new infrastructures of connection (Hochfelder, 2012; Ray, 2003; Udell, 1978; Wenzlhuemer, 2013).

This era of ambition was clearly driven by technological optimism and railroad visionaries. In the Americas, the Canadian Pacific Railway was being completed and as early as in 1885 it already projected the future of Vancouver as a global city (Berton, 2010), while in 1893 the Great Northern Railway was being finalized (Grinling, 1898). Internationally, the Trans-Siberian Railroad was being planned (Geyer, 1987), Cecil Rhodes was promoting his imperial vision of a Cape-to-Cairo railroad (Raphael, 1936), and Spanish architect, Arturo Soria y Mata, contemplated a vast linear city built along railroads and envisaged it stretching from Cádiz to St. Petersburg (Fraser, 2019). Many of these visionary projects attempted to achieve connectivity by pushing the frontiers of possibility. While this logic may evoke a vague resemblance to the modern-day BRI, the most imaginative supporters of this global ethos in America prompt us to think that the Belt and Road Initiative may seem as much American (Ehret, 2019a), as the “Silk Road” has been Euro-Western.

Some of the most prolific nineteenth-century American figures who preached an idea that now bears an uncanny resemblance to the BRI were William Gilpin, an explorer and the first Governor of the Territory of Colorado, and Asa Whitney, a businessman and Sinophile. Both of them, referred to as the “champions of Sino-American Manifest Destiny” (Ehret, 2018), shared a firm belief in the expansionist philosophy as defined by the American frontier—in ways that have been advanced by the American explorer and military officer, Lieutenant John C. Frémont. Gilpin and Whitney’ understanding of Manifest Destiny seemed to go far beyond pushing the

American frontier which, as Frederick Jackson Turner suggested, was a force that shaped both the American national ideal and American democracy (Turner and Faragher, 1998, p. 48). They promoted a unique ideology grounded in the geo-economic thought, and inspired by American progress, Western modernity and Confucian principles of peaceful coexistence, which Gilpin summarized by saying: “Science is Divine and economy is science revealed, rightly understood and utilized” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 96).

John Frémont’s mission was “to connect the Atlantic world to the Pacific, surmounting the natural barriers between” in his conquest of California, which brought him much international acclaim (Inskeep, 2020, p. xix). Gilpin and Whitney, however, aspired to connect the Americas with Asia, Europe and beyond in their ambitious proposal of a continuous transcontinental railroad, which brings us the images of persistence worthy of Dagny Taggart from *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Frémont’s exploration of the West was magnified by immaculate timing, when the U.S. was turning its eyes to it. Wishing to push the frontier Westward, his achievements were inspired by what John L. O’Sullivan called the Manifest Destiny,⁷² or rather a dream of American empire “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (Hietala, 2003, p. 255). Gilpin and Whitney did not merely envision pushing the frontier Westward, but their vision projected pushing the frontiers of possibility and imagination.

⁷² Manifest Destiny is particularly interesting here as the icon of the modernization of the “new West,” which seems to encompass ideals which Gilpin, Whitney and Frémont embraced in their own work and visions. Depicted by the painting *American Progress* (1872) as an allegorical representation of modernization by John Gast, Manifest Destiny is represented by a personified figure of the United States, Columbia, who leads civilization westward with the American settlers. She brings light from the East to the West, strings telegraph wire, instills knowledge with her book that she carries, as well as highlights stages of the evolution of transportation in the U.S.

In the wake of the American Civil War (1861-1865), Gilpin, Whitney and other classical liberals, such as William Sumner and Ulysses Grant spread an ambitious vision of American political economy. Their vision was that of expansion and progress through widespread connectivity, which was inspired by the wide-spread industrialization efforts, including the Russian construction of the Trans-Siberian rail, the reforms under the Meiji Restoration in Japan as well as the rise of laissez-faire politics, protective tariffs and industrial growth programs globally (Adams, 2004; Ehret, 2019; Zakharova and Owen, 2005; Zhang, 1998).

As articulated by Gilpin in his 369-page treatise entitled *The Cosmopolitan Railway: Compacting and Fusing Together All the World's Continents* (1890), his vision plotted a railroad that would depart the New York City and run through Denver to Alaska, span the Bering Strait, jump across Asia and terminate in Liverpool, but also reach into South America, Australia, and Africa. This proposal, Gilpin believed, was not preposterous, but rather one of practical and universal implications, which could facilitate already burgeoning international commerce (Abbott, 2018; Gilpin, 1890; Whitney, 1849), as well as elevate the world out of poverty—a dream he shared with China at the time, which experienced internal crises of Western pressure, land shortage, famine and rural poverty (Cohen, 2010, p. 110; Ehret, 2018; Ehret-Kump, 2019; Phillips, 2010, p. 174).

Gilpin's deep faith in physical infrastructure that could uplift humanity and promise boundless and prosperous future bestowed him with labels, such as the “modern Plato,” “first Geopolitician” and “planetary dreamer” (Porter, 1960, p. 246). His visionary spirit was wedded to geo-economic logic, climatological theories and geological science, grounded in the studies of Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt, whose life-long admirer was Richthofen himself. Gilpin even carried Humboldt's *Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (1843) with him on all his travels, but what spoke to him mostly was Humboldt's theory of Isothermal Zodiac

(Fig. 16) (Ehret, 2018), or the idea that the 40th degree of latitude which indicated “geographical zones seen as fecund or ripe for the propagation of civilization” (Oliver, 2006, p. 87). Gilpin claimed that it was within this “axis of intensity” that “the sacred and inspired fire of civilization, accompanying the sun, has marched from east to west since the birth of time” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 207).

Scientifically, the Isothermal Zodiac defined a process of “the least action principle of earth’s gravitation around the sun within a planetary system defined by a harmonic order of orbits” (Ehret, 2018). It implied an imaginary zone that wrapped around the globe above the equator line, which determined areas receiving much sunlight and, in a nearly colonial manner, elevated certain world regions to their primacy. Geographically, the Isothermal Zodiac mirrored a series of coordinates arranged by Ptolemy, who determined the location of prosperous oases dating the ancient trading routes along the 36th parallel north of the equator, precisely within the range of Humboldt’s belt. Isothermal Zodiac was also a beacon guiding Frémont’s Westward journey when, near the 38th parallel, miles west of St. Louis and bound for Oregon, he reflected on the Western terrain unmarked by maps, which held “a charm” for him (Frémont, 2001, p. 485; Inskip, 2020, p. 73).

In this manner, the notion of Isothermal Zodiac became a window of possibility, a frontier endlessly receding along the earth’s circumference, or as Gilpin argued in his 1849 speech in Independence Missouri, a belt where “four-fifths of the human race is assembled, and here the civilized nations...have succeeded one another” (Gilpin, 1860, pp. 111, 170). In spite of deeply problematic neo-colonial discourse he employed, Gilpin prophesied that America’s Manifest Destiny should expand into a global mission to transform all humankind. In the years of 1857-58, Julius Fröbel (1805-1893), a German geologist and journalist at the *New York Tribune*, named Gilpin a strange visionary who wished to create worldly prosperity, with the U.S. at its center, by

invoking the idea of “purity” of Chinese civilization. Fröbel reminded us that Gilpin wished to accomplish this goal by calling to “develop an indigenous dignity to appreciate Asiatic sciences, civilization, commerce and population” as an essential step in the process (Gilpin, 1874, p. 185).

In 1849, Gilpin presented his blueprints at a national rail conference in Missouri, where he called the U.S. to unite with China to facilitate “supreme commerce” between the two nations of the Atlantic (Ehret-Kump, 2019). In the same year, Gilpin’s contemporary, Asa Whitney, presented the vision to the U.S. Congress as one that “could be accomplished,” and which “time had arrived” (Whitney, 1849, p. 4-5). According to Whitney, the “geographical position [of the U.S.], with more than 2,000 miles in extent, of unoccupied wilderness land in the center of globe; Europe, with a starving, destitute population of 250,000,000 on the one side of us, and all Asia on the other side with 700,000,000 souls still more destitute, seemed to demand the accomplishment of this great work... for the benefit of the entire human family” (Whitney, 1849, p. 4-5). The vision was later accompanied with a map which sub-caption read “Gilpin’s Economic, Just and Correct Map of the World” (1890) (Fig. 17).

Embracing the logic of frontier capitalism and thriving commerce wrapped up in idealized “one-worldism,” neither Gilpin or Whitney seemed to be concerned with highly problematic neo-imperial rhetoric attached to their project. Blinded by the ideas of capital accumulation, progress and industrialization, they crafted an enduring story, which remains not too distant from the present-day rhetoric surrounding the BRI. In fact, China and Russia have recently become interested in using the Bering Strait as a connection point for Eurasian Land Bridge, project that eerily reminds us of Gilpin’s vision (Johnson and Standish, 2018; Stone, 2015).

Inspired by the American railroad expansion, Gilpin believed that “railways continue to extend themselves, soon to become a universal system over all the lands of the globe” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 303). His uplifting spirit, fantastical dream and a realizable blueprint attracted many with

the narrative of widespread benefits for all. Through the adoption of American principles, Gilpin re-emphasized his long-held belief that China could be brought to the forefront of global affairs since, as “the ancient Asiatic colossus,” it needed “to be awakened to new life, [so that] European culture finds a basis there on which it can build future reforms” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 53). Indirectly pointing to contemporary debates surrounding BRI as a new model of development aid or even diplomacy (Aoyama, 2016; Chajdas, 2018; Huang, 2016; Liu and Dunford, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019), and directly referring to the growing importance of China in the gradually thickening transnational value chains, Gilpin hinted toward a newly emerging paradigm of political relations driven by a combination of economic, geophysical, and cultural factors.

His descriptions of a new future for the human civilization designed to look like as “win-win cooperation” seemed to replace the geopolitical tug of war over territory along with zero-sum doctrines (Ehret, 2018), and relied on geo-economic logic, science and seemingly universal values of mutual success and prosperity. Writing in his *magnus opus*, Gilpin believed that “the weapons of mutual slaughter are hurled away...Room is discovered for industrial virtue and industrial power. The civilized masses of the world meet...and fraternize to reconstitute human relations in harmony with nature and with God” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 213). His visions of a “new and grand order in human affairs” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 213) appealed to many and received much positive acclaim. Even Fröbel named the transcontinental railroad project as one of “vast importance” for Sino-Western commerce as well as one which would allow the U.S. to “bring in its train Chinese civilization,” back to America (in Porter, 1960, p. 248)

Assembling the geo-economic and scientific logic with fantastical elements in plotting Sino-Western connectivity, the vision of Cosmopolitan Railway produced a powerful imaginary of progress, victorious energies, prophetic future and universal humanity (Gilpin, 1890, p. 300). While the project was never realized due to a series of disruptions, inclusive of the American Civil

War and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act,⁷³ the idea itself would live on as a promise of common destiny among all nations, which resonates strongly with the imaginations of the ancient Silk Road as well as the rhetoric employed by the BRI.

From the United States to China

As the United States and the U.K. watch their antiquated railroads decay, the Communist Party of China placed infrastructure development at the core of its domestic and foreign policy, also known as the BRI. This project, often framed as a blueprint of the emerging “Asian century” (Casarini, 2016; Kawai, 2017; Khanna, 2019; Madusanka, 2015; Wolf, 2019), has deep ties to the railroad-oriented and gas-guzzling spirit of industrialization that defined the nineteenth-century United States. It is hard to believe that by 1880, China had no rail infrastructure, and was “some 40 years behind Europe, America and many other small countries, which collectively had thousands of kilometers of railway lines” (Crush, 2013). Resisting the lure of Western technology, the Qing officials objected railroad construction and destroyed any existing projects, including the 1876 British-built railroad that connected the American concession in Shanghai to Wusong (Bird, 2019).

At the time when China had been rejecting Western-style modernization, such visions of connectivity were becoming realizable blueprints in the United States. Prior to Gilpin’s presentation of his grand vision, he worked with his grandfather who designed a canal from Delaware River to Chesapeake Bay, which reduced the shipping distance from Philadelphia to Baltimore from 500 to less than 300 miles (Brown, 1933, p. 34; Ehret, 2018). With involvement

⁷³ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 overthrew the 1868 Seward-Burlingame Treaty which promised reciprocal access to education for Chinese citizens.

of the Gilpins in the construction process, the project was finalized as early as in 1829 and, to this day, is considered to be one of the greatest public works in America's early history (Hindle, 2012, p. 57; Matson, 2006, p. 295). In interesting ways, Gilpin's deep curiosity for the ever-expanding frontier of possibility matched with the one of John Frémont's, who served as the chief topographical engineer of the "under-explored" West during the American Westward expansion.

This curiosity also reflected some of the emerging forces in China, inclusive of a reformer Yung Wing who valued Western ideas. As the first Chinese to ever graduate from an American university, he recruited 120 boys from Guangzhou to be educated in New England, who marveled at the steam ships, railroads and streetcars—many of whom would return to China and revolutionize the "ancient civilization" (Bird, 2019; Leibovitz and Miller, 2011). Zhan Tianyou would be one of them, whose experience during American industrialization led him to realize his dream of becoming a rail engineer in 1888, and secure a job on China's first officially sanctioned railroad connecting Tianjin to the Tangshan coal mines (Bird, 2019; Leibovitz and Miller, 2011). Amid the imperial scramble for rail concessions in China, Zhan emerged as the chief engineer. One of his projects, connecting Beijing with Kalgan (modern-day Zhangjiakou), proved to employ a unique track technology which, still in use in 2018, is currently replaced with a high-speed rail (Bird, 2019).

Meanwhile, in America, technological progress intertwined with disruptive events. Preceding the Civil War and following Frémont's presidential nomination of 1856, Gilpin rose up in the ranks of the Republican Party to become the first Governor of the new Colorado Territory in 1861 (Karnes, 2014). Although his program concentrated on promoting public works, roads and irrigation systems, Gilpin and his contemporaries wished to defend the West from Confederate States in the South (Bancroft, 1889, p. 20; Ehret, 2018). Having received much public acclaim,

Gilpin's inaugural speech promoted his vision of connectivity as the means to abolish slavery in a common effort "to fraternize the domestic relations of our people and to draw the travel and commerce of all the nations, and all the continents of the world" (Legislative Assembly, 1861, p. 12). In the next years, amid both hope and tragedy, the global fight against slavery wished to build "political and economic bridges" (Ehret, 2018). It was these efforts, following the Haitian Revolution, that popularized a form of discourse centered around the recognition for universal humanity (Gleeson and Lewis, 2014; Parker, 1865; Sinha, 2016), that would later give rise to Human Rights (Martinez, 2011), and align itself with the Confucian credo of peaceful coexistence.

This particular moment in American history, in unexpected ways, married the language of ambitious progress and seemingly preposterous idea of global land-based connectivity, where advancement of human lives became synonymous with industrial capitalism and economic progress. While Westward expansion promised abolition of slavery, it also, ironically, produced a logic of human unity under the unquestioned idea of progress and industrialization, often conducted at the expense of the local populations, which prompted Walter Mignolo to characterize this paradox as the "darker side of Western modernity" (Mignolo, 2011). In spite of this, according to Steven Inskip, Frémont, in his vision for the U.S., did advance the antislavery cause because he helped to bring about the Civil War, which "disrupted the old political order that had protected slavery, and forced a national reckoning with it" (Inskip, 2020, p. xxvi). At the same time, by pushing the frontier Westward, Frémont and Gilpin produced a powerful imaginary that aligned the notions of human betterment with the logics of speculative capitalism, industrialization and capital accumulation, in an ambitious attempt to secure a bright future and a new transformative order of human relations, which now eerily resembles some of the main tenets of the BRI.

These ambitious plans shared by Gilpin and Frémont, but also Richthofen, revolved around their ability to analyze, dissect, and conquer geophysical terrain.⁷⁴ Interestingly, they all aligned their journeys and explorations with the Isothermal Zodiac. For Gilpin, Frémont, and Richthofen, Colorado proved to be unifying and “pre-eminently cosmopolitan” (Gilpin, 1874, pp. 119–120).⁷⁵ Located on the 40th parallel, the new territory became a place where one of the highest mountain peaks would be named after Richthofen, as well as where “the zodiac of nations close[d] its circle” (Gilpin, 1874, pp. 119–120; Noel, 1976, p. 1). Denver, or rather the city’s Union Station at 1701 Wynkoop Street, emerged as a global portal that projected ideas of progress and infrastructural connection as well as opened up to the new currents of circulation.⁷⁶ It became a space that represented Gilpin’s fantasies as well as a place which would welcome the first

⁷⁴ Although the BRI and the Cosmopolitan Railway are undoubtedly analogous, Frémont seemed inversely similar to Richthofen. While both were guided by indistinguishable curiosity and imperial motives, Richthofen’s story was reduced to the coinage of the Silk Road term. Frémont’s name, on the other hand, remains imprinted on the American landscape with towns (Fremont, California, Nebraska, Ohio, New York and New Hampshire), malls (Fremont Street Experience, Las Vegas), and neighborhoods named after him (Inskeep, 2020, p. xxiv). Both explorers, although remembered differently, shared a deep belief in grand undertakings as well as the ability to conquer geophysical terrain.

⁷⁵ The ideas of impregnable power of the terrain as well as the possibility of its topographical configuration are deeply ingrained in the nature of the Central Gold Region, where Colorado among other regions was often evoked as an example of the superior American geography. Contrary to the urban disharmony of much of the older world, North America’s vast interior presented “an expanded concave bowl, to receive and fuse into harmony whatsoever enters within its rim” (Gilpin, 1890, p. 298). This popular discourse of endless possibility was voiced by journalist Julian Ralph who in 1893 wrote about the ideally proportionate distance between America’s greatest cities with Chicago “1,000 miles from New York, and Denver [being] 1,000 miles from Chicago, and San Francisco 1,000 miles from Denver” (Ralph, 1893, p. 315).

⁷⁶ I appropriate the term “portal of globalization” as an analytical concept, which points to a localized site that displays complex interactions and can facilitate global flows and exchanges as well as open up, like a portal, to the larger network of global processes (Baumann et al., 2017, p. 8; Maruschke, 2019, 2017).

president of the Republic of China, Chinese statesman and philosopher Dr. Sun Yat-sen and, consequently, facilitate the movement of the Silk Road imaginary to China, and into the world.

Sun Yat-sen came to America in 1879 under the 1868 Seward-Burlingame Treaty,⁷⁷ to study political economy and American constitutional law, and eventually engage in fundraising for his revolutionary party to support uprisings in China. While his presence in Denver remained ambiguous and was “a complete surprise to most Denver citizens” (Arnold, 1942, p. 198), the city was linked to China in a way no other American city could claim at the time. During his visit on October 10, 1911, Chinese Revolution began exactly on the same day, which triggered the fall of the dynasty as well as his return home. These circumstances led Sun to assume the position of president of the provisional Republic of China on January 1, 1912 (Bergère and Lloyd, 1998). Following a series of political upheavals in China, which started with the adoption of European military technology and educational system under the Chinese policy of “self-strengthening,” and subsequently led to the disastrous anti-Western Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, and the death of the party leader Yuan Shikai in 1916, China descended into chaos, also known the Warlord Era (Isaacs, 2010; Scott, 2008; Westad, 2012).

In the succeeding years, Sun Yat-sen’s Nationalist Party attempted to transform the nation and form a necessary alliance with the Communists, which resulted in the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949) (Lew and Leung, 2013). However, shortly before that, Sun managed to introduce China to the spirit he encountered in America. Having been born near Macao, moved to Hawaii as a teenager, and lived in Japan as well as the U.S., Sun Yat-sen was a product of Eastern and Western experiences. As a Christian convert and a student of Western philosophy, he firmly believed in the project of Western modernity, which made him a vector of Western knowledge

⁷⁷ The treaty granted free immigration to the United States and reciprocal access to education for Chinese citizens as well as the “favored nation status” for trade with China.

transfer into China. Similarly to Richthofen, he became instrumental to the shaping up of the Chinese nation along the lines of progress achieved through connectivity and cross-regional cooperation.

While some suggest that Sun even studied railroads, possibly under Gilpin (Ehret-Kump, 2019), it is safe to assume that he was aware of Gilpin's work as he appropriated the Silk Road spirit in his own vision for industrial modernization in China. In 1920, he published a monograph entitled *The International Development of China*, where he envisioned a globally-connected system with vast rail links along with ports and transportation corridors, which would open China to the world via new infrastructures of connections as well as a US-Asian alliance (Fig. 18). These ambitions visions, reminiscent of Gilpin's and Whitney's, became visible in Sun Yat-sen's writing. Reflecting on the World War I, Sun came to the realization that wars were detrimental for both parties: the victorious and the defeated, which prompted him to call for an end to all military and trade conflict. Sun valued the power of commerce as well as the Confucian ethics of peaceful co-existence, as he suggested that "cooperation [could] help in the Development of China," which, consequently, would allow participating nations to "reap immense advantages...[and]...strengthen the Brotherhood of Man" (Sun, 1922, p. v). Forgotten for decades, Sun's treatise along with this particular rhetoric has recently resurfaced and gained much attention in the public domain as a historical reference that legitimates the construction of BRI.

By putting much faith in the power of industrial and commercial nations, the United States in particular, Sun believed that China could learn much from it by developing commercial links and becoming a part of the global network of exchange to "be[come] another New World in the economic sense" (Sun, 1922, p. v). His proposal appropriated the geo-economic logic of frontier and speculative capitalism and enmeshed it with Confucian teachings to promote prosperous global future achieved through industrial progress and physical connectivity. This philosophy was

waved into his political activism. In 1924, when he travelled to the North of China to deliver a speech advocating for the nation's unity, Sun preached his political philosophy of the *Three Principles of the People*, which promoted nationalism, democracy and peoples' livelihood, as well as rebelled against the colonial powers. In other words, apart from promoting strong China, Sun utilized the enduring imaginary of progress to defend the nation from corrupt and ineffective Qing aristocrats as well as the chaos of the Warlord Rule, and allow the Chinese nation to gain an equal footing on the world stage. While the ideas put forth by Sun would begin to disappear with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and temporarily disintegrate during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the spirit of the Silk Road would not be lost. Instead, it would travel Westward, through the steppes of Central Asia, to become a popular global imaginary.

Making of the Popular

At the time when Sun had been dreaming of democratizing China, a different sequence of events took place in Europe. On April 6, 1921, the *London Times* published an article about the explorations of a Swedish travel writer, Sven Hedin (1865–1952), which became an important moment in the popularization of the Silk Road imaginary. Hedin, who travelled across the Kunlun Mountains, the Taklamakan desert as well as various cities belonging to the ancient Silk Road, consolidated his memories of Central and East Asia, along with earlier self-reflective articles published in the *National Geographic* (1897-1905), into a book-form entitled *My Life as an Explorer* (1926) (Hedin, 1996). It is there, where he described his travels that caught attention of the press which, subsequently, allowed Hedin's book to become a worldwide bestseller in the 1920s. This did not only give him much publicity, but also introduced the general public to Hedin's

exceptional accomplishments. It also, and perhaps most importantly, allowed the term “Silk Road” to enter the popular Anglophone discourse.

Thanks to Hedin, the modern-day articulation of the Silk Road, as a widely diverse and adaptable concept, has been made possible. This was allowed by his energizing prose that freed the Silk Road from the shackles of historical and archeological research, and brought the idea to the mass audience which allowed for its subsequent reinventions as a political and neoliberal alibi. In other words, Hedin was the one who popularized the Silk Road idea outside of its preexisting disciplinary boundaries and turned an object of historical study into a universalizing and enlivening vision (Chin, 2013, p. 196; Wilkinson, 2014, p. 93; Wilson and Bowman, 2018, p. 447; Winter, 2019, p. 59; Yang and Saffle, 2017, p. 245). With that, the Silk Road became both a platform to be utilized for a variety of purposes, and an idea that allowed many to romanticize about it by imagining to be a part of larger global history. This popularization, which consequently led to the increased global circulation of the term, would not have been possible without Hedin’s engaging narrative, vivid descriptions, personal photographs and drawings (Umesao and Sugimura, 1992, p. 50; Chin, 2013, p. 196; Wilkinson, 2014, p. 93; Yang and Saffle, 2017, p. 245; Wilson and Bowman, 2018, p. 447; Winter, 2019, p. 59).

Hedin’s storytelling abilities had lasting impacts on the ways in which we currently understand the Silk Road. Arguably, the images he portrayed in the 1920s contributed to rise of the “One World” sentiments in the West in the 1940s and 1950s, which “produced a revival of interest in [the Silk Road, as well as] closer and more friendly relations with Asia, particularly China” (Porter, 1960, p. 245). Indeed, Hedin’s accessible language captivated the public’s imagination. This was especially visible when he chronicled his experiences at the Taklamakan desert, which he saw as “most dangerous desert in the world,” where travelling caravans were known to vanish without a trace (Hopkirk, 2001, p. 7). In a different instance, he revealed that Central Asia offered “many-

coloured scenes from the past,” while the Silk Road terrain reminded him of “the unbroken carnival of caravans and travelers” (Hedin, 1938, p. 230).

Having decoupled the term Silk Road from premodern antiquity, Hedin introduced the Silk Road idea along the lines of “geological science,” but also fantastical stories. As a researcher, he directed his attention to the Lake Lob Nor, which he later framed as a “wandering lake” since its location was a subject of disagreement (Chin, 2013, p. 214-5). This complex enmeshment of Hedin’s Oriental gaze toward Central Asia together with his scientific curiosity, allowed him to elevate the Silk Road idea to its nearly-universal recognizability. His ability to revive and popularize the term was closely related to his connection with Richthofen. As his student at the University of Berlin, Hedin researched Eurasian geology, which led him to develop deep interest in Central and East Asia that not only drove his personal fascination with the region that allowed him to turn it into a playground for his adventures, but also—eventually—culminated in Hedin’s appointment as the official “adviser to the Ministry of Railways” in China (Hedin, 1938, p. 12).

Hedin has been remembered as an explorer of the East. However, he was also a trained geographer, topographer and photographer, which gave him the ability to engage his readers in ways unpopular before. His adventures to the unexplored corners of Asia, driven by his daring spirit as well as technical expertise, attracted wide readership in both popular and scholarly circles. This dichotomy culminated in many of his visions, which he explained when he confessed that he lived “in the world of imagination, in the past with its impressive pictures and seething life, in the future with its splendid prospects of technical progress and the development of human energy on a scale that makes the brain reel” (Hedin, 1938, p. 231). His approach, therefore, involved both ethnographic skill and technical detail as well as imaginative fiction and seductive drawings and photography, which allowed his stories of the Silk Road to be compiled in *The Silk Road: Ten Thousand Miles through Central Asia* (1936) (Shaugnessy, 2020).

It is in this volume where, against prior explorations of the region by Richthofen and others, Hedin presented a captivating narrative that encompassed popular stories of dangerous, yet desirable, landscapes to be explored, travelled through, and conquered. Expanding on the early visions of transregional connectivity, he calculated that the ancient Silk Road measured approximately 6,000 miles, stretched “North-West and West from Sian [modern-day Xi’an], as far as the Tun-hwang region [modern-day Dunhuang, and was] one single road” (Hedin, 1938, p. 227). With this romantic reading of ancient past, Hedin presented a vision of the future where Silk Road could be revived in a form of a transcontinental motorway, where “an enthusiastic motorist can start from Shanghai in his own car, follow the Silk Road to Kashgar, to drive through Western Asia to Istanbul, and then travel via Budapest, Vienna and Berlin to Hamburg, Bremerhaven, Calais or Boulogne” (Hedin, 1938, p. 232) (Fig. 19).

In this way, he directly mirrored Richthofen’s and Gilpin’s spirit of transregional industrialization, as he projected a new form of Eurasian connection, where “steppes and deserts” would become connected with motorways and “innumerable bridges over rivers, brooks, irrigation canals and ravines” (Hedin, 1938, p. 232). Hedin’s plan updated earlier visions of Sino-Western connectivity that promised not only to facilitate transregional commerce, but also to allow travelers and adventurers alike to experience the “riches” of Asia. With a great deal of optimism, Hedin’s vision coincided with the initial boom of the American and Japanese economies as well as a relatively stable period of economic prosperity in the West, known as the “Roaring Twenties,” which sparked new waves of commerce and capital flows in the pre-Great Depression era (Bailey et al., 2010). Writing his travelogues at the turn of the 1920s-1930s, Hedin mirrored sentiments of the time torn between the memories of economic stability as well as progress-driven curiosities prompted by the emergence of a global automotive industry. It was at that time, when European automakers began to introduce labor efficiency and technological

sophistication modelled after Henry Ford's assembly line, as well as when new types of car manufacturers sprung up in Japan and shifted the demand from Europe to Asia (Nakamura, 2003; Nieuwenhuis and Wells, 2015). Additionally, the creation previously-unknown consumer markets sparked imaginations and future visions of many at the time (Foner and Garraty, 2014, p. 66).

Appealing to future-oriented dreams, Hedin popularized the term coined by Richthofen. He elevated it by promoting China's opening to the rest of the world through modern infrastructures of connection, which would allow anyone to access and experience the "darkest Asia" (Hedin, 1938, p. 234). In his own words, Silk Road revival promised to "facilitate trade communications within the Chinese Empire and open a new traffic route between the East and the West," which consequently would "unite two oceans, the Pacific and Atlantic; two continents, Asia and Europe; two races, the yellow and the white; two cultures, the Chinese and the Western" (Hedin, 1938, p. 234). This language, centered around world-wide coalition achieved through Silk Road connectivity, was consequently used in the Chinese popular press, beginning with the 1939 edition of *Shanghai News* that discussed the "Silk Road" as a force that bound together the West with China, to the 1943 editions of the same paper, which republished information about the Silk Road under its Western name (Chin, 2013, p. 217).

Hedin's imagery reproduced the romantic visions of a road-connection between the East and West, but it also, coincidentally, corresponded to the fantasies of cross-cultural encounter once articulated in the Chinese folk tales. His Silk Road emulated the curiosities for mutual connection while projecting visions of transregional modernization, just as Richthofen did during his imperial project in China, or Gilpin and Sun did in their geo-economic dreams of seamless global connectivity. In interesting ways, Hedin built upon these conventions as well as their universalizing power to produce a narrative that was equally enduring and enchanting. Bishnupriya Ghosh once observed that icons tend to empower us with cosmopolitan sentiments

“through mass consumption [and] living fantasies of universal dreams” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 11-12). Whether we consider Silk Road an iconic element of modern globality, or just a popular articulation of cosmopolitan connectivity, its idolization, or rather the universally-translatable appeal, is anchored by complex imaginative processes at play.

These processes, I suggest, refer to the construction and reconstruction of the Silk Road idea as an imaginary. Although no living memory of the Silk Road exists for the simple reason that there is no Silk Road *sensu stricto*, it has always been the parallel ways of imagining the Silk Road that formulated our current understanding of it (Thorsten, 2005, p. 303). This nostalgia for the idealized and re-invented past resurfaced in Hedin’s travelogues as he fused spatial curiosities of the industrial present with cosmopolitan visions of the future. Therefore, in popularizing the Silk Road as both a powerful source of prosperity to the regions that lied within its grasp, and a wealth of experiences that were transferred through it, Hedin transformed an Oriental tale of exploration into a popular story that operated on the level of fantasy, promise and desire. As a result, Silk Road became an enlivening cultural concept and a realizable blueprint to be exploited for political, geo-strategic, and commercial aims.

Hedin’s Silk Road reproduced the rhetoric that mirrored prior imperial conquests, but it also re-inscribed the importance of the Eurasian region onto the geo-political and economic world-map. Exploiting the region’s allure in the same way that “villainous...foreign archeologists” looted and robbed Eurasia of valuable manuscripts, documents and art⁷⁸ (Hopkirk, 2001, p. 6),

⁷⁸ This description mainly refers to Sir Aurel Stein of Great Britain, but also is not limited to Albert von Le Coq of Germany, Paul Pelliot of France and Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen himself. Stein, a Hungarian-born British archaeologist, was an ethnographer, geographer and linguist, who was known for his explorations and discoveries in Central Asia. Influenced by Sven Hedin’s work, Stein collected manuscripts from the Dunhuang caves and contributed heavily to the world-wide study of Asian culture, art, literature as well as Buddhism. According to Hopkirk, Stein is currently considered “as the most villainous of the foreign archeologists” (Hopkirk, 2001, p. 6). His collections, which he accumulated over the course of thirty years (1900-1930), have

Hedin's prose, arguably, intensified global distribution of Eurasia's ancient history and further facilitated the circulation of the Silk Road imaginary. Following its popularization, Hedin's Silk Road embodied the legacies of Gilpin, Whitney, Sun Yat-sen, and Richthofen, but it also took on a new life. Beginning with the post-World War II experiences of decolonization of Africa and Asia (1945-), and the Cold War (1945-1990), one could observe a radical shift in the ways the Silk Road idea was conceptualized, which reflected the division enacted by the Iron Curtain.

In the West and Japan, Silk Road established itself as the East-West connection. It implied a route spanning Europe and Asia which, especially after World War 2, became popularized in books and novels (including Hedin's *The Silk Road*, Yasushi Inoue's the Silk Road poem collection, and the 1959 novel *Tun-Huang*, as well as Luce Boulnois' seminal 1963 book *La Route de la Soie*). Simultaneously, the 1950s saw a rise in traditions of Silk Road-themed exhibitions, museums, film, music and art (Agnew, 1997; Whitfield, 2018; Zhang and Krist, 2018). This staging of the Silk Road idea has become a popular standard ever since, and it aligned itself with the representations of the Silk Road deployed by Japan, Europe and the US (Chin, 2019, 2018b).

On the other hand, in China, the first large-scale Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (1955), brought about a new signification and conceptualization of the term Silk Road. In the meeting, twenty nine participatory countries of the Global South, representing nearly fifty five percent of the world's population, aimed to oppose colonial exploitation and promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation (Dinkel, 2018). The conference was an important step

encompassed a wealth of documents that featured Chinese and Tibetan manuscripts, wooden tablets as well as documents in Khotanese, Uyghur, Sogdian and Eastern Turkic. These were brought to Great Britain where they can still be found at the British Museum and the British Library. Hopkirk writes that the looted manuscripts, documents and art objects "acquired through the prodigious, if (to some) questionable, efforts of one man," remain "tucked away in a corner with little room" in a museum with the greater purpose "to explain or reveal its unique value" (Hopkirk, 2001, p. 2).

in creating the Non-Aligned Movement—a vibrant testament to the potency of anti-colonial and anti-racial sentiment that gave voice to the long-marginalized peoples of former European colonies (Abraham, 2008, p. 48). Furthermore, it marked a moment when the term Silk Road became idiomatic in China. Through Afro-Asian diplomacy and the movement from within the “Third World,” the Silk Road entered China as a translation of European geographical texts (Chin, 2019). After 1955, the Chinese term for the Silk Road, *Sī lù* or *sīchón zhī lù* (絲綢 or 絲綢之路), emerged through state-sponsored historical studies and state-run newspapers which, at first limited in Taiwan, became progressively aligned with ideas that had already been circulating in the West (Chin, 2019, 2018b).

This moment in global history did not only reveal a particular form of imagination at stake, which united nations of the Global South to imagine new frameworks of cooperation outside of the Euro-American norms. It also demonstrated that the very idea was not recent, but rather based upon the preexisting history of transregional exchange. This context, and a way of thinking about contemporary connectivity, based on the bedrock of imagined ancient intercultural relationship, led to the outpouring of various reiterations of the Silk Road idea and the need for its renewal. This was seen not only in Pakistan, Syria, Turkey or Iraq, but also in China, predominantly, across newspapers and popular discourse, which stimulated political, cultural and commercial interests of both the Chinese state and the nation in the term “Silk Road” (Chin, 2019, 2018b).

As Tamara Chin points out, the Bandung Conference introduced a new form of political dialogue, in spite of the Cold War divisions, which gave meaning to Afro-Asian solidarity. It aimed to revive their long-lost bond as fellow-sufferers of European colonialism, but also as former collaborators in a shared pre-colonial antiquity (Chin, 2019, 2018b). This diplomatic discourse of cultural and socio-political renewal ignited historical inquiry into this shared

transnational experience, which prompted the establishment of area studies departments at Asian and African universities, followed by new historical research grounded in archeological and philological studies of China's connected past (Chin, 2019, 2018b; Lee, 2010). These sentiments also involved a reorientation of local scholarship informed by European domination and Western philosophy into one that placed transnational commerce at its center (Chin, 2018b, 2018b; Eslava et al., 2017). These ways of mobilizing and introducing shared memories to explain and rationalize new political alliances and geo-strategic actions have been deeply intertwined with the formation of the Silk Road imaginary, and resurfaced in 2013 along with the Chinese state's efforts at promoting the BRI.

IV. Political Cartographies of the New Silk Road

To further interrogate the Belt and Road Initiative as a visionary foreign policy of the Chinese state, it is necessary to consider its spatial cartography since, as an inherently spatial project, BRI aspires to achieve its objectives through projection of territorial manipulation. The revival of the ancient silk routes is the largest strategic project initiated by the Chinese state since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. For this reason, this chapter analyzes the ways in which China is projecting a distinct geo-vision, where the focus does not lie in extrapolating a series of hypotheses around individual projects but rather considering the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity. Against the realism of maps and plans associated with the BRI, I suggest that the amorphous, yet largely coherent, geo-vision of the BRI transforms vast Eurasian space into abstract and malleable landscape. Thus, the largely amorphous and opaque nature of the initiative prompts us to not only see the BRI as a geopolitical or geo-economic venture animated by the Silk Road imaginary, but also as a constantly evolving political mechanism of spatial reconfiguration which produces a global utopia that is legitimated with spatial imaginations, drives and ambitions.

Landscapes of Possibility

In February 1934, a Chinese newspaper *Shen Bao* (申報) announced preparations for the “Southeastern Infrastructure Tour.” Happening fifty eight years prior to the famous “Southern Tour” of Deng Xiaoping (1992), the Chinese infrastructure tour of the 1930s was utterly akin to Deng’s vision of societal progress and his project of harmonious future. While Deng’s tour

involved talks and remarks promoting the socio-economic policies of “reform and opening” (Gewirtz, 2017), the Southeastern Infrastructure Tour aspired to accelerate the construction of new highways, as well as extend the existing ones. While the Southeastern Infrastructure Tour is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, its sheer focus on state-sponsored infrastructure as well as the cultural means utilized in its promotion, offers a unique opportunity to map the political cartographies of BRI.

To pursue this task, we shall start with the commander of the Chinese Republic in 1926-1949 as well as the primary architect of the scheme, Jiang Jieshi (1887-1975), better known as Chiang Kai-shek. Attempting to enhance public security in China, Jiang envisioned a “tour” that would facilitate cultural progress by developing transportation links which, according to him, would lead to “the flourishing of trade,” as well as provide “convenience for the military,” and “the defense against bandits” (in Noth, 2018, p. 1). This ethos, eerily resembling the contemporary conversations on both commercial and security implications of the BRI, dominated the 1930s China, also known as one of the most tumultuous periods in its national history. At the time, the construction of roads was a prime concern to the Nanjing government (1927–1937) that was aware of its increasing needs for military defense and economic development, a government whose political agenda began to promote a developmental state model at a rapid pace (Kirby, 2000; Miner, 1991; Osterhammel, 1979). This was reflected in the successful completion of the Zhejiang-Jiangxi Railway in 1937, and the Qiantang River Bridge in 1934-1937 led by both Jiang and Zeng Yangfu (1898–1969), the head of the Construction Bureau.

Having received support from the Propaganda Committee, they wished to expand their vision to a network of infrastructure projects across the five provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui, and Jiangxi powered by an early-modern place-branding campaign that sought to promote the ventures prior to their completion expected for June of 1934. In spite of the monumental

state efforts, the construction did not proceed as enthusiastically as its projections. In September 1934, following a string of natural disasters that struck the Southeast, preparations for the tour were suspended since all state efforts were focusing on providing the relief aid (Kirby, 2000; Miner, 1991; Osterhammel, 1979). This series of events, however, did not erase the work of more than a hundred writers, photographers and painters who had already traveled along the projected routes at the government's expense. To commemorate these efforts and celebrate the achievements of modern engineering, an anthology of various contributions was published in March 1935 under the title of *Dongnan Lansheng* (translated as *In Search of the Southeast*).

The book did not include any blueprints or technical plans. Instead, it reflected the ambiguity and opaque nature of the BRI by presenting a rather unique public relations campaign. Showcasing new infrastructures of connection, *Dongnan Lansheng* offered a bricolage of poetry, photographs, travelogues and illustrations and featured nationally-renowned authors, painters, and photographers who attempted to artistically and poetically represent the modern Chinese landscape, which ranged from insights on local produce, to customs, to road safety, to depictions of scenic panoramas (Noth, 2018). In this way, *Dongnan Lansheng* fulfilled several functions. First, it promoted travel on modern highways and railroads in the Southeastern provinces by mapping scenic sites (Noth, 2018). Second, it visualized motorized movement and reinforced the political mechanism of space-making by exposing various possibilities of spatial modernization. As such, *Dongnan Lansheng* mobilized cultural artifacts and modern media to promote the shaping of the topographical terrain by strategic infrastructure building.

The anthology constitutes an aesthetically-pleasing collection of texts and visuals that created an illusion of a tour—one that had never been realized. Its content is organized by pathways made of text, borders created by chapter, and graphics that resemble visual stop-points. While each part carries a name of a projected infrastructure project, physical infrastructure remains

“largely unmentioned” in the text and is instead conceptualized as running “underneath as a thread that guides the experience of travel” (Noth, 2018, p. 7). Since the book attempts to represent the region as an “engine of modernity,” the landscapes unblemished by modern infrastructure (Noth, 2018, p. 5) reinforce the ideological dimension of modernization. *Dongnan Lansheng* creates a powerful vision of modernity as it maps not only a vast geophysical terrain, but also the possibilities achieved through progress and industrialization displayed in an assemblage of texts and illustrations that gently remind us of shortened arrival times as we jump from one province to another (Noth, 2018, p. 13).

This vision, which utilizes cultural texts and symbols, suggests that the unadulterated beauty of modern China can be seen, and fully appreciated, only once made accessible through physical infrastructure. The focus on natural landscape as means of promoting progress elucidates a complex formation of national ambition that is captured by shifting imagery that builds on the traditional forms of mapping.⁷⁹ Following the story of *Dongnan Lansheng* allows us to consider landscape not only as a space where modern state-craft is staged, but a distinct category that possesses the capacity to sharpen our spatial literacy necessary for the transdisciplinary study of the BRI. Therefore, the notion of “landscape” which guides this chapter, since it encompasses both the political and aesthetic qualities involved in the representation, and the making of, geophysical space.

Today, the idea of landscape is less likely to refer to a genre of painting than to a sociological image. Although we often hear of the “the urban” or the “suburban landscape,” landscape

⁷⁹ Here I refer to the techno-scientific and geographical forms of mapping that involve drawing up of the borders of a state, kingdom, or empire as inspired by the first world map that dates 500 BC (Harvey, 1985). As it was discovered in the ruins of the ancient Babylonian city in 1881, the map itself is considered the first known depiction of a geopolitical order on a flat surface (Fig. 20).

continues to be a “potent tool of cultural analysis” (Zukin, 1993, p. 16). As concept, it evokes both a geographical space and an imagined geography in spite of its etymology that points us to the idea of an individual or group ownership of land (Oakes and Price, 2008, p. 149). Cultural geographers have regarded all landscapes as *symbolic*, and have considered them to be “expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions” by equating landscape to “a panorama, a composition, a palimpsest, a microcosm” that continuously unravels itself before one’s eye (Meinig, 1979, p. 6). David Harvey, for instance, asserts us that “capital creates and destroys its own landscape” (Harvey, 1989, p. 190). This renders landscape a major cultural product of our time reflecting the spatiality of the capitalist mode of production, the forces of coercion and collective resistance, as well as our cognitive maps, aesthetic forms, and ideologies (Zukin, 1993, p. 22).

It is precisely its aesthetics and ideological undertones that animated landscape art which, upon popularization, allowed the term to imply geographical rendering and artistic sensibility that extends the scope of a territory as a politicized space (in the context of nation-state logic). As an ephemeral act between the processes of mapping and imagining, landscape expresses the geophysical reality of space as well as the complexity of visions and projections that, poetically and aesthetically, endow regions with meaning and extend beyond what is empirically known about them (Said, 2004). In this context, landscapes are partially imaginative as they “structure people’s understandings of the world, and in turn help to shape their actions” (Driver, 1999, p. 155).

Let’s consider landscape painting. As a form of art, it does not only imply a non-traditional rendering of space, but also reflects the culture-specific attitudes toward space-making. Its representative power is perhaps a reason why the imaginative geographies of Chinese landscape have received much recognition worldwide “China’s greatest contribution to the art of the

world.” (Sickman and Soper, 1957, p. 182). Contrary to the Western Renaissance painters who attempted to create a technical replica of the natural environment (Kubovy, 1988),⁸⁰ Chinese painters did not develop a mathematical understanding of space as a measurable entity for organizing spatial relations (Delahaye, 1993). Rather, Chinese landscape art gave prominence to a dynamic structure where human interactions, natural environment and the universe co-existed without the direct imitation of space (Cameron, 2012; Sullivan, 2008).⁸¹

This distinction is perhaps most visible in the arrangement of spatial information. In traditional Chinese landscape art, the represented space is typically organized in a vertical manner, where distant objects appear in the upper part while near objects appear in the lower part of the scroll. In contrast, Western artists tended to capture a specific moment in time, or fixed position in space, that allowed the spectator to look through the frame, as if it were a window. In China, landscape painting traditionally deprioritized any form of spectator guidance. Instead, it has offered a dynamic quality that portrays a panoramic scene which combines successive time

⁸⁰ The Western Renaissance (14th century-17th century) painters were predominantly interested in creating an exact replica of the natural environment (or at least what they believed they saw) through an illusion of three-dimensionality and geometric perspective. In spite of that, many of the 14th-century Western European landscape paintings represented symbols, rather than facts as they “combined elements familiar to the viewer to represent a religious or moral system” (Zukin, 1993, p. 16). The role of landscape art has been changing as it reflected the socio-political attitudes of the time. Following the 18th century, when English landscapes began to portray the countryside, there was a visible attitude shift of the upper classes from “seeing rural areas as places of leisure and indolence to viewing the as sites of entrepreneurial framing and industrious and agricultural laborers” (Zukin, 1993, p. 16).

⁸¹ While we cannot disregard that abstraction always existed in Western landscape painting, whether more pronounced or that of scale and perspective, both Chinese and Western traditions offer different trajectories of abstraction with distinct pictorial perspectives and unique conceptual frames (Bao et al., 2016; Worringer, 1916).

windows and resembles a floating, continuously expanding view instead of a fixed representation⁸² (Bao et al., 2015; Tyler and Chen, 2011).

In this sense, *Dongnan Lansheng* does not present landscapes in a traditional fashion reminiscent of Chinese art. Rather, it incorporates elements of Western modernity to project and visualize the experience of becoming a modern, industrialized nation. With this realization, landscape opens an opportunity for seeing, as Giles Gunn once remarked, “other-wise.” The illusion of coordinated travel through both vast terrain and copious amounts of information, which remains the primary feature of *Dongnan Lansheng*, is balanced with a poetic and unravelling map that does not dismiss the plasticity of the vision itself. This resonates with the malleability and the amorphous nature of the BRI, which rarely becomes a feature of traditional political analysis.

Therefore, landscapes—apart from their aesthetic quality that is able to electrify the gaze of an art enthusiast—both reproduce and are effects of distinct geo-visions. These, subsequently, confess and accentuate the political, cultural and techno-scientific aspects of space-making. They stretch the imagination, and mediate, both symbolically and materially. Since ideas and cultures are believed to be encoded in physical landscapes (Meinig, 1979; Mitchell and Mitchell, 2002), the category of landscape breeds a possibility to read beyond the unit of a nation-state, and to examine the industrial, political and techno-scientific manipulation of geo-physical terrain in ways that uncover manifestations and cultural representations of social values and collective dreams.

⁸² The distinct quality of a Chinese landscape painting was amplified by the Western curiosity for remote landscapes and the exotic East. This prompted an English poet, William Watson, to suggest “the role of landscape art in Chinese painting corresponds to that of the nude in the West, as a theme unvarying in itself, but made the vehicle of infinite nuances of vision and feeling” (Watson, 1974, p. 83).

Beyond Blueprints and Binaries

While BRI has been criticized for serving as a loose policy envelope for all China-financed investments abroad, the dynamic and opaque nature of the BRI concept calls for new perspectives. In line with the analytical category of landscape, which remains a complex tool of space-making, it is necessary to position the inquiry about the BRI outside of the predominant binaries of Western knowledge vs. Sinocentric praise, global, system-level analysis vs. hyper-local context, and methodical vs. improvised developmentalism. In other words, to better evaluate the political stakes of China's development abroad, seeing beyond the level of a "project," an "initiative," or a "strategy," and reframing the BRI as being animated by an *imaginary* allows us to see the BRI as an interface,⁸³ where independent and sometimes unrelated processes and interests meet, act and converge.

Following the methodological proposition of "area global" developed by Bishnupriya Ghosh, I examine BRI in direct relation to its complex political cartography. Studying global diffusion and materialization of transnational phenomena in specific areas, Ghosh called for circumventing the zero-sum logic that exists in Global Studies and Area Studies, where "*global* is reduced to macro-phenomena and the *area* offers granular materiality that is approached with layered expertise" (Ghosh, 2021). In doing so, Ghosh's methodological concept of "area global" serves as a useful lens of critical inquiry and does not merely reject the global as a frictionless space, or interrupt the geographic continuities of localized areas (Ghosh, 2021), but it primarily allows to enter a realm of knowledge production that does not subscribe to preexisting ontological constraints. This, in turn, opens an opportunity to: (1) examine the "production" of the BRI

⁸³ Here, I refer to a point where two systems, subjects or organizations meet and interact. In Computing, the term refers to a device or a program enabling a user to communicate with a computer, for example: a graphical user interface.

across both real and imaginary spaces, and (2) transverse the binary-level thinking that frames BRI along the lines of a “China-threat” rhetoric versus a Sinocentric uncritical praise on the one hand, and developmental blueprint versus unorderly foreign policy on the other.

China’s growing international presence contributes to the expanding conversations about the geostrategic motivations of the BRI and the reach of China’s power. As a flagship initiative of the twenty-first-century cross-border economic engagement, BRI has been claimed to be based on “amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, inclusiveness” (Zhifei, 2019), while also appearing to be an alternative path to development (Alves, 2021; Khan et al., 2018; Khan, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Paudel, 2021; Zhou and Esteban, 2018), and a symbol of China as an alternative global power (Zhang et al., 2019, p. 24). In fact, apart from projecting a distinct form of China’s *realpolitik* driven by “national sovereignty, interest, power and wealth” (Christiansen, 2015, p. 21), BRI is associated with an inclusive vision of easily-attainable economic growth and frictionless urbanization. It also projects a pragmatic way of achieving the China dream of national rejuvenation while counteracting the American efforts to contain China’s rise. Such assessments, which highlight multifarious aspects of China’s rising political and economic power, point to both the scale of BRI’s ambition and the material ramifications of China-backed projects, where BRI is presented as the “top-level design of China’s economic diplomacy” (Zou, 2018, p. 141), and a geo-economic strategy that streamlines processes involved in facilitating international trade, achieving economic growth, and improving global economic governance (Xi, 2019).

While the Chinese state is cautiously avoiding the term “strategy” in its official discourse,⁸⁴ the dominant strain of scholarly and popular inquiry into the BRI has suggested that Beijing is

⁸⁴ This argument is grounded in the fact that implementing BRI depends on a variety of local and regional mechanisms that involve negotiation and cross-governmental practice (Kaczmarek, 2016; Xie and Haenle, 2015).

willing to re-shape the global supply chains and the global economic order (Blanchard, 2017; Eichengreen, 2018; Hillman and Sacks, 2021; Mações, 2019; Rudolf, 2021; Scobell et al., 2018). Some analysts even went as far as to suggest that “China, Iran and Russia never bought into the geopolitical settlement that followed the Cold War, and they are making increasingly forceful attempts to overrun it” (Mead, 2014, pp. 69–70). Much of this literature oversimplifies the BRI with unproductive generalizations centered around the “rise of China” rhetoric as a threat to the international order (Abdullahi and Phiri, 2019; Cai, 2019; Can and Chan, 2020; Edelstein, 2020; Peters et al., 2021; Pua and D’arcy, 2021; Shiffrinson, 2020). It also blindly focuses on China’s neo-imperialist motivations, the “new scramble for Africa” (Ayers, 2013; Carmody, 2017; Kimenyi and Lewis, 2011; Mocák, 2021; Moyo et al., 2012; Nwachukwu and Ogundiwin, 2020), as well as other geopolitical and geo-economic predictions, which ultimately reflect Western-centric anxieties, anti-China sentiments, and possibly xenophobia.

At the same time, following China’s active efforts at expediting its CCP-guided globalization (Ye, 2020), and mobilizing state and market actors to sustain high-growth and socio-political stability, it is necessary to recognize that the Chinese state is signaling toward a distinct mode of nation- and space-making (Dourish and Bell, 2007), which is as much a consequence of the U.S. global retrenchment as it is a general feature of the twenty-first-century geo-economic strategy (Schortgen, 2017). The conversations about China’s rapid urbanization and its attempts at exporting the so-called “China model of development” via state-led investments tends to position both city- and infrastructure-building as the new standards for measuring progress and creating prosperous and “civilized” societies.

This ethos quickly became an epitome of “a new trend of globalization” (Wang, 2015), which prompted renowned individuals, such as Francis Fukuyama, to call the BRI a “model” as well as “a striking departure in Chinese policy” (Fukuyama, 2016). Such remarks do not only point to

the indomitable ambition of the Chinese state to export its vision abroad, but they also indicate the larger fact that BRI extends the urban logic of civilizational progress. As a dynamic and continuously evolving framework, the BRI promises a utopian future achieved through reviving the romanticized past, which organically fuels a dialectical commentary that surrounds it.

In this context, let us first refrain from analyzing the BRI through the dominant prism of an increasing assertiveness of modern China (French, 2017; Milner, 2017; Walker, 2018; Winter, 2019), or through the lens of growing international rivalry reminiscent of the Cold War, given the overabundance of such literature (Fan, 2021; Goldstein, 2020; Wertheim, 2019; Zhao, 2019). While it is uncertain how BRI could reconfigure the geopolitical and commercial spaces of participating nation-states, the analysis beyond the apparent claims aims at not only interrogating how such ambitious dreams and visions (the imagined) manifest themselves in the world geopolitics (the real), but also at considering their relation to the spatial configurations they claim to represent.

Hence, to better understand BRI's political cartography, it is necessary to: (1) pursue an inquiry which does not fall within the endmost scholarly positions—either Euro-American discourse of Chinese imperialism and the China threat, or non-Western uncritical praise of the China model of development—in order not to replicate the unproductive framework of blueprints, models and paradigms; (2) to locate the ideas of speed, common prosperity and overnight urban transformations within the official political rhetoric. After all, it is these ideas and claims which ignite public desire and animate people's imagination of what the future holds.

Given the amplitude of literature that places both China's rise and the BRI within tedious binaries, I suggest that by departing from blueprint-thinking, model-planning and Western discourse versus Sinocentric praise of the BRI into a conceptual realm of "connectivity assemblage," we could better conceptualize the initiative's territorial footprint. The attention-

grabbing plans, impressive architectures and seemingly instantaneous transformations that are embedded within the “China rising” rhetoric have produced a new urban logic which increasingly animates the BRI. This logic, grounded in the ideas of exceptional, replicable and desirable urban development, are best represented by the urban experiment of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ)—a concept which jumpstarted China’s economic reforms, and promised to deliver similar results in the Global South.

Following Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms that involved creating experimental spaces of free capital flows, SEZ emerged as a leitmotif of neoliberal development worldwide. With areas transformed into extraordinary spaces governed by business and trade laws different from the rest of the nationally-contained territory, SEZs began to project a blueprint capable of designing, planning and forecasting a distinct form of development.⁸⁵ With a narrative of impressive speed, scale and a certain degree of replication, as well as harnessing neoliberal globalization to its benefit, the SEZ became a desirable blueprint and an apogee of modernization and global urbanism.

In spite of that, framing a special economic zone as the paradigmatic “model” of development does a significant analytical disservice. This is conditioned by the fact that success of an SEZ does

⁸⁵ Following Friedrich Kittler’s proclamations, I refer to the co-constructive relationship between mediation and urbanization and how physical infrastructure is capable of projecting messages and meanings. For more information on this strain of inquiry, see the work of Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar: In his study *Projecting Beijing*, Neves looks at the role of media technologies in shaping the urban landscape of Beijing during the 2008 Summer Olympics. In another instance, Neves and Sarkar observe that both media infrastructures and technologies intertwine with the social space (Neves and Sarkar, 2017, p. 20), which allows them to suggest that “mediation enables a fluid, relational approach to the global” that is imagined in a series of local ways (Neves and Sarkar, 2017, p. 21). I am inspired by their framing of technologies and social space as inherently intertwined, which allows us to explore how the social life is projected and mediated through technologies of modernization that communicate about China’s nation-building as well as its global ambitions.

not necessarily stem from a manual-like blueprint. For example, the experience of Shenzhen (an SEZ-turned-city),⁸⁶ in spite of being referred to as an example of the “China model” of development,⁸⁷ did not emerge as a result of coherent policies or plans. Rather, much of its development was done with the use of clusters and informal arrangements.⁸⁸ This does not render

⁸⁶ The experience of Shenzhen points toward a larger problem of how the special economic zone is regarded in literature. As the paradigmatic site of space-making in China, the SEZs have been attached to China in divergent and problematic ways. This starts with considering zones as spaces of exception, which ignores the societies and states in which they have been placed. Such a view equips SEZs with an abstract aura that attempts to erase the mistakes of the past, (failures of development) with a “shiny new space, new city, city in a box” (Oakes, 2018).

⁸⁷ The city of Shenzhen does merely point toward a narrative that frames SEZs as entry-points or portals into global capitalism that enabled China’s experimentation with various patterns of neoliberal development. Rather, the city’s story is a story that increasingly emphasizes a shift from industrial development in export processing urbanism as its chief objective for being. It is useful to note, that in 2006, the Chinese government announced that it would establish approximately fifty new economic co-operations abroad. This announcement was made primarily at Chinese firms as an invitation to submit proposals for development zone projects that would aid in the expansion of China’s economic capacity abroad. It was also aimed at a broader goal of restructuring Chinese economy away from labor intensive export oriented development (Oakes, 2018).

⁸⁸ The contemporary, organic example of urban becoming that fits this scenario is precisely the of city of Shenzhen. Built on the foundation of numerous villages and premodern patterns of settlement, Shenzhen is considered to represent a heap of accumulations and negotiations. After two decades of development and expropriation of agricultural land to accommodate a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the 1980s, Shenzhen’s foundation was built on largely informal arrangements with local village collectives. In this way, the city’s development was not necessarily an outcome of top-down state-level planning, but rather it was driven by the local villages themselves that embraced the ambiguous land designations which, in turn, allowed them to operate beneath the level formal planning (Du, 2020, p. 67; Liu, 2020, p. 375; Ning, 2020, p. 291). In this sense, the transformation of Shenzhen from a commercial district into a successful urban space (Kawase, 2020), is an explicit “abbreviation of Chinese progress” (Walker, 2021). As an archipelago of “vernacular urbanisms” and villages that emerged out of “a period of illicit (and often outright politically unapproved) experimentation,” Shenzhen’s story was “later cannily re-inscribed ex post-facto into officially sanctioned (and newly invented) narratives, and eagerly extended into other cities, industries, and continents” (O’Donnell et al., 2017, p. 3). In 2004, the city of Shenzhen put forth an official declaration stating that no villages existed within the city’s perimeters. In this sense, the city authorities were allowed to destroy the places which interfered with the ideological message that the city attempted to project. Such a top-down form of space-making assumed that each new development could form a new ideal city, or rather an “ideal society without any history behind it” (Shepard, 2015, p. 116). At the same time, this very logic

it a single “economic zone-turned city,” but rather points to various exceptionalisms built up around the hardware manufacturing sector (Oakes, 2018). In spite of being rhetorically framed as a city built from nothing, Shenzhen has long been disproved to be a *tabula rasa*, given the existence of various turbulent forces of uneven development which fabric the fantasies and imaginaries were sowed into (Wilson and Bayón, 2017, p. 845).

Such observations, which disprove the multifaceted interplay of speculative entrepreneurs and state actors who inspired the promise of national development and market integration, perpetuate a restrictive ontology that flattens the Shenzhen story into a linear, highly replicable process. In spite of the complexity of ambitious visions enabled through the potential of imagination and infrastructure, an SEZ became a technocratic model and a space of exception.⁸⁹ Its lack of linearity, however, goes against the common perception of what a technocratic blueprint inherently implies. Since such logic is directly applicable to what BRI represents, given that BRI just like an SEZ projects a great deal of spatial incoherence that is continuously reinforced by the networked mechanism of the its spatial and political grasp, it is more productive

exposes a more complex reality, which does not necessarily reflect the orderly technocratic narrative of the state. Instead, it demonstrates the intricate complexity of various multi-variegated actors and processes which co-produced the social reality. As Timothy Oakes demonstrated, the urbanizing processes that occurred at the Pearl River Delta and Shenzhen, should not be seen as examples of *tabula rasa*, but rather they should signal “secular histories of territorial administration, state population, and village identities that date back millennia” (Oakes, 2018).

⁸⁹ In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Aihwa Ong voiced her concerns when she argued that economic zones constitute exceptional spaces of contingent sovereignty, where neoliberal and territorial transformations take place (Ong, 2006). In another instance, James Sidaway pursued a similar line of inquiry, when he suggested that spaces, such as SEZs, embody a new meta-geography of development (Sidaway, 2007). In a similar vein, Keller Easterling referred to such zones as “infrastructural spaces” of *extrastatecraft*, where various transnational processes, infrastructure standards, logistics and urbanisms occur outside, in parallel, and in partnership, with statecraft (Easterling, 2014). While these perspectives have been productive in conceptualizing SEZs as “spaces of exception,” they should not be used to see them as blueprints.

to speak of both in reference to planetary urbanization rather than in terms of a development model.⁹⁰

By doing so, I suggest that thinking of SEZs as existing outside of the networks in which they are embedded is highly problematic since it reduces their complexity to mere templates. In this case, a space-specific ontology, which tends to concentrate on an individual project, process, or space, fails to capture the complexity of the presumed “model,” or to deconstruct the abstract aura that is attached to it. Since BRI is an apotheosis of pre-modern connectivity that attempts to revive ancient past to cure all ills of the present, it is equipped with a similar, if not more captivating, spirit than that of the SEZ. Given that, the inherent unevenness in how the BRI unfolds performs a rhetorically-strong and universally-appealing formula that promises both economic and political success legitimated with the romantic allure of pre-nation-state interconnectivity.

Toward a Political Ontology of Connectivity

As I interrogate the ways in which China is projecting a distinct vision of pan-national connectivity, the focus here does not revolve around an individual project to extrapolate a series of hypotheses. Instead, I consider the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity that takes into account, as well as extends beyond, the “manifestations” of the Silk Road concept itself. Contrary to the existing analysis of the BRI which prioritizes particular projects bounded by the spaces they occupy, my effort does

⁹⁰ Here, I refer to the model developed by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid in which they de-center the perspectives on the urban, and focus a complex interplay of connections and processes marked by the uneven development of capitalism (Brenner, 2018; Brenner and Schmid, 2017; Schmid, 2018)

not prioritize spatial distinctiveness of each investment, but rather lies in exploring both the Chinese foreign policy and China's "model of development" as viewed through the socio-technical and techno-political lenses enabled by an assemblage of projects, investments, diplomatic exchanges and branding campaigns.

This leads me to propose a distinct set of optics that allows us to concentrate on both the enlivening rhetoric attached to the BRI and the infrastructural forms upon which the BRI rests. Such an approach highlights the shifting and opaque nature of the visions embedded within the initiative, which prompts us to not only move away from the nation-state unit of analysis, but also to think about urban connectivity as one that is wired with railroads, paved with concrete and legitimized with ideas. Such a way of *infra-structural* thinking unravels a growing potentiality of ideology and urbanism to converge.

In acknowledging the complexity and spatial indistinctiveness of the BRI, I consider infrastructure as a unit of analysis that extends beyond the boundaries (spatial or otherwise) of individual projects.⁹¹ In doing so, this inquiry simultaneously accounts for the discourses that promote imaginaries of aspirant futures, as well as elucidates the materiality of the BRI as a spatial project of grandiose scope and ambition. While BRI intersects with the discourses of logistical, trade and transport infrastructures in the field of international development studies (Gu et al., 2016), the deficiency of spatial language in the analysis of China's foreign policy, and consequently the BRI, should be a cause for concern. For decades, social scientists have historicized social

⁹¹ Here, I build upon traditional urban studies literature which conceived of a city as a particular space that is different and separate from rural regions and the country side (Lynch, 2005, 1960; Rodden, 2019). Expanding on such preconceived categories of urban space, ontology of connectivity is capable of undermining the distinctiveness between urban and non-urban (suburban, rural and otherwise). Such a standpoint broadens our analytical categories consider all the ways the infrastructural connections are formed by taking place (and space) together in particular urban agglomerations, as well as the ways in which they are connected to a broader set of networks of resources, flows and population mobilities that transcend local and regional scales.

relations, and prioritized the socio-historical perspectives, while deprivileging those of socio-spatial and geo-historical kind.

In response to this “disciplined” tradition, I would like to focus our attention on the inherent link between the discourses of cultural heritage and cultural representations as well as the power of political constellations, which points us to an increasing enmeshment of spatial logics and rhetorically-captivating imaginaries. As such, I shift from the focus on the politics of geostrategic positioning to prioritizing space-making and spatial techno-politics, given that BRI’s materialization revolves around the imagined future yet to come, and the promise afforded by physical infrastructure in creation of a vibrant “community of common destiny” (Cheng et al., 2017; Lukin, 2020; Scobell et al., 2018).

Inspired by the notion of socio-technical imaginary, I propose that collective visions and state-led activities constitute the rudimentary elements of large-scale space-making. Sheila Jasanoff, who examined the logics behind the construction of large-scale technical systems, conceptualized socio-technical imaginaries as the “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures,” which are reinforced by shared understandings of advances in science and technology (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015, p. 4). In a similar way, Aaron Moore, analyzing the Japanese state project as animated with the ideas of progress, rationality, competence and productivity,⁹² developed a discursive framework of a “technological imaginary.”

⁹² Here, I refer to Aaron Moore’s *Constructing East Asia*. In his work, Moore explores how technology was conceptualized within two opposing groups: the leftist intellectuals (with the flagship figure of a Marxist theorist Aikawa Haruki), and state engineers (represented by Miyamoto Takenosuke). Moore demonstrates how Aikawa’s understanding of technology transformed from a materialist manifestation of the means of production to a more integrated combination of political, economic and cultural elements that point not only toward revolutionary transformation but also to wartime mobilization. According to Moore, while leftists conceptualized technology as an encompassing force in all areas of life, engineers, on the other hand, saw technology as a technical field in which they claimed absolute expertise. As both of these groups became key pillars of Japan’s imperial enterprise, the continental expansion created

Supplementary to Jasanoff, Moore considered how various top-down groups (e.g. intellectuals, bureaucrats, engineers, and state planners) infused the term “technology” with future visions, ideological undertones and state power (Moore, 2013).

Moore’s term proves particularly useful for this inquiry as it highlights a complex process of infrastructural becoming, or rather an exercise of transforming ideation (i.e. the fantasies, visions and plans) into a realized entity (i.e. ports, roads, bridges) that is enveloped with a rhetorical potentiality of technological progress and connectivity (Moore, 2013). In line with the common apprehension that empire served as a laboratory for social and economic experiments, Moore’s concept goes one step further as it unravels the ways in which many of the state experts drew up and executed their plans. This does not present us with a methodical or organized efficiency that is usually associated with technocracy, but rather points to various levels of eventuality and “messiness” that emerge out of the overlapping interests that exist within a context of capital accumulation (Moore, 2013).

To bridge the top-down and bottom-up approaches of conceptualizing the enmeshment of visions, plans and executions of large-scale urban projects and technical systems, I gravitate toward the notion of a geo-vision. By fusing the political, cultural and techno-scientific aspects of the production of space, geo-visions represent imaginary and material engagement of human societies in the natural world. They signal both a rupture and a fusion of imagination made palpable—neither they encompass completed elements of the built environment, nor they point to mere fantasies developed in the minds of bureaucrats and urban planners. As complex forms of geophysical and urban becoming, they not only resemble a *mélange* of images, mappings and discourses that stimulate public desire. They also encompass policy briefs, blueprints, technical

possibilities to introduce “comprehensive technology,” or rather large technological systems, which would create employment opportunities for the engineers who would consequently become ingrained into the plans of pan-Asian developmentalism.

plans and implementation strategies that offer a promise of solving large-scale and often abstract public concerns.

In doing so, geo-visions legitimize spatial shifts with new socio-technical imaginaries, which often reconfigure time and space. Beginning with Robert Thorne's 1527 vision of leveraging the layer of perennial sea ice to cross-cut the Arctic and forge new trade infrastructure (Masa, 2019), geo-visions usually involved a power-play. Here, the goal was to offset the Spanish and the Portuguese who outpaced the English in their overseas expansion. Thus, Thorne's geo-vision was a plot for English merchants to short-circuit their rivals with quicker routes to "Cathay," India and the Spice Islands through North-East and North-West Passage across the Arctic (Marshall-Cornwall, 1977). While such forms of spatial re-making were frequently driven by national ambition, or personal ego, the underlying motivation was a desire to intervene in the geophysical space to either map it or tame it. In this sense, a geo-vision is inherently tied to a human's quest for power over territory, which is reminiscent of the colonial rivalry, as well as of the ideological divide during the Cold War (Der Derian, 1990), and of the development of the modern nation-state (Branch, 2013, 2011). What each of these examples has in common is the stupendous scale of imagination and a strong desire to reshape the familiar space into a malleable, political landscape.

BRI fits the parameters of a geo-vision, especially since the scale of its ambition points to one of the largest—if not the largest—geo-economic plans in human history. The closest in its magnitude was a vision of a German architect, Herman Sörgel, to partially drain the Mediterranean following the Great War (1914-1918). Sörgel's plan aimed at solving the ongoing crises of unemployment, overpopulation and energy shortage with building a series of dams across the Strait of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, Sicily and Tunisia. This, according to him, would create a unification of Europe with Africa under a new continent *Eurafrica*, which was to ensure

stability, prosperity and endless opportunities for its inhabitants (Masa, 2019). This lofty rhetoric, so reminiscent of the BRI, was grounded in the promise of land reclamation as well as free supply of electricity provided by hydroelectric power plants connected to each of the dams (Vidal, 2015). In spite of gaining some support in Germany, the plan never went beyond the ideation stage⁹³ and, therefore, do not fully match the breadth of the BRI.⁹⁴ Yet, the essence of the geo-vision, which was wedded to the geo-economic logic and had deep faith in physical infrastructure that could uplift humanity and promise boundless and prosperous futures, provides useful optics to better dissect the complexity of BRI's political mechanism.

Such paradigms of ambitious territorial projects are not restricted to a specific time-period⁹⁵ and, in fact, go back to the antiquity, where narratives of spatial restructuring were equally enduring and enchanting to the one of the BRI. For example, the Great Wall of China, as a grand vision and an actual series of border-defense systems dating the 3rd century BC, draws on such

⁹³ Although the project was never taken seriously, Sörgel continued advocating for the project following the nightmare of Nazism, which further propelled his rhetoric of unity and mutual benefits enabled through geo-engineering and technological manipulation of land. Never realized (since the idea faded along with Sörgel who died in car accident in 1952), what defined the essence of Atlantropa survived and could be found in the the dream and the cultural memory of Silk Road connectivity, namely the promise of dissecting and conquering geophysical terrain that marries the language of progress with political ambitions.

⁹⁴ Its immaterial and short-lived existence could be attributed to its lack of collective vision as, after all, Sörgel's Atlantropa never gained much public acclaim. Its basis for implementation required massive cooperation achieved through unanimity or possibly force which, unlike the BRI, did not offer gradual execution and flexible implementation. Finally, Atlantropa's cultural argument did not appear to be at the center of its geo-vision despite the fact that it appealed to the promise of cross-cultural coexistence and one-worldism, which could have been impacted by an increasing ethnic tension and the rise of Nazism.

⁹⁵ Geo-visions are not restricted to a specific time-period or a particular geographical scale. The European migrant crisis of the 2010s generated several geo-visions, out of which most memorable was that of an Egyptian billionaire, Naguib Sawiris, who proposed the idea of "Aylan Island" (named after Aylan Kurdi) to accommodate hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Syria (Draper, 2015; Moore, 2015).

conventions. Out of the sixteen walls, Ming Dynasty's Great Wall is the face of the massive structure as the world knows it today (Lindesay, 2015, p. 7). Aside from being a landmark that brings close to 100 million tourists to its site every year (Berger, 2016), the Great Wall has become an "ordering concept" embedded in the popular imagination—both Chinese as well as the global (Waldron, 1990, p. 2).

Complementary to its historical reality, the Great Wall has become a powerful political⁹⁶ and cultural symbol which numerous cultural references have largely been scattered through time.⁹⁷ This allowed the Great Wall to acquire mythic qualities, which render it "nowhere near so important a feature of Chinese culture as [it is] today" (Waldron, 1990, p. 203). Since 1893,⁹⁸ the misinformation surrounding the Great Wall transformed it into a civilizational icon that would become a symbol of premodern engineering, technological prowess, as well as a product of contemporary China's self-definition (Dalin, 1984; Gao and Wu, 2018, pp. 88–120; Katzenstein, 2013; Lovell, 2007; Ross, 1997).

⁹⁶ The construction and re-construction of the Great Wall has, consequently, become a central feature of both China's socio-cultural history and its foreign relations. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping himself used the reference to the Great Wall to launch his reform campaign by saying: "let us love our country and restore our Great Wall" (Doar, 2005). In another instance, the Great Wall animated the official anthem of the People's Republic of China where, as an icon of civilizational progress, it promises rejuvenation of the Chinese nation: "Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves; With our very flesh and blood; Let us build our new Great Wall!" (Lew and Cartier, 2004, p. 259).

⁹⁷ Overall, with the exception of Ming sources, the amount of material on the Great Wall is neither comprehensive nor straightforward, and some of it is actually conflicting (with regard to the length and size of the Great Wall). Additionally, the existing sources are often difficult to interpret at key points (Waldron, 1990, pp. 4–6), and their heavy reliance on literary sources has produced multiple legends about the Great Wall.

⁹⁸ Since 1893, when the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* described the Great Wall as "the only work of man of sufficient magnitude to arrest attention in a hasty survey of the earth's surface" (Evans, 2006, p. 11), the structure has become a concept in its own right by producing narratives falsely asserting that it was visible from the moon, or even Mars (Waldron, 1990, p. 214), which inflated its cultural significance to a near-universal scale.

The closest modern counterpart of the Great Wall, at least in technological significance, symbolic scale and cultural reproduction, is the Three Gorges Dam. Since its early construction days (1994) to its completion (2006), the dam propelled China's breakneck economic growth and tamed China's longest river, Yangtze, by shielding millions from fatal floods (Edmonds, 2000; Fearnside, 1988). As one of the few man-made structures visible to the naked eye from space—just like the Great Wall (NASA, 2007)—the Three Gorges Dam is a colossus that spans a total of 1.45 miles across the Yangtze (Gan, 2020). While its size does not match the Great Wall, it does reflect China's multigenerational desire to manipulate the geophysical terrain with the intention to harness rivers, save lives, and ensure prosperity, but also to provide legitimacy to the rulers' reign.⁹⁹

The persistence with which the Three Gorges Dam and the Great Wall geo-visions were carried out ingrained themselves within the Chinese national and global collective consciousness. While damming the Yangtze, first put forward by Sun Yat-sen, would establish a precedent for the Chinese leaders to envision construction of technical systems, including dams, roads and railways that would survive the test of time,¹⁰⁰ the Great Wall, in a similar manner of its

⁹⁹ Since natural disasters have traditionally been considered a sign of the emperor losing the “mandate of heaven” (Schoppa, 2019), the advances in technology and engineering, such as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, went hand in hand with the attempt to preserve political power.

¹⁰⁰ Starting with the 1919 industrial blueprint put forward by Sun Yat-sen, who in his magnum opus, *International Development of China* (1920), envisioned damming the Three Gorges to generate 30 million horsepower and provide hydropower for the whole country (Wang, 1997, p. 4). This geo-vision would establish a known precedent for the Chinese leaders to envision the construction of technical systems, including dams, roads and railways, throughout the 1930s and 1940s (Elleman, 2010; Köll, 2019; Sun, 1922), beginning with Chiang Kai-shek in the 1940s, to Chairman Mao who endorsed the Three Gorges Dam (USFBIS, 1979, p. 16), and to Deng Xiaoping who revisited the blueprint in 1970s. In this sense, the geo-vision of Three Gorges Dam survived the test of time.

magnitude, became a powerful allegory of Chinese civilization's prevailing strength,¹⁰¹ and an identifiable emblem of China's nation-making in the West between the 18th—20th centuries. The status of civilizational achievement awarded by UNESCO to the Great Wall in 1987 matches the UNESCO Heritage Sites that the Three Gorges Dam is tasked with protecting. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the materialized geo-visions of the Great Wall as well as the Three Gorges Dam achieved iconic statuses—each projecting a seductive allure and securing near-universal recognizability (de la Croix, 2016, p. 91; Gordon, 2012, p. 193; Miller and Côté, 2012, p. 187; Philip, 2016, p. 251; Rojas, 2010; Spring, 2015).

Bishnupriya Ghosh observed that icons as “magical technologies [and] cultural mechanisms that facilitate articulations of collective aspiration” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 3), tend to empower us with cosmopolitan sentiments “through mass consumption [and] living fantasies of universal dreams” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 11-12). Upon materialization and idolization, the fantasy that gives birth to a geo-vision evokes its universally-translatable appeal anchored by imaginative processes. These processes, combined with cross-cultural circulation through flows across vast geographies, open up an opportunity for universal visions and fantasies to become embedded in material objects. Such diffusion, circulation, and reproduction facilitate the making of an icon. As Ghosh explains, icons “have unshakable materiality and as they flash on screens or confront us in marble, they move us toward a greater truth, organize our perceptions and affections and act as intermediaries for our movement toward truth.” (Ghosh, 2011, pp. 4–5).

¹⁰¹ Originally conceived by Emperor Qin Shi Huang in the third century B.C. to intercept attacks of barbarian nomads, the Great Wall never effectively inhibited invaders from entering China (Islam et al., 2019, p. 35). Yet, its best-preserved sections dating the 14th-17th centuries A.D. (Ming Dynasty), entered global history as barriers that protected merchants and caravans traveling along the ancient trade routes.

Following this argument, icons have the capacity to engineer consensus for existing socio-political action, which renders them capable of mobilizing power due to their propensity to act like magical technologies which activate desire, speech, and action (Ghosh, 2011, p. 9). The Great Wall and the Three Gorges Dam fit this description as their widespread cultural representations match the magnetism represented by an icon. Both are not only world's oldest and longest of their kind, but their material power cannot be denied either, which corresponds directly to the vision animating the Belt and Road. However, while the Great Wall and the Three Gorges Dam have gained their civilizational significance by projecting the ideas of technological prowess by violently reorganizing the existing order, the Silk Road imaginary that legitimizes the BRI offers a sharp departure in such logic. As an animating force behind the BRI, the Silk Road primarily projects a seductive promise of a “connected world,” as proclaimed by the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC, 2007). In this way, the revival of “all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks” (NDRC, 2015) reorganizes our common perceptions toward globality and cross-border connectivity into an all-encompassing narrative enlivened by cultural and the allure of physical infrastructure.

As a departure from what the Great Wall and the Three Gorges Dam represented, the BRI carries similarities to the grand visions that have been grounded in the logics of connectivity as well as animated by the ideas of technological promise and cross-cultural pollination. In this context, BRI is a flagship example of a technological imaginary. Presented as the beacon of globalization, the initiative operates as both a grand vision and a speculative sales pitch that promises transformation of underperforming economies into commodified nations, and destinations for investment, with the use of a sociotechnical regime of infrastructure-led development. As it promises to perpetuate stability across vast geographies, BRI is the most recent iteration of the hypothesis that infrastructure construction could close the existing

development gap (Rolland, 2017, p. 30). This indication turns infrastructure into a seductive dream to be achieved. In support of this vision, the enduring myth of the Silk Road, which retells a story of globalization in the language of movements, flows, motions, networks, mobilities, circulation and fluidity, is combined with the potentiality of modern infrastructure that promises desirable futures of frictionless connectivity. Both enmesh a romantic fantasy of the ancient past with the contemporary and material restructuring of geophysical space to craft narratives of economic risers entering the global marketplace.

Panacea for All Ills

Beginning with the earliest roads which arose out of the erosion patterns of well-travelled paths, to an increasingly strategic importance of bridges and railroads, to the technology-enabled revolution in increasing the carrying capacity and speed of people and goods, the notion of infrastructure has become an elastic idea that would soon start to be a foundation of progress, a well-functioning society and a modality of “good life.” With the incremental stretching of global supply chains, transportation links, communication channels, power supplies and electricity grids, infrastructures of connection began to foreground not only their importance in the increasingly geo-economic age, but they also started to signal a future defined by a new maxim: “connectivity is destiny – and the most connected powers, and people, will win” (Khanna, 2016, p. 5). This ethos of necessary connectivity, according to Parag Khanna, is a central feature of the new global cartography that does not necessarily give prominence to nation-states, but rather prioritizes “mega cities, highways, railways, pipelines, internet cables and other symbols of our emerging global network civilization” (Khanna, 2016, pp. xvi–xvii).

Such enlivening narrative of increased connections achieved through modern engineering fuels both scholarly and popular discourse surrounding the Belt and Road. Promoting a transformative and inclusive future enabled by new infrastructures, the BRI weaponizes a universal ethos of connectivity as the central thread of globalization (Pieterse, 2021). In this context, infrastructure-building becomes both a form of re-connection with the romanticized past, and a solution to many of the societal, economic or political ills of the present. As a necessary condition for the BRI to materialize, infrastructure-led connectivity produces a promise of improved life as well as an expectation for a desirable future, which constitutes a significant legitimizing mechanism aside from the persuasiveness of the rhetorical appeal of the Silk Road. After all, infrastructures themselves have “long promised modernity, development, progress, and freedom to people all over the world” (Anand et al., 2018, p. 3) due to their material capacity to enable and facilitate the “exchange over space” (Larkin, 2013, p. 327).

While such connectivity-centered logic evokes contemporary attitudes toward international development, cross-regional trade and the general direction of human progress, the very same ideas have, in fact, shaped much of China’s political ideology and the nation-building process,¹⁰² way before the launch of the BRI. Since the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), when China’s transformation into a modern nation-state was interrupted by foreign attacks, war and rivalling ideologies, the official narrative of the nation framed China as the heir to an ancient civilization, which saw itself at the center of the world. The interference of militarily-superior imperialist

¹⁰² Infrastructure, apart from collective identity and narrative construction, is rarely considered to be a part of nation-building. This is because nation-states usually build their identities around categories, such as shared values or history which, consequently, form expectations regarding the behavior and organization of citizen-subjects (Anderson, 2006). Such narratives, similarly to geo-visions, marry imagination with territory, with the exception that imagination involved in nation-building is both collective and of unprecedented scale.

powers during the nineteenth century humiliated the nation and forced China to accept the terms of extraterritorial privileges given to foreigners (See Chapter II).

In this context, China's pursuit of connectivity-inspired modernity began with the encroachment of foreign powers onto China's territory and, subsequently, the state's yearning to remove the stain of national humiliation. With infrastructure acquiring a public status of an "epitome of openness" to the world as well as an "antidote to economic isolation and backwardness" among China's officials and state elites (Rolland, 2017, p. 39), the dreams of modern connectivity would begin to transform into the backbone of China's "blueprint" of modernization and national development. This ambition to revive the foregone potential materialized in a march toward economic development, which began to constitute a consistent national narrative of modern China that would further set the stage for the BRI. Within this narrative, material infrastructures were placed at the core of China's nation-making efforts.

Beginning with Sun Yat-sen's 1920 plan for expansive railroad connectivity (Scalapino et al., 1983; Sun, 1922), to the industrialization of China under Japanese occupation in the 1930s, the Chinese nation was introduced to varying forces of territorial re-spatialization to create a modern nation (Meyer, 2015; Smith, 2019). Such visions of industrial development, afforded by the rhetoric of connectivity, signaled the beginning of a new technocratic ethos that would later be appropriated along with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, China embarked on the path to restore its pre-eminence, which was laid out in his blueprint for economic socialism that sought to expand China's internal transportation networks (Naughton, 2006; Rolland, 2017, p. 27; Sorace et al., 2019). Mao Zedong's pursuit of autarkic economic development (1949–1976) reorganized the

landscape of China by re-connecting with the most distant provinces,¹⁰³ which laid the foundation for what would later become known as a powerful narrative of the “China model of development,” (Scobell et al., 2020; Smith, 2011; Williams, 2017). This trend continued until the late 1970s when, Deng Xiaoping would progressively open China to the rest of the world by embracing the market forces. Contrary to Mao’s vision of utopian egalitarianism, Deng wished to depart from ideological labelling and develop an adaptable and pragmatic governing philosophy driven by results and grounded in aligning the relations of production with the level of development of the productive forces.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Mao’s *raison d’être* for investment in infrastructure was a plan of connecting China’s expansive national territory and re-connecting with the most distant provinces—a notion that would profoundly impact the ideological underpinnings of China’s conceptualization of modernization and progress. Prior to the Sino-Soviet split of 1963, China’s mode of industrialization took an inward-looking turn, which involved the expansion of transportation network in Northeast China, where the nation’s heavy industry sectors were located. In this context, railroad connectivity was chosen as a primary means of transporting huge quantities of raw materials from resource-rich areas to “Manchuria,” or the country’s “rust belt.” Nadege Rolland notes that such push from the central government led to the creation of a network of railways, which more than doubled between 1952 and 1978 – from nearly 23,000km to 48,600km. Following the Sino-Soviet split, Mao created a “third front” in China’s strategic interior to bolster the nation’s capacity in the case of a Soviet attack. This shift left to hundreds of large and medium industries to be established in the most remote areas of China’s northwest and southwest which were far from Soviet reach. Since these industries remained equally far from the suppliers, coastlines and potential markets, apart from major military bases which mushroomed across those inaccessible regions, the 1,134 km Chengdu-Kunming railroad was also created (1958-1970) across China’s most difficult terrain, which was a consequence of Mao’s internal strategy. In spite of these developments, Rolland maintains that China’s infrastructure-led development was “embryonic” during the Mao era (Rolland, 2017, p. 27).

¹⁰⁴ Under Deng’s economic reform, the opening of the Chinese economy was contingent upon the Chinese Communist Party “letting some people get rich first.” This would become one of the most creative policies put forth by a CCP leader, and one directly contradicting the party’s founding aim (Tong, 2015). Contrary to Mao’s legacy, which is primarily associated with the Cultural Revolution (1966–70)—a radical egalitarian movement which condemned elitism and those who chose to conform to pressures from bourgeois forces (Heywood, 2017, p. 77)—Deng signaled a shift in China’s political ideology. In his 1962 speech, he presented a vision for a robust economic growth, which can be achieved only when China will “not stick to a fixed mode of relations of production, but adopt whatever mode that can help mobilize the masses’ initiative” (Deng, 1962). In this sense, while Mao believed that the forces of production could not achieve

From 1978 to the early 2000s, China's economic opening, increasing diplomatic ties, and the creation of special economic zones accelerated infrastructure-building across the country (Barnett, 1986). This, consequently, became both a natural form of enhancing economic exchanges with foreign states, and a preferred option for the Chinese government's national development planning.¹⁰⁵ This infrastructural shift that launched a series of landmark projects, including the Three Gorges Dam and some of China's major expressways that still exist today,¹⁰⁶

their best results unless socialist production relations were formed, Deng was not advocating for an egalitarian society. Instead, his assumption was that thinking pragmatically is the only way to achieve productivity, growth and prosperity (Li and Tian, 2013, p. 103). He famously said: "I don't care if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice" which, as a catchphrase to be used for the next decades to define China's approach, was meant to promote party-controlled market economics (Buckle, 2018). By the time of his Southern Tour of 1992, it became clear that China's rise would become tied to the "good cats," or those who shared Deng's larger vision of building national prosperity. In consequence, the open-door policy allowed to develop a precise stance toward achieving economic growth through an active introduction of foreign capital and technology while maintaining the commitment to socialism (Kobayashi et al., 1999).

¹⁰⁵ It is important to stress that in the early stages of reform, the Chinese government gave preferential treatment to coastal regions given the rationale that China's "backward" interior provinces would benefit from growth spillovers. In this context, Deng had declared in 1984 that "egalitarianism will not work" and that it was alright to have some areas become rich first, as long as the leadership made sure that all would prosper eventually and that there was no polarization of society...But whereas the coastal provinces attracted massive FDI and developed rapidly, the rest of the country lagged behind, creating growing inequalities in regional per capita income" (Rolland, 2017, p. 29).

¹⁰⁶ Starting in 1992, China began to invest an average of 8.5% of its GDP on domestic infrastructure, which gave way to landmarks such as the world's largest power station – Three Gorges Dam, which was approved by the National People's Congress the same year and became fully operational seventeen years later. At the same time, China's development of highways increased significantly as well. One of the most important projects was China's first expressway connecting Shanghai and Jiading completed in 1988. This trend continued and by 2002, the total network of national expressways amounted to 25,130 km, which also represented an average annual growth rate of 44%. in 2002, the same network of roads amounted to 1.77 million km, "carrying 14.7 billion passengers and 11.1 billion tons of goods" (Rolland, 2017, p. 28). Apart from transportation networks, China's infrastructure-led development involved constructing a network of electrical and telecommunication grids, and oil and gas pipelines which supported China's economic opening and allowed to sustain its export-driven growth model by transforming

would be written into the political philosophy of successive leadership, and become reflected in China's nation-building narrative.¹⁰⁷ Over the years, the Chinese government would increasingly invest in state-led infrastructural planning to fill in the ideological void created by the Cultural Revolution, which would progressively begin to shape China's political and moral landscape (Barnett, 1986; Meisner, 1985; Yan, 2021).

This promise of infrastructure-led development was not particular to China. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), Eurasia saw an opportunity for its newly independent states to begin integrating into the global economy through infrastructure-led development. Coincidentally, China played a key role in this undertaking. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Chinese government had been involved in several cross-border infrastructure initiatives in Central and Southeast Asia, which aimed at increasing regional connectivity especially in China's landlocked provinces.¹⁰⁸ While none of those projects attracted nearly as much attention and

its landscape. Such infrastructure-led development was paired with cheap labor, and improvements in human capital, which became one of the major engines for China's economic growth. This was closely linked to the alleviation of poverty in rural China, where farmers took active part in the construction of road, bridges and irrigation networks in exchange for government-sponsored vouchers for basic products and food (Rolland, 2017, p. 28)

¹⁰⁷ Here, I refer to the five generations of Chinese Leadership which have been defined by distinct theories of governance. A common thread that evokes a quest for modernity and industrialization emerges at the core of each of the following political theories. First: Mao Zedong and Hua Guofeng, 1949-1978 with Mao Zedong Thought; Second: Deng Xiaoping, 1978-1989 with Deng Xiaoping Theory; Third: Jiang Zemin, 1989-2004 with Three Represents; Fourth: Hu Jintao, 2004-2012 with Scientific Outlook on Development; Fifth: Xi Jinping, 2012-present with Xi Jinping Thought.

¹⁰⁸ Many of these projects were not initiated, financed, or led by Beijing. However, their implementation was guided by the central and provincial governments, especially in Yunnan Province and Gunaxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the south and to the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Gansu Province in the west" (Rolland, 2017, p. 32). One of the initiatives of the time was the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation (GMS), which was the very first such cross-border initiative pursued by ABD following the normalization of China's relations with Vietnam. The GMS program was geared toward enhancing the economic relations among Cambodia, China (Yunnan and Guangxi), Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam

publicity as China's BRI does today (Rolland, 2017, p. 9), infrastructure-led development became both a key feature of China's nation-building process, by connecting its territory and stimulating economic growth (Rolland, 2017, pp. 7–27),¹⁰⁹ as well as an aspirational narrative for other nations seeking national rejuvenation.

In this context, by proclaiming the need to eschew any form of insufferable past, the narrative of connectivity—enabled through infrastructure-building—produced an expectation of a desirable future for the nation and a potentiality of an improved life for an everyday citizen. Therefore, I frame the BRI as a geo-vision which produces and remakes urban environments as well as legitimizes its undertakings through ideas of interconnection and cultural heritage. Since

(Rolland, 2017, p. 33). Another initiative of similar scale was the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation (PBG), which goal was to further integrate China with the region via the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement that went into effect in 2010. The initial stage of such regional mechanism involved creating a network of land, maritime and air-based infrastructure links that would bolster trade and international cooperation. In spite of China's enthusiasm, the initiative itself lost momentum given that other Pan-Beibu countries did not exhibit similar engagement or commitment. At the same time, the involved countries feared that the Chinese initiative was a win-win solution only because of the rhetoric surrounding it, but was not backed by the facts (Rolland, 2017, p. 35). In Central Asia, China's early cross-border initiative was the New Eurasian Land Bridge, which implied transportation links between China and its neighbors not limited to China's southeastern border. This involved the connection to the North via Russian Trans-Siberian Railway that was completed before 1949 as well as the Trans-Mongolian Railway completed in 1961. Eventually, China's railway system would connect to the Soviet rail network by September 1990. Due to the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1960s, the 10km railroad linking Xinjiang with Dostyk in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic 36 years to complete (Rolland, 2017, p. 37).

¹⁰⁹ The Sino-Soviet split of 1963, which triggered creation of hundreds of large and medium industries in the remote areas in China's northwest and southwest (away from Russia's potential reach), led to the growth of military bases in those areas as well as robust infrastructure initiatives, including oil and gas pipelines, telecommunication grids and transportation networks, such as the 1,134 km Chengdu-Kunming railroad (built 1958–1970). While such efforts still remained rather “embryonic” at the time (Rolland, 2017, p. 27), they played an integral role in sustaining China's export-driven growth model. Among all, infrastructure building became a key factor in poverty alleviation that allowed farmers to participate in construction of roads and irrigation systems in exchange for state-provided vouchers for basic necessities (Rolland, 2017, p. 28). The 1990s saw a subsequent expansion of domestic transportation links across the nation, which became the main vehicle for China's development of its national economic planning.

infrastructure is a necessary condition for the BRI to materialize, I am inspired by Keller Easterling's concept of "infrastructural space" which does not consider space as grounded in its boundedness, nor in its discreet quality (e.g. the functional processes that occur within space as well as its relation to other spaces) (Easterling, 2014), but rather as a dynamic category animated by spatial logic and defined by the material attributes of infrastructures themselves.

While Easterling focuses on the characteristics of exceptional spaces, including their standards, policies and dispositions that create intermodal connections of transport and trade, her ruminations point us to the material and immaterial qualities of the BRI as an infrastructural entity. In this sense, by considering both the materiality of BRI projects as well as the narratives of national rejuvenation and symbols of pre-modern connectivity, such as the Silk Road, "infrastructural spaces" that are created through the BRI framework blur political and spatial boundaries by evoking a networked assemblage made of ties, linkages and interconnections that fuses the physical with the ideological. Such a notion of space as representational, textured and interwoven with other entities, actors, ideas and places allows us to not only highlight the many forms of interconnectivity, but also to de-center traditional categories used in disciplined analysis, and to consider the infrastructural and "urban beyond the constraints of the city," nation and geo-physical space (Coward, 2015, p. 96).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Here, I refer to Lefebvre's notion of an interconnected triad of "perceives-conceived-lived" space which implies a dynamic concept, and allows us to consider how both imaginaries and symbols become a part of the lived spatial, urban and political experience. It also allows for exposing the socio-technical assemblages that accumulate across multiple scales and in multiple overlapping spaces. Writing several decades ago, Lefebvre considered a similar spatial logic when he introduced the idea of a "meshwork," or rather an enmeshment of "mental and social activity" imposed upon "nature's space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 117). Using the terms "network" and "meshwork" interchangeably throughout his seminar work on the production of space, he evoked the idea of urban space as embracing pathways that in their density and texture resemble a "spider's web." Similarly, reconceptualizing architecture as "archi-textures," Lefebvre prompts us to envision individual buildings and urban projects as networks that are part of the larger project of production of space.

Such an approach is aligned with Lefebvre's interconnected triad of "perceives-conceived-lived" spaces, which implies an equally dynamic concept. Building on this line of thought, I consider not only how both imaginaries and symbols become a part of the lived spatial, urban and political experience, but also focus on exposing the socio-technical assemblages that accumulate across multiple scales and in multiple spaces. Writing several decades ago, Lefebvre considered a similar spatial logic when he introduced the idea of a "meshwork," or rather an enmeshment of "mental and social activity" imposed upon "nature's space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 117). The term, sometimes used interchangeably with an idea of a "network," aimed at re-envisioning individual buildings and urban projects as networks that are part of the larger project of production of space.

This opens an opportunity to consider the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity. It also questions the validity of "model-thinking" when interrogating the BRI as a "China model" of development, especially since the materialization of the BRI exposes that its plans and assumptions are often conflicting.¹¹¹ Although the BRI extends, shifts, and updates its geo-vision in ways that often are discrepant with its material manifestations, the physicality of the BRI gets cartographically represented as a discrete spatial entity both by Chinese and Western actors. Such state of affairs becomes an equivalent to what Thongchai Winichakul once called a "geo-body," or an instance of mapping which is not reflective in the political or geographical reality (Winichakul, 1997). Writing about this very discrepancy, Timothy Oakes called BRI a "developmental theater," where China's

¹¹¹ Numerous studies have shown that Chinese investment projects abroad do not comply with what the BRI narrative suggests in terms of its spatial distribution or the fulfillment of what it promised (Casas-Klett and Li, 2021; de LT Oliveira et al., 2020; Felbab-Brown, 2020; Loh, 2021; Mark et al., 2020; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, 2020; Van Staden et al., 2018; Wagner, 2021)

emergence at the global developmental stage is one that is fueled by dueling spatial practices or projection and implementation that not always go hand in hand. While Oakes sees this duality in China's ideological capacity to promote a certain model of international development and foreign policy that is then actively denied by the complex processes of individual project negotiation and implementation in practice, I would like to suggest that this duality goes further and primarily occurs at the level of "fantasy" and the "real," or rather the *real* and *imaginary spaces*.

Between Real Places and Imaginary Spaces

Henri Lefebvre (1991), Michel Foucault (1986), and Edward Soja (1996, 1989) considered space as an essential and irreducible quality of social beings. After all, nothing humans do can escape space, nor life can be lived or imagined without space (Allen, 1997, p. 6). Imagination, similarly to space, penetrates a wide variety of human activities. Yet, unlike space, imagination may represent possibilities other than the actual, times other than the past or present, and perspectives other than the familiar. The BRI is an epitome of both; it is an inherently spatial project that promises deep economic integration of over 70 countries and two-thirds of the world's population, and it does so by evoking a set of dreams, values and longings that constitute the Silk Road imaginary.

In essence, BRI involves an interplay as well as an interdependency of both real places (the roads, ports, and railways) and imaginary spaces (the economic corridors, the romanticized pre-nation-state connectivity, the Digital Silk Road). As the initiative materializes itself and forms physical connections across distant geographical places, the narrative of connectivity, prosperity and peaceful relations colonizes cognitive spaces and the collective social consciousness to justify BRI's territorial footprint. The Silk Road, as an imaginary, does not only fuel the imagination with

the rhetoric of romantic past but it also produces numerous possibilities of a desired future yet to come—some tangible, others ephemeral or to be discovered and made “real.” In this sense, we must locate the BRI mechanism as one that co-exists in both real places and imaginary spaces, from where it derives its persuasive and legitimizing power.

To extrapolate on the relationship between real places and imaginary spaces, we shall first explore the distinction between place and space. While both terms have often been used interchangeably, the distinct natures of place and space have been thoroughly discussed in the field of human geography (Kitchin et al., 2004), which serves as an inspiration to think of the BRI as occupying both real and imaginary realms of human existence. Place implies a particular kind of space which is constructed and characterized by the lived experiences of people, such as a park, city, or a building. These are not only essential in fostering belonging and a sense of identity (Kitchin et al., 2004), the central feature of places is that they involve embodiment, or a real experience of being in them (Thrift, 2003). Space, however, is a more expansive category that is both an abstraction and a basis for social relations that makes space socially produced and consumed (Lefebvre, 1991).

This binary of place and space was complicated by Henri Lefebvre, who argued that spatial logic extended beyond the dialectic of place and space into, what he called, the “trialectics” of spatiality, which better captured the entangled cultural practices, representations and imaginations (Kitchin et al., 2004). In his magnum opus, *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre argued against the idea of space as a natural entity, and distinguished among the mental (spatial practice, or perceived space), social (representations of space, or conceived space) and physical spaces (spaces of representation, or lived space) which, to him, are all indivisibly linked. With this understanding, Lefebvre considered that mental space is always influenced by social relations and physical

perceptions; similarly, social relations and physical surroundings are conceived in the mental space and, in turn, the physical space is a consequence of mental and social spaces.

As a Marxist, Lefebvre conceptualized space along the lines of production and power relations embedded within it. Since he believed that urban spaces in the Western industrialized world have been governed by abstract logics of capital accumulation, Lefebvre positioned space as a condition for ideology to exist. In this sense, ideology was conceptualized by him as having the capacity to both reference and create space, as well as encompass both sensory and practical aspects of human experience that are communicated in terms of abstractions (e.g. constructed categories, commodities). “What we call ideology,” Lefebvre argued, “only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production, and by thus taking on body therein” (Delaney, 2010, p. 101). This conceptualization allowed Lefebvre to consider ideology as embedded within the discourse on social space as well as demonstrate how experts (e.g. urbanists, planners), but also the state, can assert an official representation of social space as the true, or “conceived space,” and repress the “lived space.”

While it is useful to interrogate discrepancies between the social space (represented) and the physical space (lived) of the BRI, the focus of this inquiry that I adopt is not to perform an ethnographic study of the physical spaces of the BRI positioned against the official state discourse of the Chinese Communist Party. Instead, I position the spatial production of the BRI along both real and imaginary spaces which could not only move past tired narratives of China containment, neo-imperial incentives and Sinocentric praise, but also carve out distinct optics for a multifaceted approach that could better comprehend the totality of the political mechanism embodied by the BRI. In doing so, I am inspired by Edward W. Soja’s concept of *Thirdspace*, where I locate the production of BRI.

Influenced by Lefebvre and the break from a predominantly socio-historical analysis in the 1960s,¹¹² Soja coined the term Thirdspace to serve as a lens for analyzing “real-and-imagined” urban centers that exist in the material world and in collective imagination, such as Los Angeles. In demonstrating how cities and conurbations prevail as triads of spatial-social-historical experience, Soja’s Thirdspace represents a dynamic realm in which preconceived binaries (such as subject/object, social/historical, center/margin, real/imagined, material/mental) are reworked and open for other interpretations (Soja, 1996, p. 5).

Following Lefebvre’s theories on human relationships with space, Soja explained that Thirdspace is preceded by two spatial modes – the “Firstspace” (self-evident, existing, to be measured and studied) and the “Secondspace” (privileging of mental and philosophical constructions of space). While the former, or the ‘real’ space “fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms, [and] on things that can be empirically mapped,” the latter, the ‘imagined’ representational space, was “conceived in the ideas about space, in thoughtful representations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms” (Soja, 1996, p. 11). This distinction, which set a binary between the material “road,” and the metaphorical “Silk Road,” prioritized one conception of space over another. Attempting to break away from this dichotomy, Soja proposed an act of “thirthing” of the spatial imagination as:

The creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of thinking about spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the

¹¹² For Soja, modernism emphasized history at the expense of geography. Thirdspace according to Soja is a way of ‘thinking about and interpreting socially produced space’, where the spatiality of our lives, our human geography, has the same scope and significance as the social and historical dimensions.

exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to “real-and-imagined” (or perhaps “realandimagined”?) places.

(Soja, 1996, p. 11).

In doing so, Soja emphasizes that Thirdspace is a realm that encompasses both “real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices,” which are existentially shaped by the “interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassionate spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in *spatial praxis*” (Soja, 1996, p. 31). These qualities that Thirdspace embodies do not only attempt to revise the contemporary spatial knowledge into spatial action, but also point to a “field of unevenly developed (spatial) power,” which has received little attention in the existing literature (Soja, 1996, p. 31). Given that an analysis of BRI cannot forgo conversations about power in spite of the focus on the spatial and ideological promise of connectivity, I take inspiration from Soja’s understanding of real and imagined realms to explore space as not only a “reflective mirror of societal modernization” (Soja, 1989, p. 33), but also an active form that enables the interface of China’s BRI to project and crystalize state ambitions.

Soja’s spatial process of “thirthing” predominantly implies the contiguous restructuring of binaries in order not to simply combine preexisting categories. Instead, he points us toward a process of active transformation of preconceived ideas, categories and approaches which, through Thirdspace, creates an-Other set of optics that could diversify the frontiers of prevalent knowledge. At the same time, it is important to state that Soja’s concept of Thirdspace is not fully replicable for this analysis since the idea itself has mainly been intended for a radical use.¹¹³ Yet,

¹¹³ Since Thirdspace gestures toward a space of emancipatory potential that could radically open our understanding to Otherness, and toward expansion of spatial knowledge, its primary objective is to enable contradictory and seemingly incompatible ideas to coexist and be creatively

in spite of that, Soja's concept lends itself to be particularly productive in opening an opportunity for spatial analysis of the material places of water- and land-based infrastructures that are animated by the fantasies of progress, modernization, peaceful coexistence and seamless connectivity. In this sense, Thirdspace is an all-encompassing concept that represents the experience of life in the Firstspace mediated through Secondspace expectations, which produces "a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja, 2000).

Such process does not only highlight the political, cultural and techno-scientific aspects of space-making, but it also accounts for bold imagination—one which mediates both symbolically and materially of what is yet to come. This very entanglement of dreams and reality that is embedded in the production of economic and symbolic infrastructures points to what Wilson and Bayón once called "fantastical materialization" (Wilson and Bayón, 2017, p. 836). The intermingling of indomitable ambition, daring fantasy and tangible materialism of the BRI reveals projections of technological might, an accumulation of capital, as well as a seductive dream of planetary integration, which renders the geo-vision of Silk Road revival so alluring and enticing. Such logic mirrors scholarly conversations embedded in the critical infrastructure studies which emphasize that "roads and railways are not just technical objects...[but] they encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real" (Larkin, 2013, p. 333).

Encoding of meanings and imaginaries in the material structures has usually been a subject of inquiry into the experiences and aspirations of laborers and local populations involved in the

restructured to produce new meanings, which could be empowering. This inquiry, however, does not wish to assume that BRI constitutes a tool of developmental emancipation in the Global South, neither does it frame the initiative as a counter-hegemonic response to the Western "Washington Consensus" that carries a threat of neo-imperial violence.

space-making processes on the ground (Dalakoglou and Harvey, 2012). Attempting to extend the scope of our analysis beyond such approaches into the macro-analysis, I consider infrastructures themselves to be permeated with an amalgamation of dreams and desires. Following Wilson's and Bayón's case of a grandiose corridor of Manta-Manaus (connecting the Pacific coast of Ecuador with the Atlantic coast of Brazil), I consider BRI as not merely a transnational megaproject that generates debates about localized labor issues, or the Chinese state's involvement in domestic affairs of a BRI-receiving country. Rather, I predominantly view the BRI as a vision of transregional connectivity that attempts to reconcile and broaden the boundaries of global space by expanding infrastructural networks as well as stretching the preconceived limits of possibility through speculative narratives of Silk Road revival.

By doing so, we are able to position the BRI at the center of the analysis along with the Silk Road imaginary that animates it, and not simply dismiss the BRI as an empty policy envelope and the Silk Road as a fable which has no place in understanding modern geopolitics. By following this revisionist logic, BRI resembles a utopian dream which, successfully, highlights the operations of modern space-making as well as the ways in which territory is constructed as socially-, historically- and spatially-specific form of political organization (Elden, 2010). Slavoj Žižek once called a similar form of utopia "a belief in the possibility of a universality without its symptom" (Žižek, 1989, p. 23). The aspirational dream of universalizing values that the Silk Road imaginary brings to fore, such as the notions of peaceful coexistence, ancient cross-territorial friendship, common prosperity and mutual opportunity, becomes a rhetorical gesture of the BRI that electrifies the vision of a preferred future that is yet to come.

However, unlike utopia, the tangibility and the material power of the BRI enable endless possibilities of remaking and re-spacing, therefore, of transpiring the unattainable and unimaginable. AbdouMalik Simone's study of African cities indirectly engages with this very issue

in the context urbanization in the Global South vis-à-vis the traditional Western paradigms of modernization and economic development (Simone, 2004a). In the process of materializing these fantasies and blueprints, physical infrastructures—similarly to urban spaces—emerge as products of not only steel and concrete, but also of “stories, passions, hurts, revenge, aspiration, avoidance, deflection, and complicity” (Simone, 2004a, p. 11). This marriage of immaterial and corporeal aspects of space-making leads us to two observations. First—it exposes the precarity of physical infrastructures which, conceived in imagination, are “products of specific spatial practices” and of various local, national and global actors. Second—it inscribes urban and physical infrastructure in the common development discourse as a specific modality of temporality that does not simply aim at improving everyday lives of citizens, but it also prioritizes “capturing residents to a life aesthetic defined by the state” (Simone, 2004a, p. 7).

With this understanding, the symbolic and material power of the BRI geo-vision stems from its global scale and cosmopolitan narrative. Deployed in a two-fold manner, the BRI rests on the techno-scientific assurances as well as on the collective sensibilities to which it appeals. Such an approach focuses on the future-oriented production of global space that transforms territories with the use of science and technology on the one hand, and strategic cultural diplomacy on the other. Therefore, as a spatial entity produced along both real and imaginary spaces, BRI is not limited to one geo-economic or geo-political objective, or a nation state. The imaginary which animates it, and co-constructs it, rests upon socio-technical entanglements which can be “articulated and propagated by other organized groups, such as corporations, social movements and professional societies” (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015, p. 4). In other words, the allure of progress and infrastructure-led development is matched with the magnetism of romanticized past to be revived, which broadens the spectrum of spatial actors, formats, interests and semantics involved in the spatializing process that is formed within Thirdspace. Therefore, the focus here is not on

China's conception of the BRI as articulated by its state propaganda, neither it is on the Western response or the Western evaluation of presumed motivations and objectives of the Chinese state.

By shifting away from the state-centric and classical realist orientation of international relations that prioritizes nation-states as primary units of political struggle in the global system, to map a truly global geo-vision it is necessary not only to focus on analyzing nation-states or governance mechanisms associated with the BRI, but rather to concentrate on spatial shifts insinuated by the new sociotechnical imaginaries pursued by the Chinese state. In this way, my focus is redirected from the norms and state-actors to the architects, spatial entrepreneurs, transregional complexes, processes of spatialization and spatializing resources, such as financing, communication strategies, deployment of violence, and maps. Such approach to analyzing the BRI proves productive since the imaginary of the ancient Silk Road is deployed by not only the Chinese state through its vast network of political apparatus (inclusive of Xi Jinping himself, the SOEs, financing institutions, local actors as well as mass media, think-tanks and research institutes), but also by non-Chinese actors which either capitalize on the allure of the ancient Silk Road, or are enchanted by it.

In this way, BRI inherently gestures toward a social construction of space (through both urban ideation and materialization of engineered plans) and a complex set of power dynamics and strategies deployed in the process of space-making. This duality exposes an inherent link between representations of the world and the power of political constellations, where a multitude of ideas, visions and plans are weaved together into one fabric of spatial reorganization. It also enables the BRI to not only define and determine the spatial consequences of localized Chinese investment, but also to shape the common understanding of regional and, likely, global space.

The Community of Shared Futures

The loose geographical, financial and political contours of the BRI geo-vision have complicated the scholarly and popular assessments of the initiative which have left outside observers and foreign governments puzzled about China's territorial footprint. Naturally, the extent of China's massive infrastructure-building venture has been pointing toward presumed geostrategic and geopolitical advantages, where China was accused to "draw [its] neighbours ever tighter into Beijing's economic embrace" (Miller, 2017, p. 12). Such assessments are not unsubstantiated. After all, the far-reaching narrative of the Silk Road revival represented by the BRI has suggested that "as Europe disappears, Eurasia coheres" (Kaplan, 2018, p. 7), which crafted a tale where facts, fears, and dreams are mixed into an enlivening story that plots trans-continental integration of unprecedented scale

Animated by technological progress and references to cross-cultural friendship, BRI is ultimately materialized through infrastructural plans as well as a complex assemblage of actors and processes intimately linked to the commitments and promises made prior to its implementation. In spite of generating angst and suspicion, the vision itself rests on nearly-universal values, such as "inclusiveness," "mutual prosperity," and "unhindered flows of people and commodities," which came to be the official rhetoric of the BRI (NDRC, 2015). Principles, such as mutual coexistence, interconnections, and economic progress do not only place the rhetorical modes that have animated the Great Wall or the Three Gorges Dam in a similar logic of cross-cultural rejuvenation, but they become a key to understanding the global dimensions of a vision that re-imagines geo-physical space.

China's unprecedented economic growth has generated numerous contentions, some of which led some to proclaim a beginning of the "Chinese century" (Brands, 2018; Campanella, 2012; Fishman, 2004; Shenkar, 2006; Stiglitz, 2015). Following its profound economic

transformation and the strong sense of cultural heritage, contemporary China has seen an emergence of a peculiar narrative of nation-making that has increasingly emphasized the contributions of China to humankind as well as its central role in the global system. Since the Chinese officials became infatuated with Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, Beijing came to understand that apart from military or financial power there exist other sources of national strength (Nye, 1990). This realization allowed China to position itself as a "reemerging power" since its rise has not stemmed from nothing, but rather embodied a return to the times from before the "century of humiliation" (Carrai, 2021; Wang, 2013).

With these newly sketched contours of China's nationhood, the Chinese state realized that to co-opt states and non-state actors into its vision, China needed to craft an enduring narrative for others to relate to, which became the foundation of China's new diplomacy and its "indispensable step towards becoming a global power" (Holzer, 2020, p. 193). One of the main pillars of China's nation-building campaign has been the state's determination not to repeat its unfavorable past. For decades, following the Opium Wars (1839- 1842; 1856- 1860), the imperial China and then the Republic of China, experienced both intervention and subjugation on behalf of the Western powers (1839-1949). These circumstances led the Chinese state to selectively choose the proud instances of China's imperial past to create the "*lai hua*" narrative, which promoted the embrace of Chinese culture and which positioned China's soft power in its ancient sources of Confucian values and Sinocentric view of the Chinese civilization (Holzer, 2020, p. 193).

This national ethos would become updated by the Chinese intellectuals in 1915 with a slogan reminding the Chinese people to "never forget their national humiliation" (*wu wang guochi*). Such enlivening rhetoric aimed at ensuring that the path to national "rejuvenation" would never follow the indignities of the past (Miller, 2017, p. 7). By not allowing for the possibility of failure or friction, the Chinese officials turned to large-scale initiatives to amplify China's international

discourse power and make its story heard across the globe. What had initially begun as a domestic industrial policy of preferential treatment for coastal regions (to create a “spill over” effect to boost local economies of remote provinces), gradually transformed into an ambitious, global vision (Jeffreys, 2009, p. 70; Lall, 2013, p. 89; Wu, 2016, p. 21).

Beginning with the introduction of Confucius Institutes to spread the Chinese language and culture overseas, the announcement of the BRI in 2013 began to further incorporate cultural and economic motivations into China’s diplomatic efforts. In doing so, China began to increase its “discourse power” (*huayu quan*) abroad by evoking positive associations with the ancient Silk Road and creating a form of historic legitimacy to support its national narrative (Holzer, 2020, p. 193). However, the underlying principles of China’s foreign policy remained the same. Examining China’s official diplomatic statements, it becomes clear that starting with China’s economic opening the Chinese state began to project a largely uniform national identity, where both ambition and traditional cultural values serve as driving forces for its domestic and foreign policies.

The BRI matches Xi Jinping’s latest iteration of China’s national narrative since the three features that consistently characterize China’s nation-making effort are: (1) the ability of China as a sovereign state to create a pragmatist and flexible foreign policy; (2) the idea that China serves as a role model for the Global South (and beyond) with regard to the national rejuvenation and economic development; (3) the notion that both China and its allies should prioritize the importance of preserving traditional culture and values along with the rapid modernization of the country. In this context, the BRI, in cooperation with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), is the first multilateral global venture that originated in the Global South, which substantiates China’s stated objectives of multipolarity in international relations as well as providing an alternative to the Western hegemony in the global financial system (the World Bank,

the IMF). Moreover, the legitimacy of BRI is also projected through the lens of China's rapid industrialization and its impressive track record in fighting poverty over the past few decades. This transformative rhetoric of a prosperous future has been instrumental in promoting the BRI to developing countries with the promise of national rejuvenation, just as it had been instrumental in promoting the initiative and boosting the morale at home.

Within this framework, Xi highlighted the need to actively increase China's national wealth and power (*fuqiang*) (Schell and Delury, 2014), which created a rhetoric of industrial transformation and prosperous futures that was then consolidated in Xi's proclamation of the "Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation." The term *fuqiang*, which usually means "national interest" by the logic of Westphalian governance, has become one of the most coherent pursuits of Chinese political modernity. Building on the "five principles of peaceful coexistence" which emerged in the 1950s, the Chinese state married the domestic industrialization efforts with the nation's global interests to present itself to the international community as a positive actor in building a multilateral system. This culminated in Xi Jinping's call for a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind," which was enshrined into the Party Constitution as well as adopted in a UN Security Resolution in 2017.

Deploying national strength, global ambitions, and traditional cultural heritage to ensure PRC's political stability, the idea of creating a community of shared future became a diplomatic victory for China, which began to shape the nation on the international image as a responsible global power. This new form of ambition and confidence, which has strived to act in the benefit of all to address the world's most pressing global challenges, signaled a shift in China's national identity from a rule-taker to a rule-maker. In this way, the "Dream of National Rejuvenation" became an organizing concept for China's increasingly proactive diplomacy and ambitions of political and economic cooperation.

This very dream, also known as the “China dream,” has more in common with the BRI than what the existing literature has given it credit to. In fact, BRI and the China dream are mutually supportive and reinforcing (Mayer and Balázs, 2018). Both concepts are forms of national ambition at the heart of which lies “the ability to defend itself and shape its own destiny” (Miller, 2017, p. 17). Similarly to the BRI, China dream projects desires of infinite benefits achieved through various forms of cultural, political, infrastructural and territorial rescaling¹¹⁴ (Ong, 2004; Wang, 2015; Zhang, 2017), which has become a flagship political philosophy of Xi Jinping. While neither of the concepts necessarily embodies a purely nationalistic vision, both imply an aspirational rhetoric of a globalist utopia (Mayer and Balázs, 2018), where the strong push for connectivity is mediated between the official power of the state and the informal power of popular culture (Callahan, 2017, p. 250). With such strong rhetorical appeal and incredibly nebulous nature, both concepts have become focal points for Western and Chinese intellectuals, analysts and strategists (Noesselt, 2016).

Similarly to the “American dream,” which paradoxically marries idealism with materialistic pursuits as well as egalitarian promise with exploitation and subjugation (Campbell and Kean, 2016, p. 53; Cullen, 2003, p. 11; Drinnon, 1997; Thornton, 1987; Turner and Bogue, 2010), the China dream expresses profound ambiguity. On the one hand, through state propaganda, it hints toward Chinese heritage by picturing traditional folk art like paper cutouts, woodblock prints, and clay figurines that are reminiscent of the pre-Communist Chinese traditions. On the other hand, the central message of China dream is highly individualistic as it is presented on billboards and posters with the slogan: “The China Dream, My Dream.” Such message signals a redefinition of the state’s vision from a Marxist utopia to a Confucian fantasy of shared future defined by good

¹¹⁴ Here, I mainly refer to the creation of special administrative and economic zones reminiscent of China’s reform era.

life, economic prosperity, thrift, respect and benevolence deployed along with the China dream campaign (Johnson, 2013; Lee, 2014).

Although these values point to a distinctively Chinese way of life, many of them are simply universal. In spite of the CCP's central message that identifies universal values as an ideological threat (ChinaFile, 2013), the strategy employed to promote both the China dream and the BRI creates a seductive proposal where potential participants are persuaded by vivid imagery that urges them to build a desirable future by resurrecting the romanticized past. In the case of the BRI, the fear of missing out on the potential opportunity, however speculative it may seem to be, perpetuates an appetite for each prospective participant to plot their national futures with the endorsement of the unquestioned legacy of Silk Road connectivity. As a romantic memory of unbroken globalization, the universality of the BRI and the China dream reimagine the enchanting fairytale of national growth (which promises good times to its citizens and profits to the investors) into the zeitgeist of cross-border connectivity across much of the Global South. Following the triumph of neoliberalism in Euro-America in the 1990s, the *Silk Road redux* derives its rhetorical power from the promise of an emerging frontier to be fully incorporated into the global capitalist geography.

While the era of structural adjustment entailed a reimagination of a nation-state as a fully capitalized unit, China's formula does not only promise economic prosperity to all BRI-participating nations, but also signals a chance to fulfill the national destiny to become a part of a larger story of transnational connectivity. Instead of transforming a nation into an income-generating asset, where its territory becomes a reserve of untapped resources and its population becomes a demographic dividend that produces and consumes, the China dream and the BRI emphasize the potential of crafting a desirable future that embraces the shift of the center of global gravity from Euro-America to the Silk Road region. In this way, Chinese dream is not a

straightforward geo-political attempt to “restore China’s ‘natural position’ at the centre of the world—as it was before the Industrial Revolution” (Callahan, 2017, p. 262), but rather a geo-cultural narrative of vast reach and scope that opens the possibility of a shared and prosperous future to the global community. This uplifting narrative, apart from the rhetorical power of capital-infused growth story, conveys the dream of glorious future by erasure of the colonial shame and restoration of the mythical golden past.

This post-Mao bricolage of imagery that blends historical grievances, Confucian morality, traditional Chinese ideals, and economic progress with the euphoria of connectivity-enabled globalization, projects a fair dose of ambiguity, which allows the Chinese state to move away from traditional propaganda and amass wider appeal. As the narrative extends the bounds of a nationalistic argument for the return to glorious Chinese past, both BRI and the China dream skillfully persuade the Chinese people, and the two-thirds of the world population (who by default participate in the BRI), to collectively imagine a shared sense of identity and agency, where everyone can pursue their own versions of the China dream.

This ambiguous promise remains a powerful tool that does not only create a personality cult around Xi Jinping (Hart, 2016), but also accommodates the various expectations, dreams and approaches to achieving the desired future. After all, the “rise of China” story has never been just about an economic transformation, but also about the blossoming of dreams, subjectivities and entrepreneurial aspirations (Campanella, 2012; Rofel, 2007). Within this speculative rhetoric, the BRI reveals itself as an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, it is a manifestation of a lofty doctrine as it represents a political system that opens itself to the world. On the other hand, it does so behind a closed capital and currency account (Krawczyk, 2018). As an extension of the opening-up policy, BRI marks a point of transfiguration, where a tighter grip of the Chinese state

produces a “Red New Deal”¹¹⁵ that stands in strike opposition with Deng’s doctrine of “impossible egalitarianism” (Goldkorn et al., 2021), all while projecting a global utopia and prosperity-building at a scale unseen before.

Landscapes of Power: Empire after Empire

With the announcement of the BRI in 2013, Xi Jinping marked a decisive change in China’s economic and geostrategic policy, which began to exhibit a strong sense of political and geo-economic assertiveness. Grounded in China’s achievements of the past decades and its growing awareness of its position in the global system,¹¹⁶ this shift translated directly to an increasingly ambitious and assertive form of diplomacy as well as a distinct political philosophy.¹¹⁷ Under previous Chinese leaders, both transregional development and economic growth were the primary political objectives of the Chinese state. Following the rise of Xi to power, ideology began

¹¹⁵ Here, I refer to the state-led wide-spread attempt to reduce inequality and ensure better life for ordinary people within the realm of a socialist market economy. While the state policy seems to have popular support, its “red” tint gestures toward both a traditional communist logic as well as the fact that “companies that get in the way of the government are going to bleed” (Goldkorn et al., 2021).

¹¹⁶ Here, I refer to China’s success in alleviating poverty, impressive over-the-night urban transformation, vast infrastructure development, overtaking Germany and Japan as the world’s largest export economy, and becoming the second-largest economy in terms of the GDP after the United States--with still competitive growth rate in 2020 in spite of the pandemic (Holzer, 2020, p. 188).

¹¹⁷ On July 1, 2021, when the CCP celebrated the centennial of its founding, this shift was exhibited by Xi’s aggressive 70-minute speech during which he was dressed in an iconic Mao suit (Law and Cheong, 2021). Speaking to more than 70,000 spectators with phrases, such as “without the Communist Party, there will be no New China,” in the background, Xi emphasized the rejuvenated strength of the Chinese nation. His statement that “any foreign force who attempted to bully China would find their heads broken and bashed bloody against the great wall of steel forged by the blood and flesh of 1.4 billion Chinese people” (Shi, 2021), disturbed political leaders globally who have not been used to such rhetoric coming from China.

to trump economy as China embarked on a new path displaying the nation's "four confidences," – in the "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," its theories, the political system, and the Chinese culture (Holzer, 2020, p. 189). Such political assertiveness has not only implied an articulation of Chinese national interests abroad, but it has also pointed to China's willingness to flex its economic muscle.

This has been most visible in China's domestic campaign launched in 2020, when the state deployed stern measures to suppress large Chinese companies.¹¹⁸ With restrictions that wiped out billions of dollars in value. The reason for China's tighter restrictions on private entrepreneurs and foreign businesses has likely been intensified as a result of Xi's deep distrust of China's current form of state capitalism,¹¹⁹ and his desire to cultivate a strong state.¹²⁰ Inspired by Mao, Xi's ideological preference attempts to ensure that the CCP remains in control of all aspects of

¹¹⁸ In August of 2021, the Chinese authorities unveiled a five-year plan which highlighted tighter regulations for much of its economy. Starting with the blocking of a highly anticipated initial public offering (IPO) for one of its biggest tech start-ups, Jack Ma's financial technology company Ant Group (Kharpal, 2021), Xi's interference began a seminal moment in China's economic history. For the first time, the Chinese government stopped one of its flagship companies from carrying out significant fundraising plans for future growth. Further, the shares of a Hong Kong-listed property developer, China Evergrande, tumbled by nearly 90 percent after the Chinese government restricted speculative activities in the real estate market (Cheng, 2021). This restriction on the amount of money that real estate developers could borrow was caused by the overindulgence of real estate companies in consumer debt, which placed an increased strain on the Chinese middle class.

¹¹⁹ Following the 2015 stock market crash, Xi mobilized state funds as well as investigated whether regulators worked with the firms to initiate the stock selloff in a suspected "financial coup," which resulted in jail time for a number of regulators, investors and banking executives. In October 2021, Xi continued to further curb capitalist forces within China's economy by cutting the ties that state banks and other financial institutions had developed with large private-sector players (Wei, 2021).

¹²⁰ Following the work of AbdouMaliq Simone (2010, 2004b, 2004a) and Filip De Boeck and Marie-Francoise Plissart (2004) who maintain that people become the nation's critical infrastructure once the state fails, it could be inferred that the diminished liberties of the people as demonstrated through recent restrictions testify of the Chinese state becoming a critical infrastructure of the nation.

Chinese social life (inclusive of the military, foreign policy, education and economy) to enable its capacity to curb the single-minded pursuit of profit¹²¹ (Knutson and Linebaugh, 2021; Wei, 2021), and strengthen Xi's political power.¹²²

The BRI—named the “project of the century”—attempts to lay out a blueprint for securing a long-lasting legacy for Xi, as it projects a vision of prosperous economic geographies to be co-constructed under the guidance of the Chinese state. With this vision, the Chinese state has embarked on a mission to manage modern threats to societal and market instability by further consolidating its political power across three distinct levels: the nation, the party and Xi Jinping himself (Buckley, 2018). Beginning with Xi Jinping's first term in office in 2012, when the CCP folded all public policy-related, technocratic and administrative agencies under the power of the party, to Xi's second term in 2017, the push for a strong state and infrastructure-led development reflected a wider ideological shift, where China attempts to reinvent itself as a reemerging global power guided by socialist political ideology.

Vowing to restore the nation to its ancient glory and to sustain China's global rise, the state enshrined a new political doctrine also known as the *Xi Jinping Thought* into the constitution as well as approved Xi's radical break from an established system of succession (Doubek, 2018;

¹²¹ Xi Jinping has been aiming at a wide range of businesses by blocking IPOs (Initial Public Offerings), adding new regulations and pushing some companies to donate to social causes. In April 2021, Alibaba saw a regulatory action. A few months later, a ride-sharing company Didi faced scrutiny as well. More recently, celebrities have been facing greater political scrutiny, including Zhao Wei, actress married to a developer and businessman who was erased from the internet, and an actor Zhang Zhehan who was blacklisted following his visit to a Japanese shrine.

¹²² Xi's interventions may have been influenced by Western capitalist economies, where big tech was enabled to encroach onto the political sphere (such as when both Facebook and Twitter took down President Trump's social media accounts). If true, the Chinese authorities began to perceive such events as major flaws of Western capitalism, which prompted an increasing number of crack-downs on China's most celebrated businesses and public figures who began to be perceived as a threat to CCP's power given their robust economic growth and growth in popularity abroad.

Rudd, 2021). With increased controls at home and growing projection of openness, inclusivity and cosmopolitan futures abroad, China successfully extends its own success story beyond its borders under the banner of BRI. Within such framework of a distinct integration of Eurasia that evokes a mode of civilizational revival, China's commitment to invest in vast trade infrastructures is paired with its appetite for high-end manufacturing¹²³ (Knutson and Linebaugh, 2021; Perlez and Huang, 2017; Wei, 2021), and modernization of its military (Buckley and Myers, 2017), to create a hallmark of a distinctly ambitious geo-economic diplomacy.

To analyze such unique political culture, I gravitate toward approaches which skew away from Western-centric commentary in order not to replicate the existing strain of scholarship that too often produces one-sided interpretations, as well as to account for the fact that China is characterized by a distinctive imperial mindset, which is an important point of departure for any political analysis. Historically, China had never sought to explicitly influence others through the means of governance or religious conversion. Instead, its imperial tradition emerges from the “tributary system” dating the Ming and Qing dynasties, which involved a complex, yet elastic, assemblage of relations with foreign territories that engaged in tribute exchanges with China facilitated through trade infrastructures and cross-cultural exchange. The tributary system allowed a great deal of flexibility in “deal[ing] with all sorts of regimes, good and evil” (Kaplan, 2018, p. 25), which was possible due to the opaque hierarchy of kingdoms and states within it. With no clear distinctions between superior and subordinate actors, China's imperial tradition was grounded in respecting the expectations of the Chinese polity (Lee, 2016).

¹²³ As opposed to speculative areas of investment, such as the internet platform companies, the stock or housing markets, which have been subjects of scrutiny amid the recent governmental restrictions.

Resembling the BRI in its assurance to not deprive any nation from coming into China's embrace based on the characteristics of its political regime, the logics of the tributary system point us toward a distinctive, non-Western political imagination, which corresponds to the traditional Chinese cultural concept of *Tianxia*, also translated as "All-Under-Heaven." *Tianxia* implies a vision of world order derived from China's imperial tradition which shaped much of Chinese international relations thought, and it still plays a significant role in both domestic and international debates about China's role internationally. Undefined by Western norms, *Tianxia*, as a concept, has roots in China's early philosophical texts (1046–221 BCE), where it represented the political and cultural identity of China's polity against its rivals. Regardless of the current interpretation, central to *Tianxia* are Confucian norms of hierarchy and morality. Grounded in the assumption that modern problems do not derive from "failed states," but rather are a result of the "failed world," *Tianxia* represents an attempt to re-create the modern state of political and economic affairs in the image of Confucian governance dissimilar to the Western colonial conquest. At the same time, the term itself is vague enough that it can be read as inclusively as "the World," or "All-Under-Heaven," but other times it is translated as "Empire" (Callahan, 2008, p. 751).

For this reason, to better understand its historical underpinnings and to sketch the political cartography of the BRI, I turn to the socio-historical concept of "empire" as a productive analytic to map out the diffusion of Chinese power. While the notion of empire is both provocative and polemical as it tends to signal imperial motivations and warn against sinister geopolitical designs, I consider David Palmer's ruminations on "post-colonial empires" helpful in not only recognizing some of the contemporary tensions that emerge within the BRI framework, but also to further examine the imperial projection embedded within it. Palmer attempts to position the concept of an imperial formation outside of the commonly known Western frames. To him, the Westphalian

principle of sovereign states, which serves as an analytical lens through which world's greatest empires have been conceptualized and analyzed, does not match the complexity of what came to be understood as an American, a Russian or a Chinese empire.

This is conditioned by the fact the Westphalian logic, which does not necessarily allow for empires to exist outside of their territorial bounds. Since “empire” is usually conceptualized as “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective sovereignty of another political society” (Doyle, 1986, p. 45), or a capacity to “export institutions to the periphery, thereby building a bridge between the two and creating a common culture that ensures that metropolitan institutions and ideas always have the upper hand” (Kumar, 2019, p. 15), conventional conception of empire is shaped by how they have been represented on maps. The British, French and Portuguese Empires have always been represented as parts of a single entity directly under the administration of its imperial metropole. Usually, the mapped territory would only be a part of a single empire at a given moment, which represents a typical Westphalian mode of territoriality that resembles the modern nation-state logic. This does not allow an empire (in the conventional sense) to recognize other states as sovereign equals, or even engage with them in diplomatic relations.

While neither the contemporary United States of America nor the Peoples' Republic of China would consider themselves empires today since both nation-states emerged out of anti-imperial struggles, Palmer's notion of a post-colonial empire opens an opportunity to break away from the “Westphalian” conceptions of empire, yet still utilize certain elements of the concept to productively capture the extent of territorial or ideological reach of each state. According to Palmer, non-Westphalian conception of empire require us to consider a vast system of overlapping imperial formations, out of which he recognizes three modalities: blocs, infrastructural networks and celestial empires. In this way, Palmer allows us to avoid any form of

dialectical analysis while interrogating the BRI's distinct mode of space-making, therefore not subscribing to the Western discourse of Chinese colonialism or uncritically accepting Sinocentric praise of the BRI.

The first modality which Palmer presents as a form of non-Westphalian empire derives from the Cold War, when the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc were bound together with uniform systems of military and ideological alliances.¹²⁴ Collectively, each of the opposing ideological blocs represented a form of imperial imagination, yet they did not subscribe to the unitary imperial sovereignty in a strictly Westphalian sense.¹²⁵ The unifying aspects of each bloc translated to standards of knowledge production, ideology and values that unified much of the West, as well as a form of centralized integration in the Soviet Bloc that served as a modern imitation of the Russian Empire (Kumar, 2019). As Palmer suggests, the Euro-American and Russian blocs continue to operate in a form of post-colonial empires bound together by the legacies of the Cold War era, inclusive of the military, institutional and infrastructural ties.

Since much of China's modern history centered around the resistance to Euro-American imperial imagination counterbalanced with Russian assistance that led to China's eventual break from the Soviet empire (Palmer, 2020, p. 11), China's current political cartography differs

¹²⁴ Here, I refer to NATO, NORAD and ANZUS which were under American-controlled centralized military command, incorporating North America, Western Europe and the Pacific. Latin America and the Middle East were influenced by the U.S. which put in place and removed dictators and regimes according to its own strategic interests. In Africa and Asia, the physical, educational, political, economic, and cultural infrastructures remained tied to those of the former metropolises. In East Asia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, they were placed under American military protection.

¹²⁵ In the case of the Western bloc, strings of American and British military bases running through the Pacific Ocean, East Asia, Middle East and Europe ensured a form of coherence to this imperial imagination with some examples of groupings, such the European Union which decided to carve out a space within the empire, or Iran, Chile or Vietnam, which attempted to break off completely at the cost of American-led coups, invasions or bombing.

significantly from the cartography of an empire marked by uniform colors similarly to the maps of the Cold War era. BRI employs a distinct mode of imperial imagination, where territories and boundaries are replaced with infrastructures, flows and imaginaries of profound interconnectivity, which projects a geo-vision of a smooth, frictionless and borderless world. However, if layer this rhetoric on top of the material reality of China-funded projects internationally, including ports, Special Economic Zones and other infrastructural and connectivity-enhancing ventures, we can see a clear resemblance of early networks of scattered posts of European companies of the Indies that were employed several centuries ago (Palmer, 2020, p. 14) (Fig. 21).

Juxtaposing the map of Chinese investments, with the map of the “American empire” composed the American, British, French and Italian military bases (Fig. 22), we see a clear pattern corresponding to the sites of Chinese investment, which attempts to ensure Chinese access to natural resources, including oil, and foreign markets. Interestingly, this modality depicts a shift where many of the regions incorporated into the American empire through military, political and commercial infrastructures are now becoming increasingly integrated into the “Chinese empire” under the BRI’s vast network of geo-economic, technological, transportation and geo-cultural infrastructures. This network is not exclusionary in the sense of creating a unified area of China-enabled connectivity, but rather embodies overlapping qualities with prior infrastructural networks that are being revitalized as well as other infrastructures that coexist with the BRI, such as military bases in Djibouti and financial institutions in Hong Kong. In this sense, this second post-Westphalian modality renders “overlapping, interlocking and interpenetrating infrastructures of empire” possible (Palmer, 2020, p. 15).

Palmer’s third modality pertains to the heavenly or celestial empires that have adopted their imperial imagination into the national imagination enforced by the Westphalian state system, which include historical civilization-states, such as China, Russia, India, Iran and Turkey. A

peculiar characteristic of such states is that their newly constructed national imagination “has a tendency to re-imperialize itself,” therefore project its distinct form of imperial ambition beyond the geo-political bounds of its territory (Palmer, 2020, p. 15). In this sense, when we consider empires not rooted in a single polity, such as the Kingdom of God of Western Christendom, the Caliphate, or the Chinese Mandate of Heaven, they oftentimes continue to engage in conflict with the secularity of a nation-state. Such imperial imagination spills over the Westphalian cartography and, to cite Palmer, “rather than being ritually performed in a display of sovereignty as in pre-colonial times, becomes the belief system or ideology of cultural, religious and political movements, which mobilize individuals for whom the imperial imagination has become part of their subjectivity” (Palmer, 2020, p. 16).

Such imperial dream positioned against the inability of full enactment of its imperial sovereignty becomes an opportunity for individuals who hold such beliefs to sustain them as they diffuse along the infrastructures and networks that keep them afloat. In this sense, inspired by Palmer’s notion of post-colonial empires, I propose to strip the concept of an empire from its Western-centric biases, yet preserve the elemental features of what the notion enables, namely a sharper conceptualization of the political imagination embedded within the BRI. By beginning to think through non-Western praxis of space-making, we would not only stop reinforcing the dialectical political analysis of the initiative itself, but also consider the BRI as an imperial projection among many (in a non- Westphalian sense) to further develop the notion of post-colonial empires as rich and complex assemblages of relations involved in the spatializing process.

Acknowledging the macro-level political and historical legacies as well as paying attention to the frictions and flows among the overlapping “orientations, networks, values and identities” that are felt and negotiated through the BRI on a micro-level, such analytical approach has the capacity to move beyond the motionless entity of a nation-state, and to consider the “global” as fluid unit

that responds to and is shaped by increasing waves of globalization, transnational flows and the cross-border cooperation among state and non-state actors of material (e.g. infrastructure) and immaterial (e.g. diplomacy, trade union) kind. This is a necessary step to be taken since Asian empires have never expressed rigid territorial boundaries, and instead evoked multi-scalar levels of governance.¹²⁶ Such “perspectival vision of empire,” points to the diffusion of imperial imagination that spreads outward to reach ever distant peripheries and polities as well as to incorporate smaller and larger regions into ritual order of the empire (Palmer, 2020, p. 9).

Analyzing the geo-political and geo-economic influence of the United States post-9/11, David Harvey spoke of imperialism with reference to the “frictionless” spaces that allow for unimpeded flows of investment, capital and competition unconstrained by sovereign nation-states, which corresponds directly to Palmer’s argument about the usefulness of the term empire and the necessity to adapt our understanding of the concept beyond the Westphalian context. In *The New Imperialism* (2003), Harvey made a distinction between “distributive” and “collective” power in consolidating hegemony, where distributive power implies a coercive form of state hegemony and collective power points to forms of cooperation deployed in fulfilment of strategic means. In other words, distributive power requires the hegemon to take “power away from

¹²⁶ While Western imperial maps usually depicted clear lines that inscribed the bounds of their territories, in the 17th and 18th-century Asia, the imperial projections did not show any definite borders. Furthermore, Asian empires frequently featured multiscalar and overlapping sovereignties, which showed “how local polities, through tributary diplomacy, simultaneously affiliated themselves to multiple surrounding kingdoms and empires— placing themselves under the sovereignty of more than one imperial entity, while maintaining their local autonomy” (Palmer, 2020, p. 9). An example of such a model is the Chinggisid (or Genghisid) Dynasty which incorporated the Mongol modes of administration, Confucian principles of legitimacy and order, and Tibetan Buddhist notions of spiritual supremacy. By absorbing the three distinct traditions specific to particular locations and historical polities, they diffused outward through both military and diplomatic engagements which allowed them to be integrated and assimilated by other polities.

others” by leading a coalition or creating an order, while collective power projects the idea of mutual gain and benefit achieved through the actions of a rising hegemon (Harvey, 2003, p. 37).

In this sense, the United States as a truly distributive power has secured and sustained its hegemonic position globally since the 1970s with considerable efforts of home-grown financial institutions, such as the US Treasury, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In contrast, China positions itself against such neoliberal ethos reminiscent of the Washington Consensus era, which demonstrated its commitment to offset the damage caused by the structural adjustment programs (SAP), which often furthered domestic inequalities and led to solidifying financial dominance of the US at the expense of increased vulnerabilities of the Southern nations and ever more complex interdependencies with the industrialized North. Further, Beijing’s new financial instruments (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund in particular) prompted some to speculate that while China might not be rejecting the global architecture, “it does mean that it wants to supplement and reshape it” (Miller, 2017, p. 12).

Such conversations, which imply a form of hegemonic power in the making are often limited by the existing frameworks, such as alternative development, south-south cooperation or south-east alliance, which do not fully represented the complexity of the BRI given its rhetorically-strong and seemingly apolitical appeal that promises a connectivity-enhancing mechanism which does not involve political or financial conditionalities, and is promoted to deliver “win-win” solutions globally. Taking a step back, we must remind ourselves that no matter the scale, function or motivation, infrastructural projects which remake geo-physical space are inherently political. For this reason, each decision that leads to how, where, why and under whose command an infrastructure project materializes, reveals the details and spatial layouts which often justify particular structures of power. Across disciplines, scholars have urged to critically evaluate

decisions that shape built environments and show both micro and macro-level impacts of those subjected to them.¹²⁷

Given that, Harvey's notion of collective power where all parties benefit, or at least seem to, fits the complex apparatus exemplified by the BRI, which is only fostered by the increasing commercial relations that it produces. Harvey's conceptualization of collective power is equally helpful in comprehending the ever-changing mechanism of the BRI which often stretches in its scope and scale to incorporate speculative digital infrastructure investments (termed the Digital Silk Road) as well as diplomatic efforts deployed during the Covid-19 pandemic (referred to as the Health Silk Road). In doing so, the "creation and transfer of new technologies," as Harvey maintains, remains to be a crucial element of the China's collective power of the BRI, which extends its reach beyond the new financial institutions, into the utopian fantasy of reclaiming the past as the path toward a future yet to come.

This very world-view directly corresponds to China's drive to avoid another "national humiliation" in its creation of desirable futures. As a "Celestial Empire," China for centuries was the central sphere of tributary nations that included Japan, Korea and Vietnam, as well as the barbarians of the Central Asian steppes (Miller, 2017, p. 4). Today, the dream of the community of common destiny which is filled with optimism, symbolism and anticipation does not resemble a branding campaign that was used to promote the Beijing Olympics,¹²⁸ but a comprehensive

¹²⁷ For example, Laavanya Kathiravelu emphasized the importance of "discourse embedded in space" in her analysis of the labor migrants in Dubai (Kathiravelu, 2016, p. 135), whereas Patrick Malone pointed to how built space accommodates power vested in the state, capital, property and land (Malone, 2017), which reflects the larger consensus that power is embedded in built environment (Flynn and Mackay, 2019; Martinez, 2011; Milun, 2013; Varna, 2016).

¹²⁸ The spectacle of 2008 Olympic Games utilized a series of maneuvers that attempted to re-present China's return to its former glory. However, the most spectacular ones seem to be the displays of banners with the Game's official slogan "One World, One Dream," (which resonates with China Dream) against the backdrops of Great Wall, Tiananmen Square and other iconic

geo-vision which signals a form of collective power (one that is enabled through the shared purpose that skillfully utilizes the Silk Road imaginary), which challenges the existing frameworks of inter-state power relations, hegemony and empire.

Unlike the conventional empires that were created through conquest and sustained through economic production and trans-regional trade, the post-colonial imperial imagination that animates the BRI is achieved with ritualized cultural performance of the Silk Road imaginary that draws on the cosmology of mutual and collective coexistence. The “Chinese empire,” as we may call it for the lack of a better term, exist primarily in the collective imagination, where ritualized efforts of geo-cultural performance are diffused from the top down and from bottom up. While material infrastructures, such as ports or bridges, which are have always been a foundation of empires, are supplemented with a powerful vision that plots a form of space-making, where lives and bodies (from both the imperial center and the periphery) together with myths and imaginaries shape material realities and fantasies in an all-encompassing and uplifting narrative of a better future.

Inspired by Joshua Neves’ explorations of “media archipelagos” and Paul Amar’s pioneering work on “security archipelagos,” I would like to propose that in order to bridge Harvey’s theory of collective power and Palmer’s ruminations on post-colonial empires in an attempt to better map and comprehend the BRI, we might consider a framework of “imperial archipelagos” as an ameboid geography that fuses the modalities of infrastructural networks and celestial empires into a distinct category of imperial imagination that exists within the realm of Thirdspace—even if its physical attributes or territorial footprint are not fully pronounced, felt or even present.

spaces of historical significance. This was supplemented with the images of Olympic torch relay and its “Journey of Harmony” crossing 85,000 miles [and] tracing the ancient Silk Road...before reaching the capital” (Price and Dayan, 2009, p. 229).

In doing so, this dissertation attempts to contribute methodologically to the macro-level study of the BRI by (1) refusing to accept the “global” as a smooth space of transnational flows, (2) interrupting the geographic coherence of localized processes of areas (Ghosh, 2021), and (3) disrupting the existing analytical frames to examining global power dynamics. Bridging disciplines, real places and imagined spaces, I consider the production of the BRI as occurring within Soja’s Thirdspace, which does not only allow us to better position the mechanism of BRI’s space-making outside of the existing, unproductive frameworks, but it also foregrounds the dynamism, plasticity and malleability of the BRI interface, and it is these ideas to which I now turn.

Epilogue: Plastic Silk Roads

The BRI is not only grandiose in size (as it stretches throughout much of Eurasia, the Middle East and Africa), but it also is vague and indeterminate in its conceptual and geographical scope. On occasion, the initiative stretches and includes a greater number of countries within its perimeter. In spite of projecting a revival of ancient connectivity across six economic corridors that remain to be the priority of BRI's immediate neighborhood policy,¹²⁹ the BRI now expanded to Latin America, the Caribbean and Australia (García, 2016; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li and Zhu, 2019; Oosterveld et al., 2018), which have never historically been considered parts of the ancient silk routes. Open by design, BRI's list of participating states has never been final or exclusive, nor ever confirmed by an official source (Mações, 2019, p. 24). The opaque nature of the initiative goes far beyond geography into the conceptual and institutional spheres, where various state and non-state actors operating within and through the BRI collectively contribute to the narrative that frames the project as China's attempt to "make friends" and improve lives of two-thirds of the world's population.

This idea of open cooperation and mutual benefit among all BRI-participants produces an amiable narrative that appeases the critics of China's economic rise while inexplicitly promoting China's strategic interests. With trade infrastructures and connectivity-oriented economic development as primary means of sustaining China's economic growth and improving the livelihoods of all parties involved, BRI is neither just one of the largest infrastructure and

¹²⁹ The 6 BRI corridors are: (1) the New Eurasian Land Bridge, (2) the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor, (3) the China-Pakistan Corridor, (4) the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Corridor, (5) the China- Mongolia-Russia Corridor, and (6) the China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor (Zou, 2018, pp. 164–168).

investment schemes in history, nor a global vision that accounts for approximately one-third of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Chatzky and McBride, 2019). It plots the creation of a community of common future committed to “peaceful development” led by China (Buzan, 2010; Pan, 2008; Yue, 2008), where inter-state trade coordination is coupled with cooperative diplomacy in areas of security, terrorism management, dispute settlement and cross-cultural exchange.

BRI's open design goes beyond the question of state participation since its financial scale, timescale and the scope of its implementation remain equally opaque. In spite of this, the Chinese authorities make an effort to dispel any doubts or suspicions with regard to the BRI. Speaking in April 2019, Xi disproved of any ulterior motives or growing concerns about potentially revisionist leanings of modern China (Feng, 2009; Johnston, 2003). Despite the lack of official data and unclear financial estimates, he confirmed that investments of the BRI-related deals reached US\$64 billion by mid 2019. By pledging to continue to “make good use of the Belt and Road Special Lending Scheme, the Silk Road Fund, and various special investment funds, develop Silk Road theme bonds, and support the Multilateral Cooperation Center for Development Finance in its operation” (Xi, 2019), Xi appeased the criticism toward the largely opaque initiative. At the same time, the BRI framework began to stretch, which complicated much of the discourse surrounding it.

Initially presented as the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and water-based 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, BRI quickly began to absorb China's digital ambitions grouped under the “Digital Silk Road” strategy, China's state interests in the Arctic regions framed as the “Polar Silk Road,” as well as China's diplomatic attempts in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic termed as the “Health Silk Road” (Cao, 2020; Shen, 2018; Tillman et al., 2018; Vila Seoane, 2020). Given that, it is hardly surprising that China's growing international engagements trigger debates about

the geopolitical and geostrategic motivations and the exercise of power on behalf of the CCP. While calling for international cooperation and attempting to refute such claims, Xi, implicitly or not, reinforced the opaque nature of the BRI itself.

Such multitude of references to Silk Road revival projects an opaque mechanism that defines the BRI, which “would have sounded very odd if the name of the initiative were—as it once was in the English translation—One Belt, One Road” (Maçães, 2019, p. 25). Therefore, the multiplicity of “belts” and “roads” within the ever-changing BRI framework does not signal an accidental lack of precision, but rather point to a strategic plan that replicates the opaque nature of the Silk Road concept to its strategic advantage. The vague and ambiguous scope of the BRI, which began to serve as an umbrella-term for all investments initiated by or linked to the Chinese state, reflects China’s practice of experimentalism, where the central government tests a policy framework by piloting its implementation it while adjusting the macro and micro-levers necessary for its successful realization.¹³⁰ This form of plasticity sets up a foundation upon which political practices become unstable, non-linear and, to a large extent, undefinable. With every twist and turn, the BRI highlights its plasticity which unfolds between the material and sculptural attributes of infrastructures and the spectral qualities and tangential memories of the Silk Road.

The elastic vision of cross-cultural connectivity, as is encapsulated by the BRI, necessitates an approach which does not deprioritize the plasticity of objects of social scientific or humanistic inquiry. Since plasticity has never occupied the center of such investigations, I seek guidance in the fields of medical humanities and architecture to better conceptualize the malleable political mechanism represented by the BRI. While drastically different in their disciplinary orientation and methodological training, both neuroscience and architecture represent professional fields that

¹³⁰ For more information about successful examples of experimentalism which scaled up and became parts of China’s national strategy and policy, see (Heilmann, 2008).

fuse the critical thought of ideation with the examination of, and the intervention in, physical and material objects, whether that is a biological body or a spatial body.

In medicine and neuroscience, plasticity, as a concept, is defined as “neural correlates of consciousness” (Metzinger, 2000), which predominantly points to the complexity of brain as a plastic assemblage of neurons and synapses that house and enable consciousness. In architecture, scholars and practitioners increasingly discuss the goal of “architectural flexibility,” when plasticity implies the ability to adapt the space, layout, and structure of a building to the continuously evolving needs of the natural environment and the inhabitants of such space (Chaillou, 2018). In this way, the philosophical and scientific paradigm of plasticity demonstrates that the modes of prior comprehension of either biological or spatial body, such as those of genetic code or urban planning, are no longer capable of capturing the complex, omnipresent and constantly evolving system within which they are embedded.

Accounting for the latest advances of neuroscience, Catherine Malabou argued that the genetic code proved insufficient in explaining the environmental or experiential impacts on the arrangement and modifications of the network of chemical compounds surrounding DNA (Malabou, 2005; Malabou and Lawless, 2016). Similarly, in the case of urban planning, the idea of bounded mechanical cities separated from one another, no longer captures the enmeshment of “urban functions into pervasive lattices of real-time functions that crisscross the globe” (Westwood and Williams, 2018, p. 35). In both instances, the notion of plasticity points to instability of categories and to impermanence of discourse which reflects a paradigm shift from rigid structure into one that can equally accommodate the occurrences of discontinuity, rupture and performance. In her discussion of human brain, Malabou suggests that the organ itself simultaneously enacts the aesthetic, ethical and political aspects of “being,” therefore representing a truly “self-cultivating organ.” This form of complexity, or rather complex plasticity represented

by the brain's capacity to serve as "the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience" (Malabou, 2009, p. 6), gestures toward a continuous process of self-making and re-making through biophysical reactions clashing with sociological interactions. This very quality highlights the materialism of plasticity and its capacity to re-make and temporalize itself (Malabou, 2009, p. 30).

Plasticity, in this context, is a crucial component of the emerging "self," in a bodily and non-human way. In the case of the human mind, it becomes plastic from the moment it "render[s] itself the central focal point of movement and change in relation to others" (Malabou, 2009, p. 30). This is not too dissimilar from various forms of architectural plasticity, which have their roots in the postwar Japanese Metabolist tradition that began to position spatial flexibility at the core of the twenty-first-century architectural practice. In the 1960s Japan, architects Kikutake and Awazu called for a natural design process that would encourage organic and "metabolic" development of urban landscape through flexible visions of space-making that incorporate both technology and social welfare. In this sense, the Metabolist Movement promised social regeneration via both built environment's metabolism and a deep faith in technological progress, where the urban rebirth was constantly metamorphosing and adjusting to society's needs (Kisho, 1977; Lin, 2010; Nyilas, 2018; Pernice, 2022). The shift away from tradition, utilization of modular housing and mass production became some of the guiding pillars of such plastic philosophy.

Since plasticity denotes both the capacity to "take form (as in the plasticity of clay) and to give form (as in the plastic arts and plastic surgery)" (Malabou, 2007, p. 434), the focus of neuroscience and modern architecture does not lie in reaffirming static units of inquiry, but rather in exploring the spaces among them, therefore pointing to the entire systems or ties and interconnections, such as neurons or neighborhoods and infrastructures. Such an approach

employed by these two fields not only represent the organic organization of space, whether geo-physical or bio-physical, but also gestures toward the serendipity of preconceived blueprints, procedures and structures of thought. Rooted in plasticity and enabled by new technological paradigms, the field of architecture, just like the field of neuroscience, equips us with a prototype of conceptualizing a truly flexible scheme, which “embraces societies’ expectations and leverages technology’s disruptive potential” while “mirroring the principles of the human neural network” (Chaillou, 2018).

Similarly to a human body, which “render[s] itself the central focal point of movement and change in relation to others” (Bhandar, 2011, p. 237), the architectural grammar embraced by the Metabolist Movement represents a desire to create open and flexible spaces positioned in direct relationship to their former spatial arrangements. As Stanislas Chaillou points out, “the same way our cortex performs through the action of individual neurons, a building can be thought as a set of connected “units”” (Chaillou, 2018), which continuously takes hold of the larger spatial context in an effort to (re)make itself. With this in mind, the plasticity that is central to the BRI does not only shape the initiative with regard to the expectations, concerns, wants and bows of all actors involved, but it also becomes its linchpin that assists us in applying a plastic ontology to the understanding of the political practices that occur within and through the BRI framework.

By implicitly promising redemption from the failures of politicized development model (defined by the conditionality of Western structural adjustment programs), the BRI framework is shaped in direct relation to the Western developmental paradigm. It promotes cross-border infrastructural connectivity while disrupting the pre-existing category of development as we know it. In the times defined by quantifiable models, blueprints and datasets, where both architecture and build environments turn into a “retinal art” following the mass circulation of data and images projected onto the flat surface of our retinas (Pallasmaa, 1994, p. 41), BRI disrupts such loss of

plasticity with its ever-changing materiality. It folds both geographical places and memories of premodern connectivity into a seductive spirit of Silk Road alliance which penetrates collective consciousness.

As a massive spatial project, BRI aspires to fulfill the timeless task of any architectural undertaking, which externalizes ideas to “create embodied existential metaphors that concretize and structure man’s being in the world” (Pallasmaa, 1994, p. 49). By relying on the rhetorical strength of the Silk Road imaginary, the BRI places China in the continuum of geo-economic history as well as global culture. As a political, geo-economic and cultural venture, the plasticity of the BRI framework assists in legitimizing the initiative by positioning it in parallel to the decolonial South-South cooperation, which has required “plastic political practices that do not rely on static conceptions of identity, place or belonging” (Bhandar, 2011, p. 238). Pertinent to, and emerging from, the relations of dispossession and ownership in the colonial settler context, plasticity of the South-South alliance has embodied “the conditions for the type of instability on which such practices both rely and feed off” (Bhandar, 2011, p. 238).

Therefore, the official representations of the BRI present us with a curated and benevolent image of a multilateral initiative, such as when President Xi reiterated to the UN General Assembly that the BRI “focuses on development,” and therefore “emphasizes the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits,” inclusive of green and “high standard cooperation to improve people’s lives and promote sustainable development” (Xinhua, 2019). At the same time, some analysts have argued that China’s multilateralism resembles a strategic tool to counterbalance American hegemony (Holzer, 2020, p. 192). In this context, the plasticity of the BRI unfolds through the initiative’s (1) temporality (e.g. the real-time response vs. the short- or long-term adaptation); (2) agency (e.g. participant-centric model vs. top-down

hierarchy); and (3) stimuli (e.g. the varieties of local conditions, individual and collective behaviors and influences).

While BRI does not necessarily promote rule-based order—similarly to the EU’s Connectivity Strategy that attempts to act according to prescribed rules and universal principles imposed by the European Union—BRI promotes infrastructure building, expansion of transport and energy links as well as digitalization and people-to-people exchanges as the natural means of ensuring prosperity in the twenty-first century. In spite of not subscribing to a predetermined model of development, the core principles of the BRI involve openness and elastic engagements that are packaged as a new form of win-win cooperation of shared benefits (Zou, 2018, pp. 160–161). As a no match to EU’s Connectivity Strategy in terms of its size, ambition and scope, BRI acts predominantly on national interests which allows the final outcomes to be a result of both “diplomatic negotiations and power games” among participating nation-states (Holzer, 2020, p. 192). In this sense, the power of such a malleable political mechanism can dictate and rewrite the rules, under which the BRI – as a multilateral initiative – operates.

Toward Vertical Cartographies of China’s Power

The malleability of the BRI is, I suggest, the central feature of the initiative itself. As Soja’s concept of Thirdspace has allowed us to access the nuance of BRI’s spatial vision that is largely absent from the current literature, the plasticity of the BRI complicates the spatial analysis of the material places of water- and land-based infrastructures that are both animated and continuously reconfigured with the fantasies of progress, modernization, peaceful coexistence and seamless connectivity. While Thirdspace points to the experience of life in the material Firstspace mediated through the immaterial dreams, fantasies and expectations of the Secondspace, therefore

unraveling a realm within which a distinct form of imperial imagination exists both territorially and culturally, malleability supplements and guides the analysis of a shifting network of the BRI.

In this context, I propose the need to extend the already established framework by focusing on the malleability and plasticity of the BRI which mirrors the nature of the Silk Road imaginary. Such an approach would provide an opportunity to complement a traditional political analysis which does not consider various dimensions of space-making (Graham and Hewitt, 2013, p. 73). It is both necessary and productive since, for many years, the conventional understanding of geography and social sciences has not only been too rigid, but also too horizontal. In fact, many of the critical sociological investigations into “global cities” (Sassen, 2004), “world city networks” (Taylor and Derudder, 2015), “network societies” (Castells, 1996), and the “splintering” of urban space (Graham and Marvin, 2002) unintentionally promoted a horizontal logic of inquiry. More specifically, socio-geographical concepts, such as uneven development, territory, scale or even geopolitics, have largely been theorized on the presumed horizontal plane of human existence (Paglen, 2016).

This logic has been conditioned by (1) the fact that the majority of human activity occurs horizontally—on the Earth’s surface—and, for the most part, it does not fully account for the human infrastructures and activities that have found their way to inhabit the vertical axis, (2) the fact that the analysis of neoliberal processes of space-making prompted disciplined approaches to focus on network formation, physical connections, traceable spatial flows, and the mobilities across various geographies. Such topological theories of social and urban life privileged a rendering of space that could be mathematically organized and mapped (Taylor et al., 2010), which carries a strong resemblance to the classical Western tradition of landscape painting. Such a way of thinking deprivileged the vertical, shifting and hidden properties of space-making, which one would usually associate with a Chinese scroll paintings. Such intellectual tradition, apart from

advancing certain conversations about scale and “rescaling” (Tsing, 2011), has produced a relatively “flat ontology” (Collinge, 2006) of processes, imaginaries and flows which have been approached as entities that form connections across various sites and spaces with distant *elsewheres*.

It is surprising that only until recently, scholars began to conceptualize that both human infrastructures and activities have found their way to inhabit the vertical axis as well: beginning with the deep sea mining and to undersea cables through which ninety-nine percent of world’s data flows, to the transregional and even interstellar cartographies that create “over the horizon” vertical spaces that synchronize time on the ground (through machine-to-machine communication) and provide a playground for geopolitical and economic games pursued by the nations on the Earth below (Paglen, 2016). In this sense, various topologies of development, politics, urbanism, and the production of space have emerged over time, which beg us to consider the vertical dimensions of human world-making. After all, as military orbital space theorist Jim Oberg posed, outer space is quite “unearthly” since much of the common spatial logic, inclusive of political and military theory, is not applicable to the fragmented and uneven topology of gravitational interactions, irregularities, magnetic fields, solar radiation and atmospheric molecules (Paglen, 2012, p. 5).

In this sense, the vertical cartography does not follow traditional conception of horizontal world-making or space-making, but rather represents a malleable space which constantly shifts and expands. Thus, it requires a new form of spatial ontology. While the example of political and military race in outer space may seem inapplicable, the horizontal logic inaccurately captures an issue closer to Earth, mainly due to the lack of an internationally agreed upon vertical limit of a nation’s territory. While the airships and balloons that operate up to an altitude of 37km are restricted by the territorial bounds drawn on the Earth’s surface, the lowest satellites can operate

at approximately 160km, which creates a “gray zone” that is a result of imprecise limits of vertical sovereignty (Paglen, 2016).

Attempting to account for such instances of imprecision and malleability of the production of social, cultural and political spaces, a growing number of thinkers developed conceptual tools to examine spaces as a multidimensional formation. Peter Sloterdijk’s magnum opus *Spheres* (1998, 1999, 2004) argues that space is not a flat area, but a volumetric structure given the fact that the modern society is best understood as a formation that is “foamy” or “froth-like.” By this, Sloterdijk does not only suggest that human experience is spatially determined, but he also points to an aggregation of “bubbles,” or small-scale spheres of shared experiences, concerns and risks, which are mutually constitutive and mutually impermeable (Bergthaller, 2015; Sloterdijk, 2011, 2005, 2004, 2002). This conceptualization of social space, as seen through its volume and fluidity rather than through its static impression, provides an opportunity to reorganize our conception of space as neither flat, nor static, nor fixed—but rather multidimensional, complex and dynamic.

With this in mind, a number of scholars in critical urban and human geography circles began to advocate for a collective shift toward “non-horizontalism.” An urban historian, Ole Bauman, captured this attitude with his question about the meaning of “elevation” in an “age of the horizontalization of world views” (Bauman, 2000, p. 4), where various forms of vertical cartographies emerge alongside their horizontal counterparts. Ranging from the critiques of imperialist cartographic impulses that manifested in territorial expansion (Scott, 2008, p. 1853), to the debates on the overlooked vertical relationalities of urban skyscrapers (McNeill, 2005), to the rapid growth of infrastructural, luxury, and securitized subterranean complexes (Skayannis, 2010), there has been an emergence of calls to theorize the inclusively “spherical,” “volumetric and verticalized imaginations of urban space” beyond the constraints of the “two-dimensional planar metaphors” (Graham and Hewitt, 2013, p. 74; Klauser, 2010, p. 326).

Thickened by new urban forms, structures and arrangements (e.g. supply chains, cross-border infrastructure, megacities), the volumetric imaginations of space began to recently emerge in the West in spite of having existed in the Global South and the Global East for decades. In Mumbai, as Arjun Appadurai noted, contemporary “horizontal” make-up of the urban landscape has long been enmeshed with the “vertical city,” where often hidden, subterranean infrastructure as well as political and engineering processes took place in spite of not being “fully available to the gaze” (Gandy, 2014, p. 6). It is in such hidden spaces, where the importance of processes occurring through verticalized enclaves, urban planning, infrastructural networks, and patterns of circulation within and among informal economies and temporary settlements, that began to define the “politics of verticality.”

In the West, such forms of vertical modernity have been forged by both corporate and state initiatives. Beginning with the sophisticated models of the “Big Oil” conglomerates that plot their economic survival by “tackling” climate change and the rising sea levels, to the growth of extractive industries such as fracking and natural resource extraction, to the atmospheric experiments in geo-engineering that involve “drilling” in the clouds, these modern geo-economies have exhibited complex vertical cartographies built into them. This vertical dimension expands our optics and prompts us to consider the stakes of thinking along the thickened horizontal cartographies of globalized connectivity in light of the emergent vertical cartographies that extend the limits of our political imagination. Seeing beyond the lines on maps that are not as leveled and smooth as they appear to be, the emphasis on verticality opens new analytical possibilities as well as showcases a “new level of vulnerability” of the protected territory of the state (Elden, 2013, p. 2, 2009, p. xxii).

For example, some of the most recent scholarship on the BRI began to develop conceptual tools to conduct multi-scalar analysis of the initiative. Alexander Chen proposes an approach that

highlights horizontal (here, the policies of regional integration issued between provinces) and vertical scalar tensions (pertaining to the policies controlling BRI integration articulated by national, supranational and subnational actors), which allows him to recognize the diverse roles and interests of various actors under the space-making processes of the BRI (Chen, 2021). However, such approaches often put too much emphasis on the idealized egalitarianism, therefore posing a risk of uncritical analysis which assumes each actor's uniform ability to shape the outcomes of the initiative itself. Contrary to this belief, yet inspired by the premise of varying scales, I draw on the geoeconomics and geopolitics of the BRI vision, which hearkens back to the Silk Road and produces a complex political cartography that bears a striking resemblance to an imperial cartography of the fifteenth-eighteenth century.

While the vast horizontal scope of the BRI signals an expanding territorial capture (by the China-backed space-making actors), its vision of infrastructural progress, frictionless connectivity and peaceful relations performs a rhetorical function that animates the BRI. Operating on the level of textuality and embracing its inherent plasticity, the Silk Road imaginary thickens the desirable geo-visions of cross-border connectivity with a logic that predates the nation-state concept as well as operates above and beyond it. The plasticity of the Silk Road idea, mirrored by the BRI, points toward a vertical logic, which power stems from its adaptability to the unordered social reality, varying political regimes and the ever-increasing connective tissues of global capitalism. It is there, where I position the constantly evolving political mechanism of spatial reconfiguration deployed by the Chinese state, which transcends the dichotomy of static spatiality and dynamic action into the ability to reshape both physical spaces and political constellations.

Such vertical dimension of political imagination has been a domain of scholarly inquiry of the Israeli architect and cultural theorist, Eyal Weizman. Writing on the "politics of verticality," Weizman interrogated spatial dynamics of the Israeli appropriation and occupation of Palestinian

land, where a constantly shifting stratification of territory encompasses a vast array of competing layers of ownership and occupation of the same space. Navigating through the fractured spaces of the West Bank, Weizman shows instances where, territorial claims are major sites of contestation. For example, writing about access to ground water, Weizman writes that “Israeli pumps may reach down to the waters of the common aquifers, whilst Palestinian pumps are usually restricted to a considerably shorter reach, only as far down as seasonal wells trapped within shallow rock formations, which, from a hydrological perspective, are detached from the fundamental lower layers of ‘ancient waters’” (Weizman, 2012, p. 19).

Such spatial arrangement of vertical contest of state power does not only display Israeli strategy of claiming ownership (both politically and ideologically) over land and water with a justification of its divine right, but it also displays a larger cartography crucial to the understanding of the conflict itself (Petti et al., 2013; Segal et al., 2003; Weizman, 2002). With this in mind, Weizman prompts us to forgo the horizontal gaze in the hopes of de-flattening spatial imaginaries of modern geopolitics. “Geopolitics is a flat discourse,” he writes, which pertains to the largely top-down and aerial view of spatial inter-state relations, which largely “ignores the vertical dimension and tends to look across rather than to cut through the landscape” (Weizman, 2002, p. 3). Attributing a traditional (horizontal) cartographic imagination to the “military and political spatialities of the modern state” (Weizman, 2002, p. 3), Weizman calls for the need to untangle the politics of vertical space that characterize the architectural manifestations of Israeli power in the West Bank, which remains particularly instructive for our inquiry.

In spite of the fact that Weizman traces the logic of occupation, his focus on state-led intervention into geo-physical space points our attention to the various processes of temporality and flexibility which, consequently, allows us to conceptualize the capabilities of the state and non-state actors in the rapid, over-the-night transformation of territory that has hardly any

reflection in a static map. Instead, maps, as Weizman suggests, become mere still-shots in a constantly evolving animation of space-making (Weizman, 2004). Such theorization of verticality-as-plasticity is grounded in both the 1907 Hague Convention as well as Ariel Sharon's, the former Prime Minister of Israel (2001-2006), geo-vision of state fortification (Brown, 2010; Kimmerling, 2003; Weizman, 2012). Under the Hague agreement, both public property and the territory of the occupied population were prescribed to be subjects to the laws of usufruct, which implies that an occupying state was lawfully allowed to conduct a temporary occupation (Amnesty International, 2019; ICRC, 2020). In response to this convention, Sharon's plan proposed a flexible matrix of dynamic defense system that aimed to fragment the space into semi-autonomous and temporary units, which enabled the Israeli state to expand its territorial footprint. Since the proposal denied permanence of the material space with a constantly shifting and updating political mechanism of the fortification strategy, each gesture of the state to remake urban landscape involved transforming, shifting and breaking down the existing boundaries of legal categories. This, Weizman maintains, allowed the Israeli state to legitimize and justify its suspension of property rights as well as facilitate the confiscation of Palestinian land (Weizman, 2004).

While not entirely synonymous, the idea of a dynamic matrix that is constantly updated depending on the strategic objectives of the state, and one that cannot be mapped due to its constantly evolving nature, indirectly mirrors the opaque nature of the BRI. As a matter of fact, the vast and vague narrative that surrounds the BRI is not only reinforced by the absence of official renderings or blueprints, but it also acts as a mechanism that actively prevents scholars from any form of comprehensive mapping. As the critics of the BRI framework argue, nowadays any China-backed project could be labelled as a node of the BRI matrix, therefore modifying and extending the current scope of the initiative at every step a project becomes folded into the "Silk Road Redux" agenda.

Furthermore, Weizman's urban theory of flexibility and temporality points our attention to an important observation, namely that the horizontal logic cannot account for the liquid and arbitrary borders, which complicates the strong relationship of physical space to power. In this sense, the processes of malleability and temporality, where the mechanism of political flexibility serves as a tool through which power can be exercised more adroitly, highlight the role of a fluid urban-ideological matrix that becomes an arena of power projection and power competition. This new vertical space accommodates a biopolitical project in the making which, through the constantly shifting and eternally malleable space, signals both a promise and a risk.

In this manner, a flexible form of space-making could be risky because of its liquid power that disguises its tangible impacts through the veneer of its non-concrete structure. At the same time, it could be promising, because of the potentiality of its malleability that encourages agency and power diffusion. As such, flexibility of the BRI electrifies the political project of space-making and equips the state with tools to navigate the fractured and deterritorialized global reality in the pursuit of its geopolitical and geo-economic objectives. At the same time, it affords the malleable space with multiple diffused agencies, where engineers, laborers, and the international community at large can create an opportunity of judgement, action and rejection. All of the sudden, the pastoral image of the Silk Road landscape becomes a real-world laboratory of "push and pull," where conditions of modernity, such as scientific rationalization, rapid urbanization, intensification of state-to-state relations and accelerated development, are repackaged and endorsed with the allure of premodern cross-cultural heritage and cross-border connectivity.

Following Weizman's reflections on the "politics of verticality," we can locate plasticity and verticality within the BRI framework, which allows me to argue that the initiative achieves two objectives: (1) the mythic nature of Silk Road affords malleability to the Belt and Road Initiative, which electrifies this political project into a universally-appealing, cross-border infrastructure-

building scheme; (2) the Silk Road imaginary allows for the language of connectivity to displace concerns over power asymmetries or uneven relations within the BRI framework. With a close attention to the diplomatic maneuvering, mutual negotiations, re-negotiations, and the conjecture of political-economic crises, this way of imagining geopolitics does not only attempt to make sense of the new iterations of the “New Silk Roads” (inclusive of the Polar, Digital and more recently, the Health Silk Road), but it also pushes the limits of the “political” as we know it, and provides new optics to better understand the socio-political, economic and cultural forces at play in the making of the BRI.

Conclusion

The Silk Road, as imagined and remembered through stories, travelogues, letters, maps, blueprints and lectures, has become both the icon of historically interconnected geographies of Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe, as well as the notion that formulated theories of unimpeded flow of tradable goods, ideas, customs and religions. Yet, its unquestioned basis was rarely a subject of an inquiry in the Humanistic Social Sciences. In numerous cases, the Silk Road served as a neoliberal alibi that generated profits and increased capital flows, as well as a political tool that attempt to transform the uneven geophysical space of the Eurasian landmass into one, which could be tamed, shaped and sculpted to serve the geo-strategic and geo-economic needs that could, allegedly, serve the humanity. Due to the numerous uses of the idea as an animating force, the Silk Road became an enduring global imaginary, a way of mediating collective dreams of the future yet to come, or, to put it in Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's words, a technology which has the capacity to *produce* the world (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 7).

Positioning my dissertation at the nexus of several intersecting and interwoven bodies of scholarship as well as by combining Global History, Geopolitics, Critical Infrastructure, Cultural, Urban, Development and Media Studies, I demonstrated not only how the Silk Road concept was weaved through historical and commercial networks, but also how the Silk Road, as an enlivening cultural imaginary, offers an opportunity to enrich the traditional scholarly conversations about China's rising economic and political power which, too frequently, miss the complexity of its peculiar diplomacy, especially in the context of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

Attempting to explore the Chinese state's formulation, and the cultural, socio-political and economic implications of repurposing the Silk Road idea, along with the symbolic significance of it, this dissertation posed two questions: (1) *Why, and how, does China wish to revive the ancient Silk Road?* (2) *And, what implications does this dream carry for the world, and our understanding of geopolitical, socioeconomic and techno-logistical global entanglements?* Situated in various points of history, inspired by the emerging tradition of critical geopolitics, and grounded in the field of Global Studies, this inquiry relied on an assemblage of critical perspectives as well as material and cultural "texts" since the primary concern of this dissertation was not the material objects themselves, but rather their role in the production of social life, and the practical consequences of relationships and meanings produced by affective flows between and among them (Deleuze, 1988; Fox and Alldred, 2015).

To comprehensively map this assemblage of complex cultural and material practices which re-present, and derive their explanatory power from, the Silk Road concept, I designed this study to be an assemblage itself. By doing so, this inquiry relied on a web of cultural and material "texts," levels of analysis, my own subjectivities, availability of data, reliability of methods, contexts and abstractions, to become a *research-assemblage* that explores the possibilities, which the use of the Silk Road imagery provides for the exercise of the imagination to transcend the politics and the economics on which the BRI depends to project China's global ambitions. In other words, positioned against the contemporary research in Humanistic Social Sciences which, too often, oversimplified or overlooked the complexity of networks, flows and the circulation of ideas, this dissertation extended its analysis to the cultural and material re-presentations of their meanings, which has been of interested to many historians and scholars who indirectly have shaped this approach (Castells, 1996; Ferguson, 2018; Frankopan, 2015; Modelski, 1987).

Following this logic, this dissertation developed a two-fold argument. First, it suggested that the totality of the BRI paradigm can only be understood, if at all grasped, once it is analyzed through the idea that animates it, namely the Silk Road. To perform this inquiry, I first suggested that re-imagining the Silk Road as, not simply a historical fact, but rather a narrativized and archetypal, yet complex and disjunctured, flow of meanings is of prime importance. This position allowed to further frame the Silk Road concept as an enduring icon of cosmopolitan worldliness which tends to project a distinct civilizational logic as well as a rhetoric of global connectivity and cross-cultural heritage that, in turn, has the capacity to produce a collective dream of desirable global futures yet to come.

This promise, described and promoted through a series of trade, development and territorial engineering projects, bestows the BRI with a seductive fantasy of utopian globalization where the future prevails on the logic of a frictionless, peaceful and cooperative world order. Such distinct form of world-making, animated by the Silk Road imaginary, allows the Chinese state to, both ideologically and materially, describe, legitimate and justify its ambitious undertaking. In this sense, I suggested that both the civilizational logic and the inherent appeal of global cultural heritage, which are embedded within the BRI framework, signal toward a distinct form of ambitious power, which is both manifested and legitimized by the Silk Road's re-presentational modalities that electrify the political project of space-making.

Second, to assess the implications of the dreams embedded within, and promoted through, the BRI, I prioritized the analysis of the BRI as its own agent and actor in the production of a persuasive and plausible ontology of connectivity (as opposed to the analysis of its individual parts) to better position it as an amorphous, yet largely coherent, geo-vision which, animated by the memories of deep antiquity, is – in fact – a constantly evolving political mechanism of spatial reconfiguration. Focusing on BRI's open design and the inherent plasticity of the initiative, I

demonstrated a deeply embedded mechanism that carries profound implications for the world, and our understanding of geopolitical, socioeconomic and techno-logistical global entanglements.

In this way, while seeking guidance in the fields of medical humanities and architecture to better conceptualize the malleable political mechanism of the BRI, I further suggested that the malleability of both the Silk Road and the BRI provides new optics to better understand the socio-political, economic and cultural forces at play. In other words, in an attempt to expand the scholarly conversation into the BRI's opaque nature, I suggested that the plastic form of space-making reveals a liquid form of power that animates China's political project to successfully pursue its geopolitical and geo-economic objectives by displacing concerns over power asymmetries within the BRI framework through the rhetoric of cosmopolitan connectivity and the allure of the golden past. At the same time, the same form of plasticity affords the potentiality of multiple interpretations, experiences as well as agencies, which can engage in the judgement, action, or a complete rejection of the BRI. Such an approach allowed to discuss China's rising political, economic and cultural prominence without necessarily supporting either the Western or the CCP-centric logic.

The significance of this inquiry lies in the conviction that one cannot clearly comprehend the depths of the BRI apparatus as well as the various nuanced ways in which the Chinese state communicates about its national goals and global ambitions by simply looking at the policy documents or the BRI blueprints. Therefore, by utilizing the Silk Road as a heuristic device and a conceptual lens, this dissertation revealed the peripheral, scarcely present, or otherwise-disciplined areas of research and analysis through its transdisciplinary approach to analyzing global connectivity by spanning the frontiers of Global History, Cultural Studies, Political Economy, Development and Infrastructure Studies to uncover the politics of China's re-

presentation as an emerging global power — an investigation that has not yet been comprehensively undertaken.

This approach did not merely aim at borrowing from, or merging, a number of disciplines, but rather focused on the value of “rethinking” disciplinary constraints to uncover “what they obscure or miss altogether,” therefore producing perspectives which are “more penetrating and discerning” than the ones which were offered before (Gunn, 2015, p. 76). To borrow from Geertz, this inquiry aimed at altering the way in which we “think about thinking” (Geertz in Gunn, 2015, p. 83), especially in the context of the politics of re-presentation of China as a rising power.

In this sense, I did not position the Belt and Road Initiative as an alternative pattern of development aid, but rather as a form of ambitious heritage diplomacy and a malleable political mechanism that is animated by the Silk Road spirit, the allure of global cultural heritage, the rhetoric of progress, prosperity and peaceful coexistence, as well as the logic of transregional connectivity. Paying close attention to the material and textual manifestations of the Silk Road revival, both historically and contemporarily, I suggested that the BRI renders People’s Republic of China a distinct form of *ambitious* power. In this sense, the Silk Road serves the role of an ambient and social aesthetic reprised in a larger project of worlding China, which promotes legitimizes and justifies China’s ambitions globally. Electrified by the Silk Road, and embodying the specter of global China, the BRI, when untangled and seen through the prism of its antecedent, affords a unique opportunity to not only unravel China’s visions about its past and the global futures yet to come, but also to better understand the modern China as a rising and distinctively ambitious global power.

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APPENDIX A

Figures of the Introduction

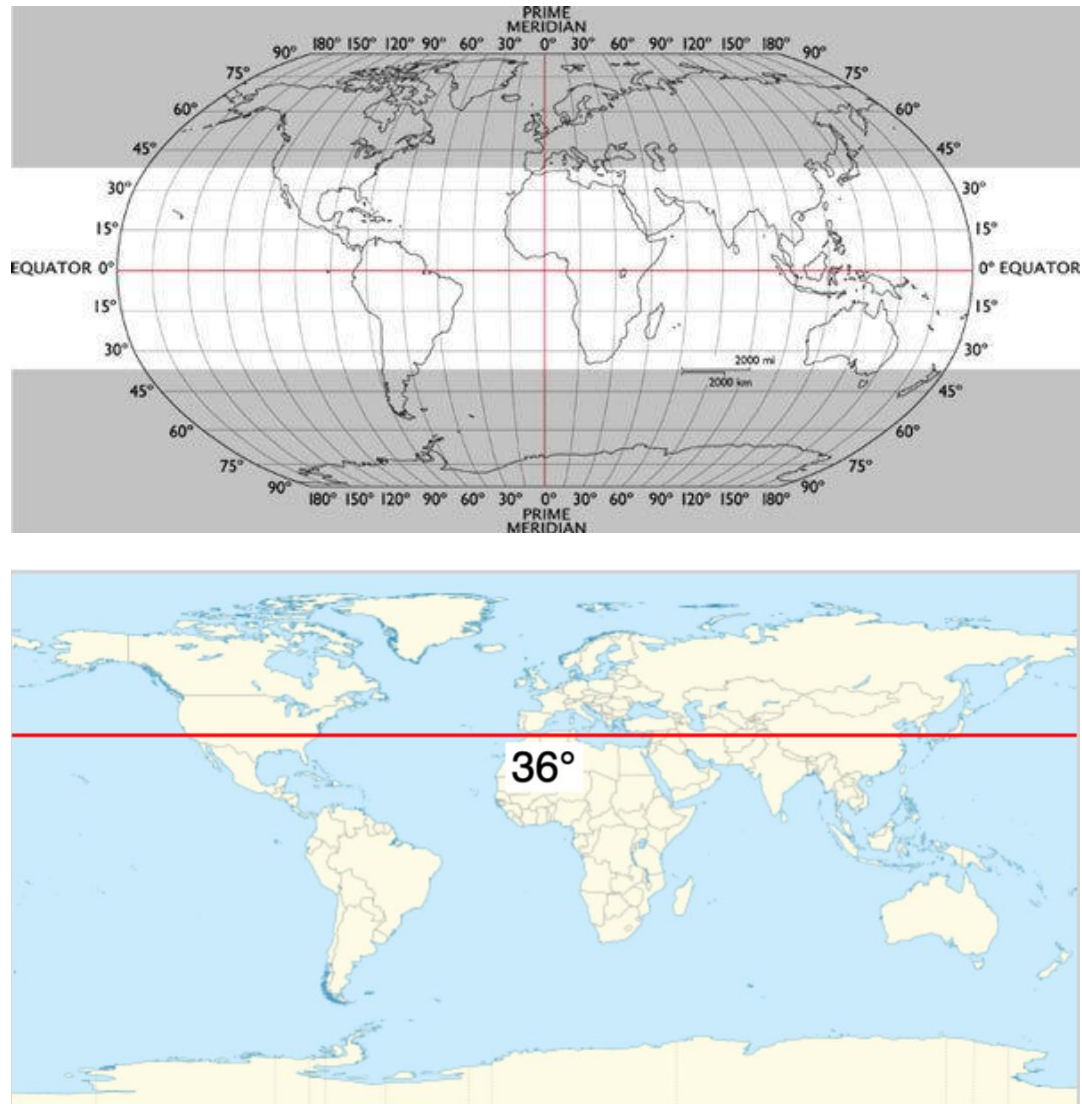


Fig. 1: Two renderings of the 36th Parallel North of the Equator. Courtesy of Alchetron.com + Wikimedia.

Available at: (<https://alchetron.com/37th-parallel-north#37th-parallel-north-08e13391-0210-4290-a096-4a0a627fdcf-resize-750.jpeg>); (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/World_location_map_%28equiangular_180%29.svg).

Accessed: December 2019.

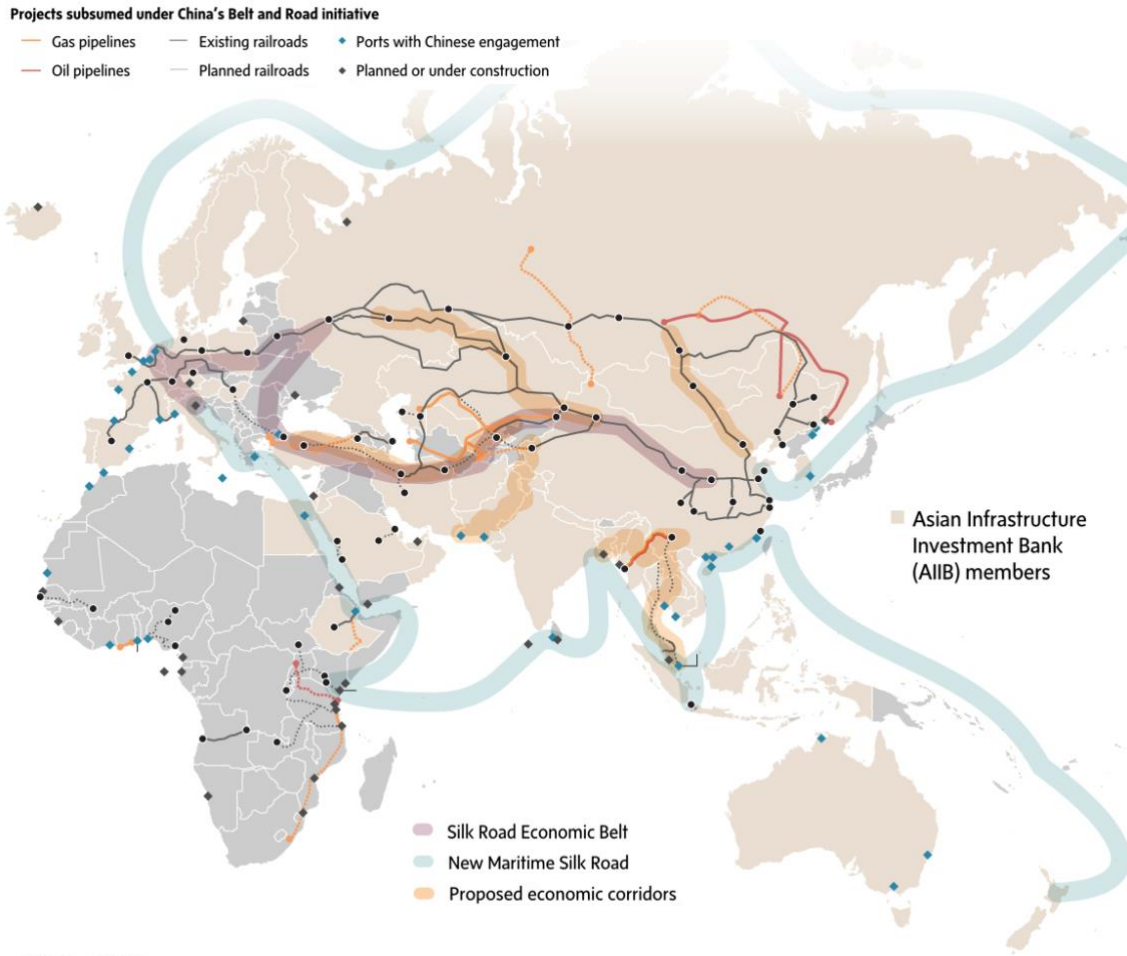


Fig. 2: BRI map by Reuters. Courtesy: Reuters.

Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/bho3yk/one_belt_one_road_propaganda_map_illustrating/,
 Accessed: December 2019.

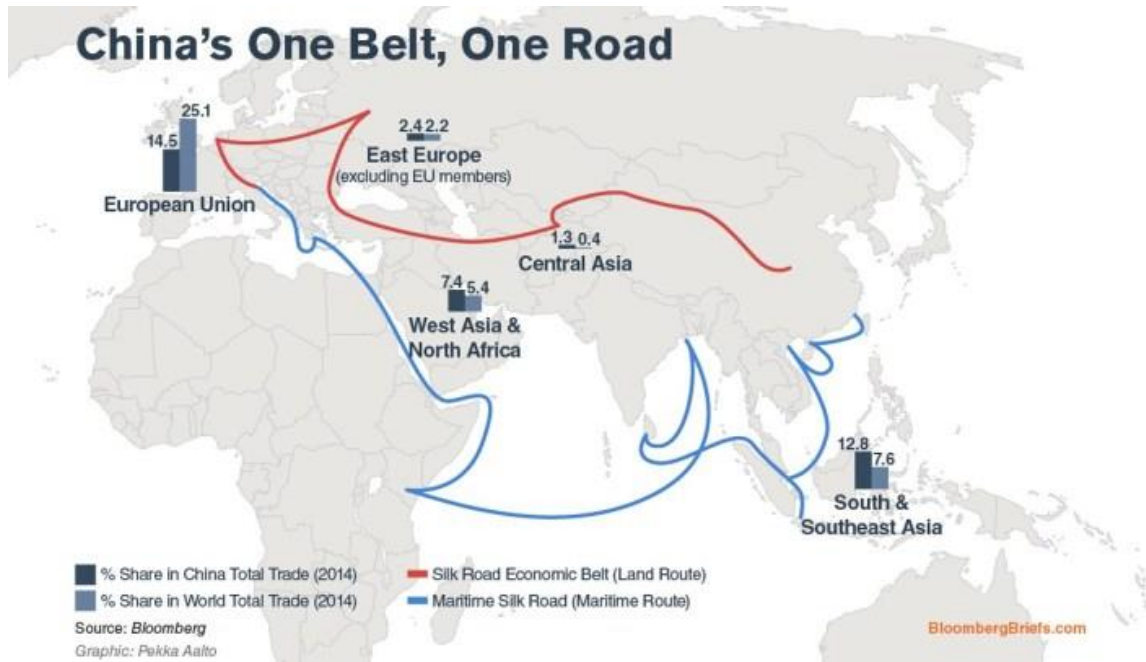


Fig. 3: BRI map by Bloomberg. Courtesy: Bloomberg.

Available at: (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-20/commodities-meltdown-boosts-china-s-bid-to-build-new-silk-road>),
 Accessed: December 2019.



Fig. 4: BRI map by Wall Street Journal. Courtesy: WSJ.

Available at: (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-new-trade-routes-center-it-on-geopolitical-map-1415559290>),
 Accessed: December 2019.

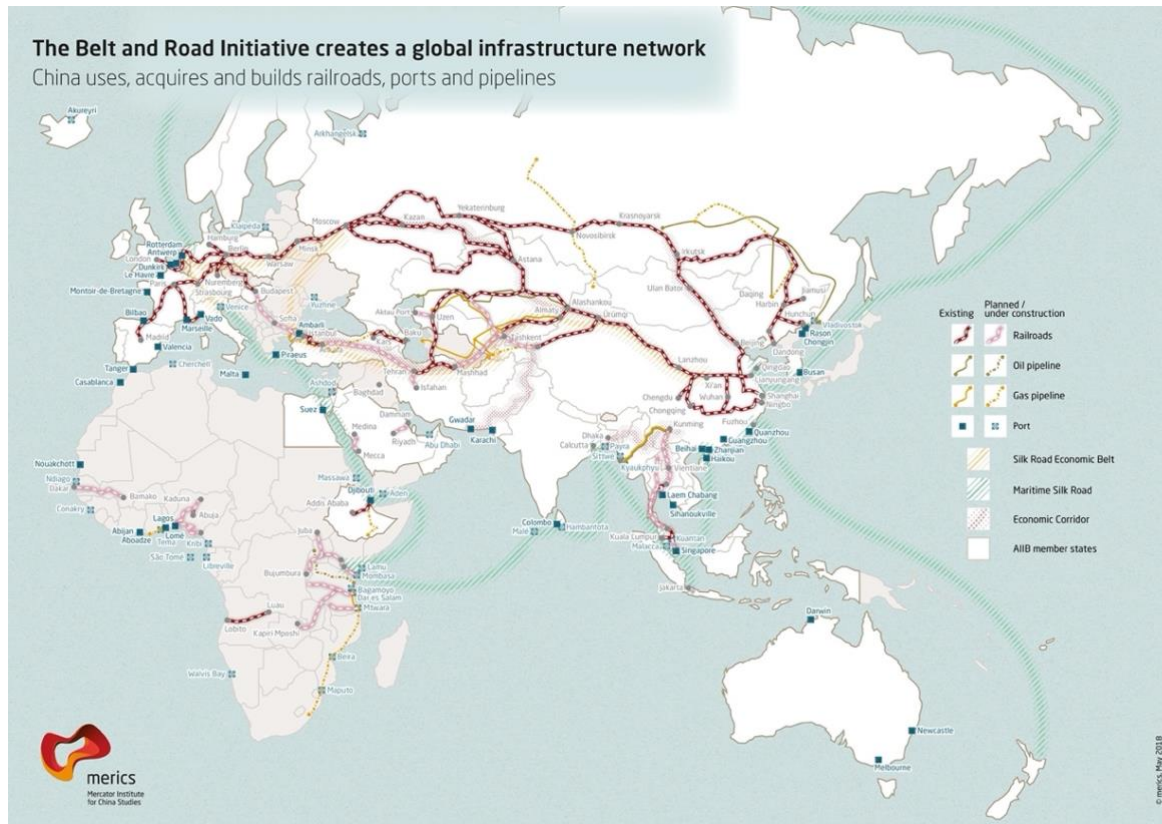


Fig. 5: BRI map by Merics. Courtesy: Merics.

Available at: (<https://www.merics.org/en/bri-tracker/mapping-the-belt-and-road-initiative>),
 Accessed: December 2019.



Fig. 6: BRI map by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Courtesy: CSIS.

Available at: (<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/belt-road-and-beyond/>),

Accessed: December 2019.

Figures of Chapter I



Fig. 7: An image of Buddha in the Kongwangshan cliffs (Jiangsu), possibly later Han Dynasty.
Courtesy: (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 19).

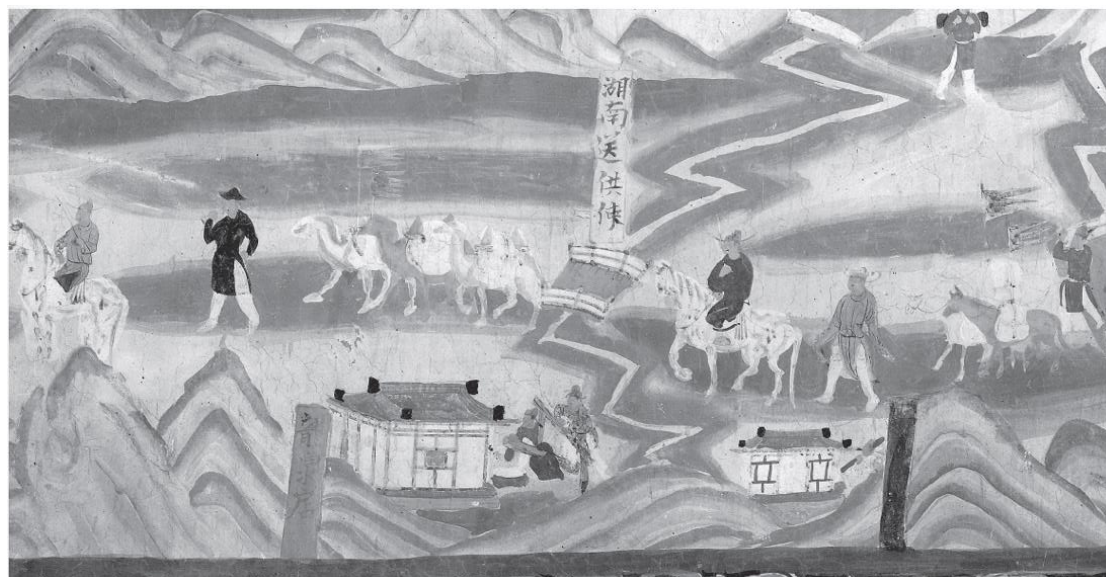


Fig. 8: Detail of tribute mission. Mural from Hunan, from the Map of Mount Wutai. Lower right corner.
Courtesy of the Dunhuang Research Academy, in (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 38).

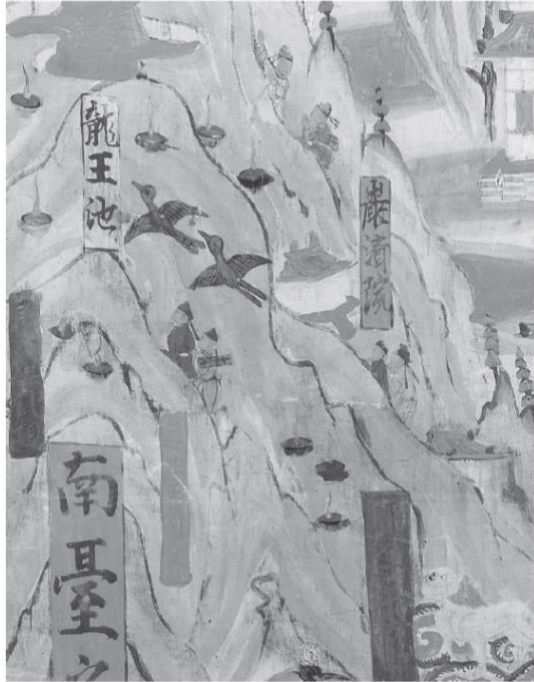


Fig. 9: Detail of pilgrims departing for Buddhist scriptures, from the Map of Mount Wutai. Courtesy of the Dunhuang Research Academy, in (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 42).



Fig. 10: The first map displaying the Silk Road from the Catalan Atlas. Courtesy: National Palace Museum Taipei. Available at: (<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/khan/Article.aspx?sNo=03009145&lang=2>), Accessed: December 2019.

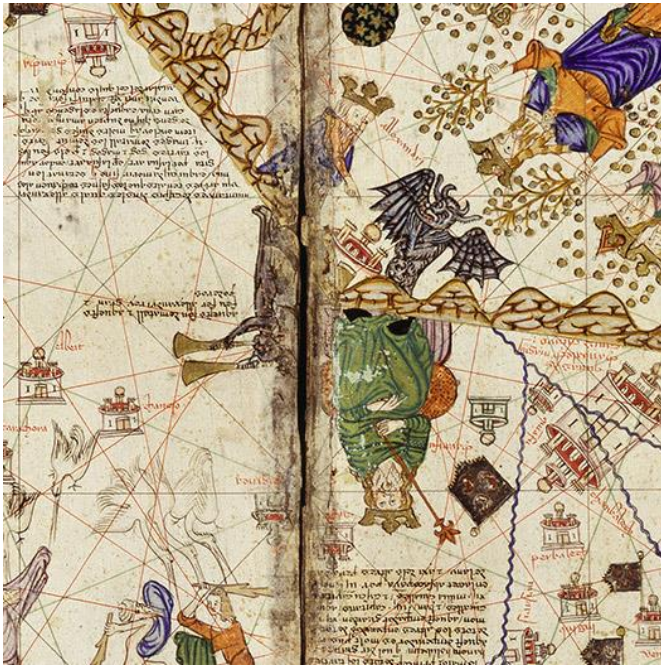


Fig. 11: Detail from the Catalan Atlas: Alexander the Great pointing at the devil; Angel is playing a trumpet; Kublai Khan in an upside-down position. Upper right corner. Courtesy: National Palace Museum Taipei. Available at: (<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/khan/Article.aspx?sNo=03009145&lang=2>), Accessed: December 2019.

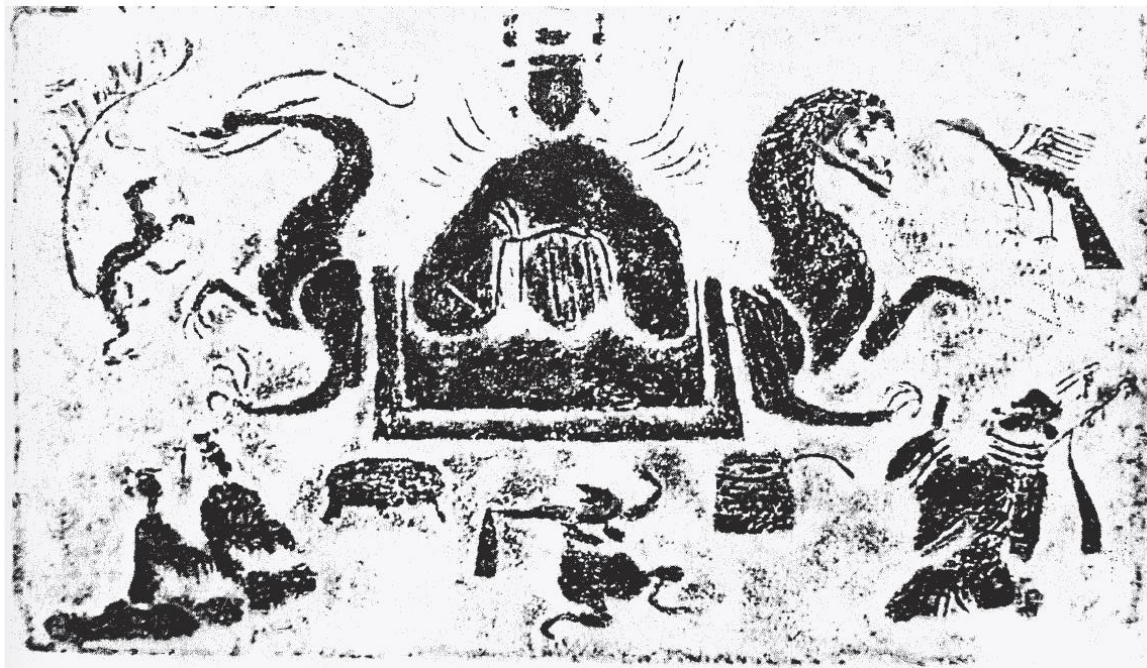


Fig. 12: Queen Mother of the West on a pottery tomb found in Sichuan, Later Han dynasty. Courtesy: (Forêt and Kaplony, 2008, p. 21).

Figures of Chapter II



Fig. 13. Overview of Transport-Connections from 128 BC to 150 AD by Ferdinand von Richthofen, *China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon*. Orig.: *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien*. Erster Band. Einleitender Theil. Mit XXIX Holzschnitten und XI Karten. Available at: (<https://www.schierenberg.nl/product/22276.html>). Accessed: March 2018.

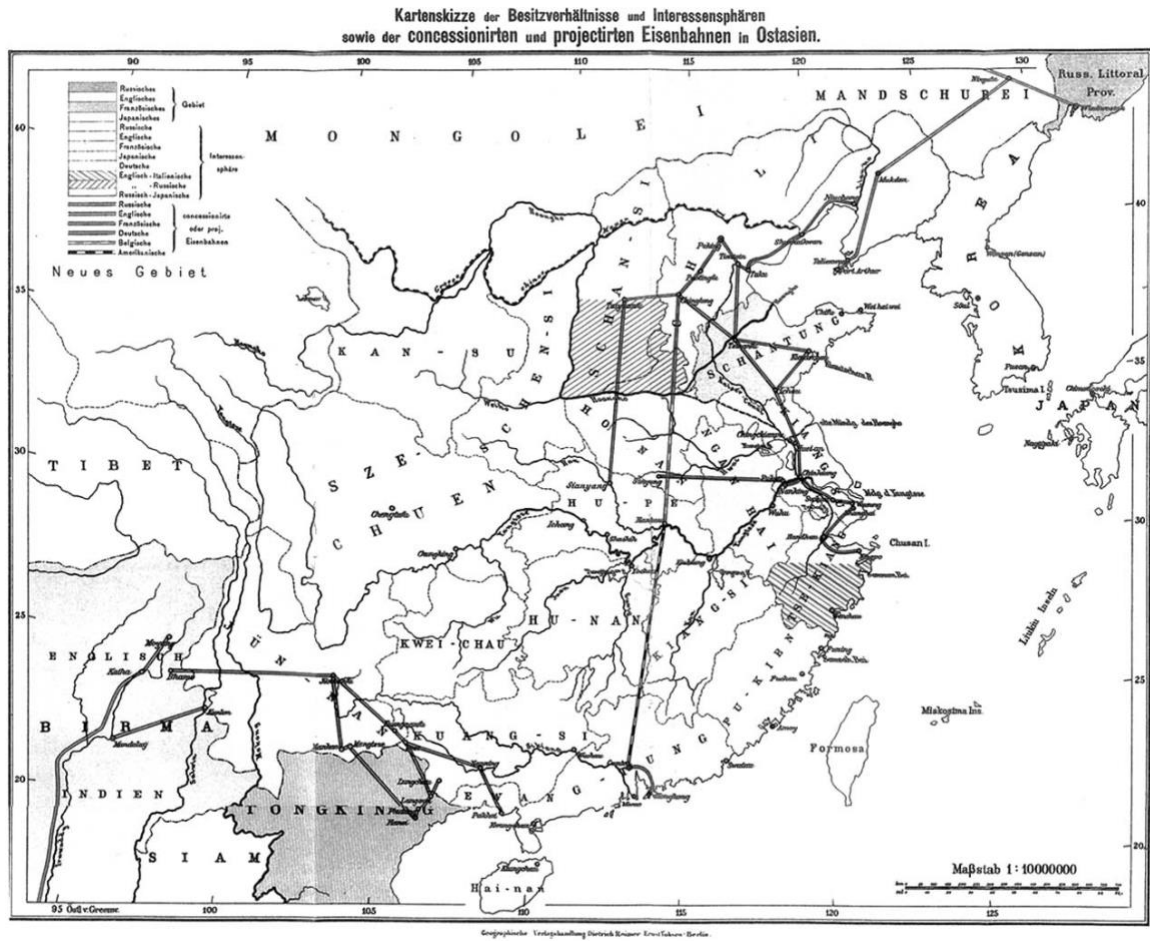


Fig. 14. "Sketch Map of the Acquisitions and Spheres of Interest as well as the Conceded and Projected Railways in East Asia." Max von Brandt, *Industrielle und Eisenbahn-Unternehmungen in China* (Berlin, 1899). Courtesy: (Chin, 2013, p. 215).

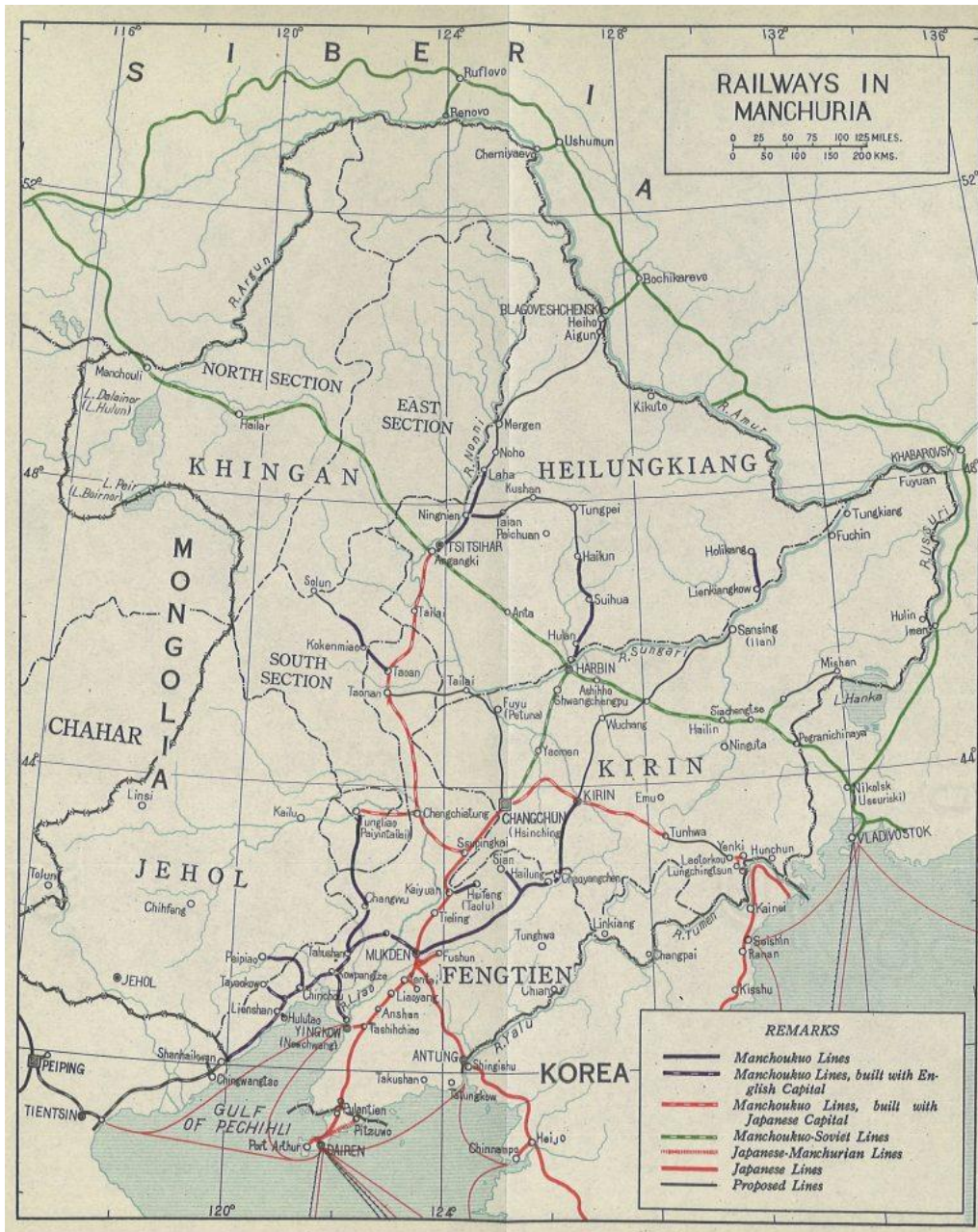


Fig. 15. Railways in Manchuria. A map of Manchukuo, or Manchuria, depicted in an English-language publication from Japan, “The Manchuria Yearbook 1932-33,” produced by the SMRC research institute Toa-Keizai Chosakyoku (East Asiatic Economic Investigation Bureau). Courtesy: *The Library of Congress*. Accessed: January 2020. Available at: (<https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2018/06/the-historian-as-magpie-searching-for-treasures-in-the-asian-reading-room/>).

Figures of Chapter III

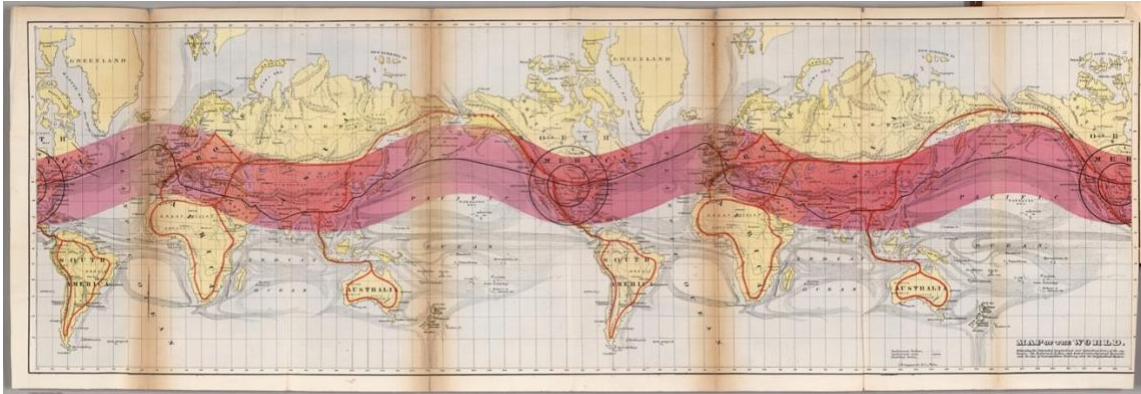


Fig. 16. William Gilpin's 1873 Map of the Isothermal Zodiac and Axis of Intensity positioned on the world-map. "Delineating the Contrasted Longitudinal and Latitudinal forms of the continents: the Isothermal Zodiac and Axis of Intensity Round the World; and the Line of Cosmopolitan Railway and its Longitudinal Feeders." Courtesy of John Krygier and *Making Maps*. Accessed: January 2020. Available at: (<https://makingmaps.net/2014/09/30/gilpins-map-of-the-isothermal-zodiac-and-axis-of-intensity-round-the-world-calcareous-plain-maritime-selvage-etc-etc-maps-1873/>)

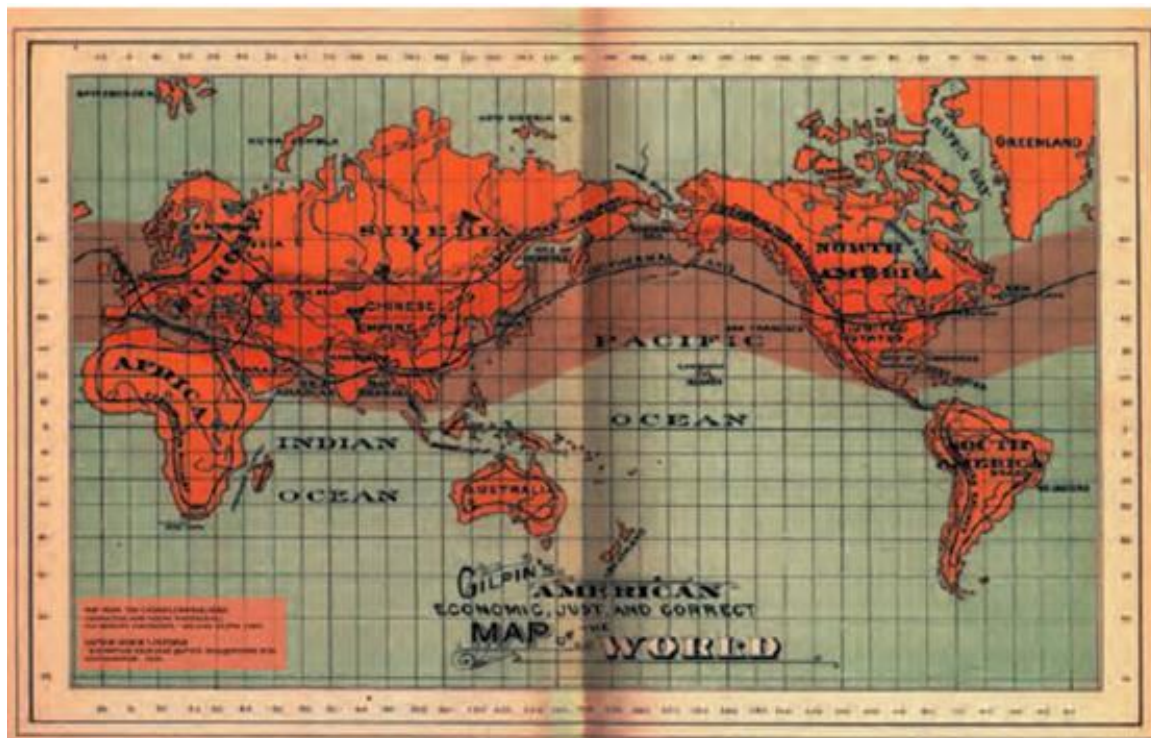


Fig. 17. William Gilpin's Economic, Just and Correct Map of the World. Courtesy of Matthew Ehret-Kump, 2019. Accessed: January 2020. Available at: (<http://canadianpatriot.org/william-gilpin-and-the-original-world-landbridge-project/>)



Fig. 18. Sun Yat-sen's Vision of International Development of China. A map outlining Sun Yat-sen's 1920 vision for rail-lines connecting China to Eurasia. An early a precursor to the Belt and Road Initiative. Courtesy: *Los Angeles Review of Books, China Channel*. Accessed: January 2020. Available at: (<https://chinachannel.org/2019/02/28/railway-links/sun-yat-sen-rail-plan-for-china/>)

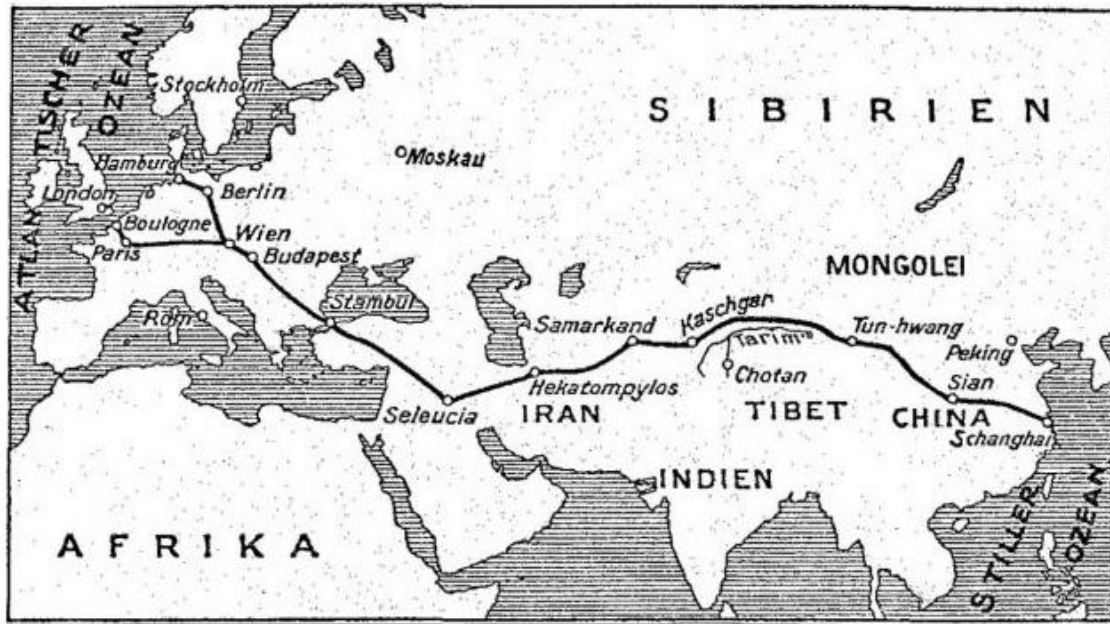


Fig. 19. Map of a projected road between China and Europe. Courtesy: Sven Hedin, *The Silk Road*. London, 1938.

Figures of Chapter IV



Fig. 20. The Map of the World, Late Babylonian, 6thC BC (approx.). *Clay tablet; map of the world; shows the world as a disc, surrounded by a ring of water called the "Bitter River"; "Babylon" is marked as a rectangle at the right end of the Euphrates.*

Excavated by: Hormuzd Rassam. Excavated/Findspot: Abu Habba (Sippar) Asia: Middle East: Iraq: Iraq, South: Abu Habba (Sippar). Available at *The British Museum Online*: (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1882-0714-509). Accessed: September 2020.



Fig. 21. Hong Kong University’s map showing scattered posts that evoke the early networks of posts of the European companies of the Indies. Courtesy: (Palmer, 2020).

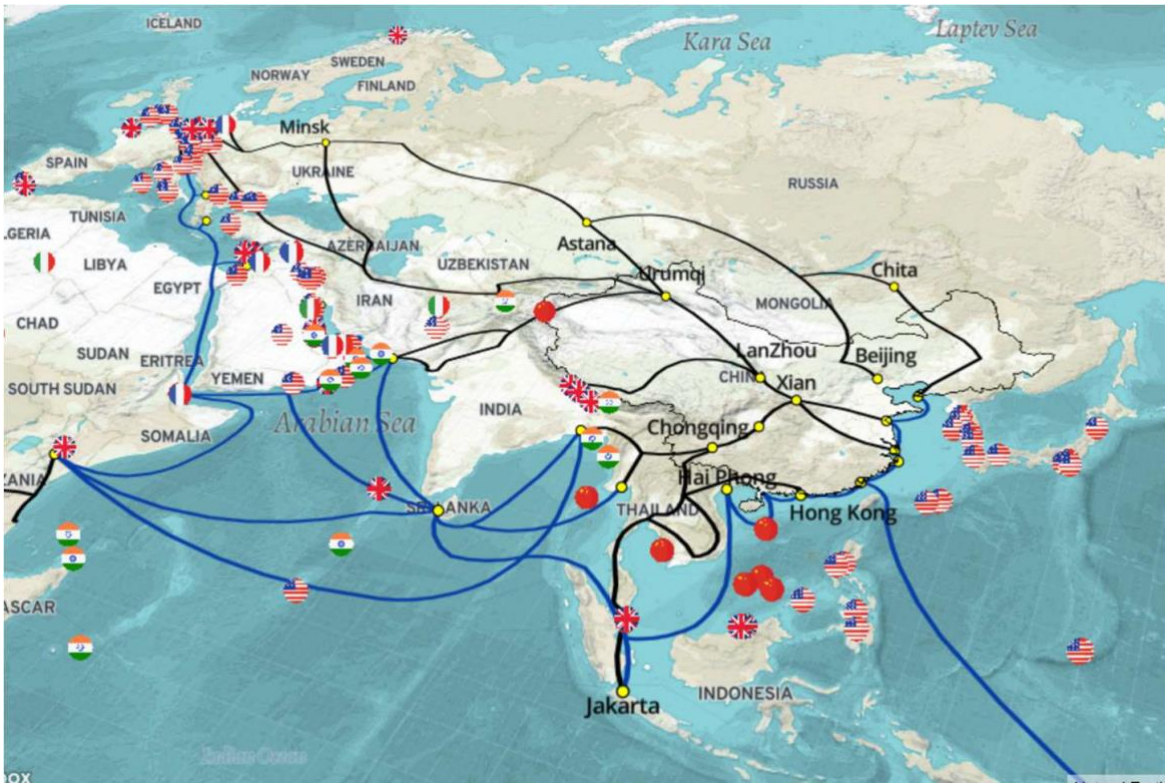


Fig. 22. Hong Kong University’s map of the “American empire.” Courtesy: (Palmer, 2020).

APPENDIX B

Travelers Along the Silk Road

Based on *The Silk Road Foundation*, Available at:
(<http://silkroadfoundation.org/artl/srtravelmain.shtml>), Accessed: March 2019.

Time Period	Traveler	Description
976–922 BC or 956–918 BC	King Mu (Mu Wang)	West Chou king and the earliest reputed Silk Road traveller. His travel account <i>Mu tianzi zhuan</i> , written in the 5th-4th century BC, is the first known travel book on the Silk Road. It tells of his journey to the Tarim basin, the Pamir mountains and further into today's Iran region, where the legendary meeting with Xiwangmu was taken place. Returned via the Southern route. The book no longer exists but is referenced in <i>Shan Hai Zin</i> , <i>Leizi: Mu Wang Zhuan</i> , and <i>Shiji</i> .
138-116 B.C.	Zhang Qian (Chang Ch'ien)	Chinese general and envoy credited with opening the Silk Road after his mission from the Han Emperor Wudi to recruit the Yueh-chih people to form an alliance against the Xiongnu. First trip (138-125) skirted the Taklamakan desert via the northern route, passed the Pamir, then reached Ferghana. Returned via the southern route. His second trip (119-115), a mission to seek alliance with Wu-sun people, took him to Dunhuang, Loulan, Kucha, then the capital of Wu-sun kingdom in the Ili river. His missions to the west led to the formalization of trade, especially the silk trade, between China and Persia.
40-70 A.D.	Anonymous	Anonymous author of the <i>Periplus of the Erythraen (=Red) Sea</i> . A merchant handbook, written apparently by an Egyptian Greek, about trade routes through the Red Sea and involving both East Africa and India. One of the most important sources for Roman Eastern trade, compiled after the discovery of how to use the monsoon winds to make the round trip to India. Includes extensive information on ports and products. Read the bibliography.
73-102 A.D.	Ban Chao (Pan Ch'ao)	Chinese general restoring the Tarim basin under Han's power and maintaining whole control of the area as west as Kashgar during his career there. He sent out emissaries to the area west and beyond the Tarim basin, including the area of modern-day Iran and the Persian Gulf. Read the bibliography.
97 A.D.	Gan Ying (Kan Ying)	First Chinese envoy to Ta-Ts'in (the Roman Orient) sent by general Ban Chao from Kashgaria in 97 AD. Journeyed through the Pamir mountains, Parthia, and reached as far as the the coast of the Persian Gulf. However he was dissuaded from continuing further west. The first known Chinese visited the Middle East as west as T'iao-chih, near the present Nedjef, Iraq. Read the bibliography.
399-413 A.D.	Faxian (Fa-hsien)	First Chinese monk reaching Indian and returning with a knowledge of Buddhism. Traveled the southern route through Shenshen, Dunhuang, Khotan, and then over the Himalayas, to Gandhara, Peshawur then India. He journeyed most of the way on foot and was the first known traveler passing through the Taklamakan desert from Woo-e to Khoten. Returned to China via the sea route. Read more....Read the bibliography.
518-521	Song Yun (Sung Yun)/Huisheng	Sung Yun of Dunhuang went with a monk Huisheng on a mission sent by the Empress Dowager to obtain the Buddhist scriptures in India in 518. Traveled through the Taklamakan desert via the southern route passing Shanshan, Charkhlik, Khotan, then further west into the Hindu Kush, Kabul, Peshawar. The most interesting account is their visit to the Ephthalites (the White Hun) kingdom, who centered in eastern Afghanistan and controlled much of the Central Asia during the 5th and 6th centuries. Both wrote a travel account but none remained.
629-645	Xuan Zang (Hsuan-tsang)	Chinese Buddhist monk and translator traveling across the Tarim basin via the northern route, Turfan, Kucha, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bactria, then over the Kindu Kush to India. Returned via the southern route. He spent his remaining life translating sutras into Chinese. His travel and story became fantastic legends which were used in plays and novels, such as Wu Ch'eng-en's famous novel in the 16th century, <i>Journey to the West</i> . Read more.... Read the bibliography

713-741	Hwi Chao	Korean monk but grew up in China. Traveled to India via sea route (route unclear). Lived there for several years and visited various Buddhist kingdoms in India, Persia and Afghanistan. On the returning journey, traveled to Kashmir, Kabul, passed the Pamirs and entered Xinjiang from Tashkurgan, then skirted around the Taklamakan desert from the northern towns, Kucha, Turfan and Hami. His account Wang wou t'ien tchou kquo tch'ouan or The Record to Five Indian Kingdoms provided valuable information on the Islamic and Buddhist distribution among the Central Asian kingdoms during the 8th century. His book had been lost since Tang dynasty until an incomplete copy (14 pages, ~6000 words) was miraculously discovered by the French explorer, Paul Pelliot at Dunhuang cave in 1908.
751 - 762	Du Hwai	Chinese soldier defeated and prisoned by the Arab at the famous battle of Talas in 751. Stayed in the prison camp for ten long years and traveled to Tashkent, Samarkand, passed northern Iran to Iraq, west into Syria. On the Persian Gulf, he boarded a foreign ship, returned to Canton via Indian Ocean and South China Sea. His book is a personal account of Talas battle and his prison life in Central Asia.
750-789	Wukong (Wu-K'ung)	Chinese monk went as a delegation with the ambassador from Samarkand who was returning home. He fell ill there and could not return with his countrymen. On his recovery he became a monk and lived in Gandhara and Kashmir, not returning to China until 790 Read the bibliography.
821	Tamim ibn Bahr	According to Minorsky, "the only Muslim traveller who has left a record of his visit to the Uyghur capital on the Orkhon, i.e., to Khara-balghasun in the present-day Mongolia." The author likely was from Khorasan and was sent to the East in connection with political upheavals in Transoxiana. Only an abridged version of his narrative survives, known especially from Yaqut's geographical dictionary. Read the bibliography
921-922	Ahmad Ibn Fadlan	Sent as ambassador from the Abbasid Caliph to the ruler of the Bulgars on the middle Volga River. The route went from Baghdad via the territories of the Samanid state and its capital Bukhara, through Khwarezm and north of the Caspian Sea. Although the account we have is not the original report, it has great value, since Ibn Fadlan "possessed extraordinary powers of observation." (Canard). The account is often best known for its rather lurid but valuable description of a Viking (Rus) funeral on the Volga; this served as the inspiration for a best-seller by the novelist Michael Crichton, Eaters of the Dead. Read the bibliography.
1219-1225	Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai	Great Kitan statesman and poet who became advisor to Genghis Khan and his successors. Traveled with Genghis Khan and his army to Central Asia in 1219. Journeyed to Altai, Ili valley, Talas, Samarkand, Buhara. His impression on the prosperous Buhara can be read on some of his poems. Returned via Tienshan, Urumqi, Turfan, and Hami. His travel book Xi Yue Lu (The Travel Record to the West) is only available in Chinese. Read the bibliography.
1245-1247, 1249-1251	Andrew of Longjumeau	A Dominican and papal envoy to the Mongols, traveled from the Holy Land to vicinity of Tabriz (N. Iran) on his first trip. On the second, accompanied by several others including his brother William, went much farther (his route is not well documented) to the inner Asian dominions of the Mongols, where he arrived during the regency of Oghul Qaimish, the widow of Khan Güyüg. We know of his journeys from summaries in Matthew Paris's Chronica Majora.
1220-1221	Wu-ku-sun Chung tuan	Accompanied by An T'ing chen, sent as ambassador of the Jin emperor to Chingis Khan, whom he found apparently in the Hindukush mountains (today's Afghanistan), not "the North." The Pei shi ki (Notes on an Embassy to the North) is a written version of his oral report copied in the Chi pu tsu chai ts'ung shu. Bretschneider indicates the "narrative is of little importance." Read the bibliography.
1221-1224	K'iu Ch'ang Ch'un & Li chi ch'ang	An eminent Taoist monk born in 1148 CE and thus elderly at the time of his trip, Ch'ang Ch'un was ordered by Chingis Khan to travel to his court. The route went through the Altai and Tienshan mountains, the southern parts of today's Kazakhstan, through Kyrgyzstan, to Samarkand and then down into NE Iran and Afghanistan. He was accompanied by Li Chi ch'ang, who wrote the Hsi Yu Chi, a rather detailed diary of the journey; it was published with an introduction by Sun si in 1228 and included in the Tao tsang tsi yao. Bretschneider feels that this account "occupies a higher place than many reports of our European mediaeval travellers." Read the bibliography.

1245-1248	Ascelinus and Simon of San Quentin	Dominican envoys of the Pope to the Mongols, who went from the Levant into the southern Caucasus and returned (accompanied by Mongol envoys) via Tabriz, Mosul, Aleppo, Antioch and Acre. There is information about the embassy in Matthew Paris's chronicle as well as in an account written by Simon of San Quentin, which has not been translated into English. Read the bibliography.
1245-1247	John of Plano Carpini (Pian del Carpine) and Benedict the Pole	Franciscan monks sent as envoys of Pope Innocent IV to the Mongol Khan. Traveled through the dominions of Khan Batu (ruler of the "Golden Horde") to the vicinity of Karakorum, where they witnessed the proclamation of Güyüg as the new Great Khan. Where he is discussing that which he actually saw, Friar John's account ("History of the Mongols"/ <i>Historia Mongalorum</i>) is "the first direct authentic description of Asia" (Olschki) and one of the most perceptive and detailed accounts we have of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Considering his European Christian perspective, it is surprisingly unbiased. It became quite widely known in Europe through excerpts in an encyclopedia compiled by Vincent of Beauvais, the <i>Speculum Historiale</i> . Read the bibliography.
1253-1255	William (Guillaume/Willem) of Rubruck (Ruysbroeck)	Franciscan missionary from Flanders who traveled through the Black Sea and the territories of the Golden Horde to the court of the Great Khan Möngke at Karakorum. His account (<i>Itinerarium</i>) is "a mine of varied information about the Asiatic life of his times" (Olschki). It contains "the fullest and most authentic information on the Mongol Empire in its pre-Chinese phase" (Dawson); it is of interest for descriptions of encounters with Nestorian Christians, of Karakorum itself and the palace which is no longer extant, and much more. Although his experiences interested his contemporary Roger Bacon, Rubruck's account did not become widely known until it was translated and published late in the sixteenth century.
1254-1255	Hayton I (also, Hethum, Haithon) and Kirakos Gandsaketsi	King of Little Armenia, Hayton traveled through the Caucasus and territories of Khan Batu to the Great Khan Möngke in Karakorum and then back via Samarkand, Bukhara and Tabriz. The account of his travels was written down by Kirakos, who accompanied Hayton. This account is not to be confused with a descriptive narrative of the Near East written by Hayton's nephew of the same name. Read the bibliography.
1259-1260	Ch'ang Te	Envoy from Mongol Khan Möngke to his brother Hülegü soon after the latter's conquest of the Abbasid Chaliphate. Ch'ang Te's <i>Si Shi Ki</i> , recorded by Liu Yu, is part travel diary and part a second-hand account of Hülegü's campaigns in the West. Its geographical information is inferior to that of Ch'ang Ch'un.
1260-1263	Yeh-lü Hi Liang	Great-grandson of Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, who, with his father, worked for Möngke Khan and then Qubilai. His biography in the <i>Yüan-shi</i> relates his travels in Inner Asia in the period of the Mongol civil war prior to Qubilai's consolidation of power.
1260-1269, 1271-1295	Niccolò and Maffeo Polo	The merchant father and uncle of Marco Polo traveled from the Crimea through the other territories of the Golden Horde to Bukhara and ultimately to the court of Qubilai Khan in North China. Qubilai sent them back to Europe on a mission to the Pope via the overland route; they arrived in Venice in 1269. When they departed again for China in 1271 via the Levant, Anatolia and Persia, they were accompanied by young Marco. Our knowledge of their travel is from Marco's book.
1271-1295	Marco Polo	The most famous of the Silk Road travelers, who, by his own account, worked for Qubilai Khan. He traveled overland through Persia across the Pamirs and south of the Taklamakan; his return was by sea from China around south Asia to Hormuz, whence he went overland to the Mediterranean. A Venetian, Marco dictated his account to a professional writer of romances while imprisoned by the Genoese on his return. It is important to remember he was not keeping a diary. Olschki calls it "not...a book of travel and adventure, but a treatise of empirical geography." Clearly some of the descriptions are formulaic, others not based on direct observation, and others reflecting the common stock of travel mythology. Many of his observations are precise and verifiable; others unique but likely accurate. Since his main associations seem to have been with the Mongol rulers of China and with the Muslim merchant community, often he is silent about "obvious" features of Chinese society. Polo's book became well known in Renaissance Europe and served as a stimulus to further travel and discovery.
1275-1279. 1287-1288	Rabban Bar Sauma and Markos	Önggüd (Turkic) Nestorian monks who traveled from Tai-tu, Qubilai Khan's northern capital, to the Middle East, via the southern branch of the Silk Road (through Khotan and Kashgar). Although on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (which they never reached), they seem to have had official sponsorship from the Khan. Once in the Mongol Ilkhanid realms, they became involved in Nestorian church politics, and Markos eventually was

		elected head of the church as Patriarch Mar Yaballaha III. Bar Sauma was sent to the West as an emissary of the Ilkhanid ruler Arghun in 1287, with the goal of concluding an alliance against the Mamluks. Bar Sauma's writings were preserved in an abridged translation into Syriac, from which there are several translations into modern languages. As Rossabi notes, "His narrative remains the only one of its era to provide an East Asian perspective on European ways and rites," even though it is somewhat disappointing in detail about life in the places through which he traveled. Like their contemporary, Marco Polo, the travelers are not mentioned in any Chinese sources. Read the bibliography.
1279-1328	John of Monte Corvino	Franciscan missionary, active in Armenia and Persia, and then in India and China. He left Tabriz for India in 1291 and arrived in Beijing probably after the death of Qubilai Khan in 1294. He was elevated to the rank of Archbishop in ca. 1307 and continued to head the Catholic mission there until his death. Although he did not write a travel narrative, several of his letters have been preserved.
ca. 1316-1330	Odoric of Pordenone	Franciscan monk who traveled via Constantinople and the Black Sea to Persia, and then via the Indian Ocean to India in the early 1320s. From there he sailed around southeast Asia to the east coast of China and spent several years in Beijing. His claim to have returned via Tibet is dubious, although he apparently traveled overland, arriving back in Venice via the Black Sea and Constantinople. His lengthy travel account, which he dictated in 1330, became a "best seller," in part because of Odoric's indiscriminate mixture of tall tales with more authentic information. He occasionally notes aspects of Chinese culture that were ignored by Marco Polo, "with whose account he was certainly familiar" (de Rachewiltz). Important portions of his material were re-worked and given a further fictional gloss by the author of the very popular late medieval travel fable attributed to John Mandeville .
1325-1354	Ibn Battuta	A native of Tangier (Morocco), Shams al-Din Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9 or 1377) is famous for spending the years between 1325 and 1354, when he returned home, traveling across North Africa and through much of Eurasia, all the way to China. His initial goal was to participate in the pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj); his interest in Muslim holy men and places dominates portions of his text. While he may have kept notes, the account as we have it is "a work of literature, part autobiography and part descriptive compendium" (Dunn). It was dictated to Ibn Djuzayy between 1354 and 1357. Some sections clearly do not contain eye-witness material; chronology is often confused. There are critical views of the value of his material on Iran and questions about how much he saw in China. Among the most valuable sections are his descriptions of Anatolia, the territories and customs of the Golden Horde, and Southern India.
1339-1353	John of Marignolli	Franciscan sent as papal legate to Yüan (Mongol) Emperor of China. Entered the lands of the Golden Horde via the Black Sea. His route probably ran through Urgench (S. of Aral Sea), via Hami (north of the Taklamakan) to Beijing and Shang-tu, where he was received in August 1342. After three years, headed home via ship to Hormuz and then overland to the Levant. Included his travel recollections in his chronicle of the history of Bohemia; his account was ignored until the nineteenth century.
1340	Francesco Balducci Pegolotti	A Florentine merchant, Pegolotti was active in the Eastern Mediterranean in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, at which time he acquired first- and second-hand information on the Asian trade. While he himself never travelled further east, his account is of particular interest for its description of the relative security of trade routes through the territories of the Mongol Empire and the great variety of products available in commercial centers such as Constantinople by about 1340. His merchant handbook survived in a copy made in 1471.
1403-1406	Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo and Alfonso Paez	Ambassadors of Spanish King Henry III of Castile and Leon to Timur (Tamerlane). A third envoy, Gómez de Salazar, died en route. Traveled through the Mediterranean to Constantinople, into the Black Sea to Trebizond and then overland via Tabriz to Balkh, Kesh (Shahr-i Sabs) and Samarkand. On return journey, they passed through Bukhara. Clavijo's account, written soon after his return in 1406, is a very important source for travel on the western part of the Silk Road. Its description of Tamerlane's Samarkand is one of the fullest available and includes substantial detail on economic life, trade with India and China, and Timurid buildings.
1413-1415, 1421-1422, 1431-1433	Ma Huan	Muslim interpreter who accompanied the famous Ming admiral Ch'eng Ho (Zheng He) on his fourth, sixth and seventh expeditions to the Indian Ocean. His <i>Ying-yai sheng-lan</i> (Overall Survey of the Ocean's

		Shores) (published in 1451) contains valuable information on geography, products and trade in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. On the first two voyages, he went as far as Hormuz; on the third he apparently reached Mecca.
1419-1422	Ghiyathuddin Naqqash	Artist representing Prince Mirza Baysunghur, son of Timurid ruler Shahrukh, in embassy sent by latter to Beijing in 1419. Describes travel via route north of Tarim Basin (through Turfan, Jiayuguan, Suzhou to Beijing and back via Kashgar to Herat), various aspects of culture along way, including Buddhism, and reception at Ming court.
1435-1439	Pero Tafur	A native and notable of Cordoba, born ca. 1410, Tafur traveled from Spain to the Eastern Mediterranean and back. While not a merchant, he was very interested in commercial affairs and well connected with the trading networks. He was in Egypt, the Black Sea region and in the sad remains of the dying Constantinople; while he thought about going to India, the closest he came was a conversation with the famous traveler Nicolo di Conti, whom he met on the latter's return journey from South Asia.
1436-1452, 1473-1479	Giosofat Barbaro	A merchant who spent a decade and a half in the Venetian colony of Tana at the mouth of the Don River and then in the 1470s traveled as an ambassador to Persia. In his "Journey to Tana" he describes the regions adjoining the Black Sea as well as distant Muscovy, which he never visited; his "Journey to Persia" follows closely his official report on his mission. The latter, at least, incorporates information from other travelers and presumably was influenced by the author's having seen the Persian travels of Contrarini.
1466-1472	Afnasii Nikitin	A merchant from the Russian city of Tver on the upper Volga River who traveled through Persia to India and spent more than 18 months there. He died just before reaching home. The largest part of his travel account describes India; the account is of some interest for his advice to fellow Christian merchants to leave their faith at home and profess Islam if they wished to prosper on the Silk Road. There is a 1958 Russian film based on his journey; a Soviet oceanographic expedition named a newly discovered undersea mount off the southern coast of India for Nikitin.
1474-1477	Ambrogio Contarini	Venetian ambassador to Persia, who traveled through Central Europe, Ukraine, the Crimea and the Caucasus. In Persia he spent time in Tabriz and Isfahan, and returned home via Muscovy and Poland. Although he traveled rapidly, he was a good observer. Apart from what he relates about conditions in the Caucasus and Persia under Uzun Hasan, his narrative is of considerable interest for its material on Moscow in the important reign of Grand Prince Ivan III.
1490s-1530	Babur	The great-great-great-grandson of Timur (Tamerlane), Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483-1530) wrote a stunning memoir of his early life and struggles in Central Asia and Afghanistan before finally settling in northern India and founding the Mughal Empire. His Baburnama offers a highly educated Central Asian Muslim's observations of the world in which he moved. There is much on the political and military struggles of his time but also extensive descriptive sections on the physical and human geography, the flora and fauna, nomads in their pastures and urban environments enriched by the architecture, music and Persian and Turkic literature patronized by the Timurids. His most recent translator declares, "said to 'rank with the Confessions of St. Augustine and Rousseau, and the memoirs of Gibbon and Newton,' Babur's memoirs are the first--and until relatively recent times, the only--true autobiography in Islamic literature."
1557-1560, 1561-1564, 1566-1567, 1571-1572	Anthony Jenkinson	Representing the English Muscovy Company and accompanied by Richard and Robert Johnson, traveled via the White Sea and Moscow, down the Volga River and across the Caspian Sea to Bukhara and then back by the same route in 1557-60. In 1561-1564, via the same route to the Caspian, he went to Persia to try negotiating trade agreements; spent the winter in Kazvin discussing the spice trade with Indian merchants. Jenkinson's subsequent trips did not take him beyond Moscow. Beginning in 1546, well prior to his Russia service, Jenkinson had traveled widely in the Mediterranean and the Levant.
1579, 1580-1582, 1583-1584	John Newbery	A London merchant, Newbery undertook three trips. The first went only as far as the Levant. The second took him from the Levant through Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf and Hormuz and then back through central Persia, the southern fringe of the Caucasus, Anatolia, and Eastern Europe. On the third he was accompanied by Ralph Fitch (see separate entry), John Eldred (who stopped short of the Persian Gulf), William Leeds and James Story all the way to the Mughal court in India. Newbery died on the route home. He was the first Englishman to visit several of these regions. Unfortunately, he never wrote much about his travels--notes on the first and especially the second trip were apparently worked into a

		narrative by Purchas in the 17th century; the third trip is known from some letters, Fitch's account, and Linschoten.
1583-1591	Ralph Fitch	English merchant (d. 1611) who traveled with John Newbery (s. v.) via the Levant and Mesopotamia to India, through northern India and on as far as Malacca (in Malaysia) before returning home via the Persian Gulf, to discover in London that he was presumed dead and his property had been divided among his heirs. He later returned to Aleppo. He apparently did not keep a diary; in writing down his account, in part with the encouragement of Hakluyt, he drew upon the travel account by the Italian Cesare Federici. The Indian section of Fitch's account is "disappointingly meagre and haphazard"; clearly he must have known a lot more than made its way into writing. Since, unlike Newbery, he survived to tell the tale, he often is given the greater prominence of the two.
1602-1607	Benedict Goës	In 1594 the Portuguese Jesuit Benedict Goës joined a mission to the Mughal Emperor Akbar, where he was chosen by the Jesuit leadership (partly because of his knowledge of Persian) to travel on an exploratory mission to China via Kashgar. He died before reaching Beijing; what survived of his notes and letters and some oral accounts were later (1615) combined by the famous Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci into his travel journal. Despite some inconsistencies and problems in dating, the account is a unique record by a European of travel on the overland trade routes in inner Asia at the beginning of the seventeenth century. One is struck by the route itself-- heading northwest into Afghanistan before going north across the Hindu Kush to the headwaters of the Amu Darya, then east to Sarikol and on to Yarkand and Kashgar before skirting the Taklamakan on the north. The account details human and natural threats to travel and other aspects of the inner Asian trade, and provides some valuable information on the political divisions of the time.
1615-1616	Richard Steele and John Crowther	Agents for the British East India Company, traveled from Agra, the Mughal capital in N. India, overland via Kandahar to the Safavid capital Isfahan. Their account highlights the continuing importance of the overland trade routes, in part as a way of avoiding the Portuguese control of the Indian Ocean ports. There is interesting information on the role of the Afghan nomads along the route and an emphasis on the relative safety of travel in the period of Mughal and Safavid strength and stability. Steele then returned to England by traveling overland to the Mediterranean and taking a boat via Marseilles; Crowther returned to India.
1629-1675	Jean Baptiste Tavernier	French merchant/jeweler who probably knew the overland trade routes through Persia better than any other European in the seventeenth century. His six voyages took him to the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia and Mughal India; his interactions with the merchant communities (notably the Armenians in Persia) gave him an insider's perspective. His account reflects the editing of a professional writer but is precise and detailed.
1633-35, 1635-39, 1643	Adam Olearius	Secretary to Embassy of Holstein and (in 1643) Ambassador from Holstein. First and third missions were to Moscow; second went through Moscovy to Persia, where he spent a year and the conduct of one of its members did a great deal to discredit the enterprise. Well-educated at the University of Leipzig, Olearius compiled one of the most widely read and detailed accounts of Muscovy and Persia, seen through the lens of his Protestant upbringing and learned European perspective. It was published first in 1647; the revised German edition of 1656 became the standard one and drew upon a wide range of other sources. It was translated into several languages and frequently re-published.
1664-1667, 1671-1677	John Chardin	A French Huguenot jeweler, Chardin spent significant time in the Caucasus and Persia and traveled to India. His is one of the major European accounts of Safavid Persia, whose value is enhanced by his good knowledge of Persian. Persecution of Protestants in France forced him to flee to England, where he was recognized as an expert on the Middle East.
1682-1693	Hovhannes Joughayetsi	Armenian merchant who traveled and traded between New Julfa (the Armenian suburb of Isfahan), Northern India and Tibet. He spent five years in Lhasa. His commercial ledger is a unique source of information on products, prices, trading conditions, and the Armenian commercial network on the seventeenth-century routes involving the Safavid and Mughal empires.

APPENDIX C

The Chronology the Silk Road

Based on *The Silk-Road.com and the Silk Road Foundation*, Available at: (<http://www.silk-road.com/artl/chrono.shtml>), and (<http://www.SilkRoadfoundation.org/toc/index.html>), Accessed: March 2019.

Time Period	Events
5000-500 B.C	<p>3200 Horse domesticated on south Russian steppe. 3000 Minoan civilization starts, the earliest in Europe. 3000 Silk first produced in China. 3000 Sumerians develop first writing system. 2500 Domestication of the Bactrian and Arabian camel, vital for desert travel. 1700 Horse-drawn chariot introduced in Near East. 1500 Iron technology developed in Asia Minor. 1500 Semimadic stockbreeding tribes inhabit steppes. 900 Spread of mounted nomadism. 753 Rome founded. 707 Cimmerians, earliest-known mounted nomads, defeat kingdom of Urartu in Near East. 900-700 Scythians and Sarmatians appear in the northern steppes. 600s Zoroaster born in Persia. 560s Buddha born in Nepal. 550 Achaemenid Empire established in Persia. 500s Chinese adopt nomadic style, wear trousers and ride horses. 450 Herodotus visits Greek trading colony of Olbia to gather information on Scythians. 551-479 Confucius born in China.</p>
400 B.C.	Empire of Alexander the Great expands into Asia. Greek culture into Central Asia.
300 B.C.	<p>Roman expansion begins. Greco-Bactrian kingdom develops in Central Asia. Parthians establish their empire in Iran. Qin dynasty unites the entire China for the first time. Chinese complete Great Wall as defense against the northern nomads' invasion. Han dynasty overthrows Qin and develops its vast empire. Buddhism begins to spread north. Gandhara art type emerges and starts a new art style - Serindian. Paper first made in China. Achaemenid Empire of Persia.</p>
200 B.C.	<p>Stirrup appears in Indian and Central Asia Greek city-states come under Roman rule. The Xiongnu, later called Huns rise to power in Central Asia and invade Chinese western border regions. Han Emperor, Wu-ti's interests in Central Asia cause him to command the Chang Ch'ien expeditions. The Silk Road under China's control and the route to the West now open.</p>
100 B.C.	<p>Mithridates, Parthian king, sends ambassadors to Sulla and Wu-ti to open a link between Rome and China. Parthians defeat Romans at Carrhae. One of the most disastrous in Roman history. Roman conquers Gaul. Egypt under Roman rule. Gives Rome access to Red Sea and Spice Route trade. Rome officially becomes an empire.</p>
1 A.D.	<p>Silk first seen in Rome. Buddhism begins to spread from India into Central Asia. Roman Syria develops the technique of blowing glass. The industry expands. Kushan Empire of Central Asia. Sogdians trading on Silk Route. Xiongnu raids upset Chinese power in Tarim region. Death of Jesus Christ. Spread of Christianity begins. Chinese General Pan Ch'ao defeats Xiongnu and keeps the peace in the Tarim Basin. The stability of the Silk Road popularizes the caravan trades into two routes - north and south. China sends the first ambassador to Rome from Pan Ch'ao's command, but he fails to reach Rome. Greco-Egyptian geographer, Claudius Ptolemy, writes attempts to map the Silk Road.</p>
100 A.D.	<p>Rome sends the first Roman envoy over sea to China. Roman empire at its largest. A major market for Eastern goods. Buddhism reaches China. Buddhism flourishes, becoming the most popular religion in Central Asia, replacing Zoroastrianism. The four great empires - the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Chinese - bring stability to the Silk Road.</p>
200 A.D.	<p>Silk is woven into cloth across Asia, but using Chinese thread. Han dynasty ends. China splits into fragments. Sassanians rise to power from Parthians. Strong cultural influence along the trade routes.</p>

	<p>Barbarian attacks on the Roman Empire. Death of Mani in Persia. Manichaeism spreads throughout Asia, not to die out until the 14th century.</p>
300 A.D.	<p>Stirrup introduced to China by the northern nomads Secret of sericulture begins to spread west along the Silk Road. Xiongnu invade China again. China further dissolved into fragments. Constantinople becomes Rome's capital. Christianity becomes the official Roman religion. Dun Huang caves starts to appear and becomes the world's largest Buddha caves. Huns attack Europe. Roman Empire splits into two. Fa-hsien, a Chinese traveler by foot sets out for India.</p>
400 A.D.	<p>A Chinese princess smuggles silkworm eggs out of China. Silkworm farms appear in Central Asia. New techniques in glass production introduced to China by the Sogdians. Visigoths invade Italy and Spain. Angles and Saxons rise in Britain. Western Roman Empire collapses. Frankish kingdom formed.</p>
500 A.D.	<p>Silkworm farms appear in Europe. Nestorian Christians reach China. Kingdom of Hephthalites (White Huns) in northern Asia, conquering Sogdian territory. Buddhism reaches Japan. Split of the Turkish Kaganate into Eastern and Western Kaganates. Western Turks move to Central Asia. Sui dynasty reunites China. Sassanian Empire at its greatest extent in Central Asia.</p>
600 A.D.	<p>Roman Empire becomes Byzantine Empire. Tang dynasty rules in China. The Silk Road reaches its golden age. China very open to foreign cultural influences. Buddhism flourishes. The Islamic religion founded. Death of Muhammad. Muslim Arab expansion begins. Xuan Zang's pilgrimage to India. The Avars from the steppes introduces stirrups to Europe. Sassanian Persia falls to the Arabs. Muslims control Mesopotamia and Iran, along with the Silk and Spice routes.</p>
700 A.D.	<p>Arabs conquer Spain in Europe, which introduces much Eastern technology and science to Europe. Arabs defeat Chinese at Talas. Capturing Chinese papermakers, they introduce the craft in Eurasia. Block printing developed in China Tang dynasty begins to decline, and with it, the Silk Road. Glassmaking skill introduced to China by Sogdians.</p>
800 A.D.	<p>First porcelain made in China. Gunpowder invented in China and spread to the West by the 13th century. All foreign religions banned in China. Compass begins to be used by Chinese. Diamond Sutra dated 11 May 868, the world's oldest known printed book made in Dunhuang. Venice established as a city-state.</p>
900 A.D.	<p>Kirghiz Turks in control of Eastern Central Asia, establish kingdoms at Dunhuang and Turfan. Tang Dynasty ends. China fragmented. England unified for the first time. Playing cards invented in China and spread to Europe toward the end of 14th century. The Islamic Empire divides into small kingdoms. Sung Dynasty reunites China. Porcelain developed in China and exported to western Asia.</p>
1000 A.D.	<p>First Crusade. Exchange of technology between Europe and Middle East.</p>
1100 A.D.	<p>China divided into Northern Sung and Southern Sung. Muslim oust the Franks from the Levant. Genghiz Khan unites Mongols. Expansion of Mongol Empire begins. Silk production and weaving established in Italy. Paper money, first developed in China.</p>
1200 A.D.	<p>Death of Genghis Khan. Mongols invade Russia, Poland, and Hungary. The Europe's first envoy to the East, Friar Giovanni Carpini leaves Rome for Mongol capital. Friar William Rubruck sent to Karakorum by the King of France. Seventh, and last, Crusade. Mongol control central and western Asia. Silk road trade prospers again under the "Pax Mongolica." Kublai Khan defeats China and establishes the Yuan dynasty. Paper money introduced to Central Asia and Iran by Mongols. Marco Polo leaves for the East.</p>
1300 A.D.	<p>Turkish Ottoman Empire in power. Tamerlane, with capital in Samarkand, conquers Persia, parts of Southern Russia, and northern India. Third Silk Road route appears in the north. Ibn Battuta, the first known Arab travels on a 750,000 mile journey to China via the Silk Road.</p>

	<p>The Black Death spreads throughout Europe. Paper made across Europe. Spinning wheel in Europe. Battle of Crecy between French and English, where cannons used first in Europe. Mongol Yuan Dynasty collapses. Chinese Ming Dynasty begins.</p>
1400 A.D.	<p>Tamerlane defeats the Ottoman Turks, and causes the deaths of seventeen million people. Renaissance period in Europe. Chinese explore the Spice Routes as far as Africa. Death of Tamerlane leads to the decline of Mongol power. Ottoman rises again in the Central Asia. Ottomans conquer Constantinople. Gutenberg printing press in use. China closes the door to foreigners. Fearing the power of Uighurs, Ming China reduces trade and traffic on the Silk Road. The Silk Road comes to an end for purposes of silk. Lyon becomes the new center of the silk trade. Columbus reaches America. Vasco da Gama discovers the sea route from Europe to the East via the cape of Good Hope.</p>
1500 A.D.	<p>Islam becomes the religion of the entire Taklamakan region.</p>
1600 A.D.	<p>Uzbek Turks appear from the north, settle in today's Uzbekistan. Prince Babur, descendant of Genghis Khan, extends his empire from the Ferghana valley to India. Manchuria rises and invades China. Qing Dynasty established.</p>
1700 A.D.	<p>The trade along the Silk Road is disrupted by the collapse of the Safavid Empire in the 1720s. Traders take the sea route between Europe and the Far East instead of going overland on the Silk Road. Numbers of severe earthquakes in Central Asia damage some of the great monuments. Porcelain produced in Europe. The Manchus, a Tungusic people from Manchuria, absorb the Gobi and Altai districts.</p>
1800 A.D.	<p>Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen uses the term "Silk Road" (Seidenstrasse) for the first time. Manchus take over the Tarim Basin. Xinjiang Province created under Qing Dynasty. Elias crosses the Pamirs and identifies Muztagh Ata. Recommends the Wakhan corridor be established.. Hedin explores the Kun Lun and Takla Makan desert and towns buried along the old Silk Road. Conway in the Karakoram Mountains. Stein's archaeological investigations of the Takla Makan and central Asia. The Great Game - Tsarist Russia and British India expand in Central Asia.</p>
1900 A.D.	<p>Hedin's expeditions. The Qing dynasty ends in 1912. Chinese revolution; end of Chinese dynasties. Europeans begin to travel in the Silk Road Tibet under China's control. Karakoram highway from Islamabad to Kashgar built by China and Pakistan.</p>