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1. Introduction: Silk Roads and China’s production of knowledge

1.1. Shaun Lin and Yang Yang

Since its launch in 2013, China’s highly ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen a plethora of coverage across disciplines. Geography is no exception, with analyses of geopolitics, economic geographies, and transport geographies related to BRI proliferating to this day (Flint & Zhu, 2019; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). The most recent scholarship on BRI has brought attention to topics that have been relatively neglected or completely ignored elsewhere. For example, geographers have examined the spatial imaginaries of the Polar region that are part of an expansive BRI (Woon, 2020), going beyond the dominant Eurasia-centered analysis; geographers have also examined BRI’s financial dimensions together with China’s wider trajectory of foreign policy (Lai et al., 2020). Tim Winter’s (2019) Geocultural Power joins this body of work, shedding new light on the cultural politics of BRI. Focusing on contemporary Chinese narratives of ancient Silk Roads, Winter provides a strong account that highlights how the Chinese government engages heritage and history in support of the geopolitical and economic aspirations of BRI’s infrastructural plans. BRI mobilizes cultural and historical narratives of the Silk Roads, and at times reworks such narratives, to create and sustain China’s geopolitical outreach. Winter’s Geocultural Power extends discussions of the spatial configurations of BRI and argues for more critical attention to be paid to the wider historical narratives, particularly from the late nineteenth century (the Great Game) to the twentieth century (Cold War), that support these configurations in the modern era, as China revives ‘a theater of geopolitics and great-power accumulation’ (2020, p. 80). This short introduction outlines the book’s key contributions and provides a quick overview of the accompanying reviews and a brief discussion of future research agendas.

Winter introduces this highly accessible book by explaining his motivations for writing the book and by providing an overview of his framework and approach. The second chapter traces the Silk Road as a geocultural form that has its origins in the late nineteenth century and that was shaped by modern geopolitical and cultural events. Chapter 3 explores instances in which key political actors in Asian states have appropriated the historic Silk Roads. Chapter 4 looks at various BRI...
projects (particularly the sea corridors), focusing more on infrastructure and the use of historical narrative and heritage to foster international cooperation. Chapter 5 examines artefacts—the physical objects of itinerancy and their associated heritage diplomacy. Chapter 6 focuses on knowledge production of the Silk Roads, urging readers to pay heed to neglected historical events and processes. The concluding chapter highlights the spatial configurations and implications of the two Silk Roads, specifically the use of culture and history as political and diplomatic strategies to smooth the uneven topography of the historic Silk Road and BRI. While serving a smoothing function, Winter suggests, culture and cultural heritage can also become sources and sites where tensions and violence emerge.

This review forum brings together seven critics, namely Henryk Alff, Mark Frost, Marina Kaneti, Tim Oakes, Jonathan Rigg, Alessandro Rippa, and June Wang. They have different backgrounds ranging from anthropology and geography to history and political science. This diversity is deliberate, as Geocultural Power fundamentally crosses disciplines as it weaves together cultural and heritage studies with international relations and the study of diplomacy. If there is one common critique among these reviewers, it is that the book’s exploration of geocultural politics tends to prioritize state actors. Several of the reviewers suggest that the book could have given more attention to local responses to BRI—a point that Winter acknowledges and addresses in his response. Further to this point, readers of Political Geography will recall a recent special issue of ‘China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground’ (Oliveira et al., 2020), which emphasizes that opinions on the ground matter, especially given the actual and potentially massive material consequences of BRI policies. Geocultural Power provides an important complement to ‘on-the-ground’ perspectives by explaining in great depth the ambitions, aspirations, logics, and imaginaries that underpin BRI.

All of the reviewers make note of, and praise, Winter’s expansive temporal framing of BRI, which also features in other geographical analyses, including a recent symposium on the politics and spaces of BRI in Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space (Sidaway et al., 2020). In one of the symposium’s papers, Wahlquist (2020) also touches on the Silk Roads, describing it as an increasingly used and evocative metaphor. The question is how this metaphor might continue to resonate as China and the rest of the world approach the second decade of BRI, as the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshapes connectivity, and especially people-to-people connections. Hence, another Silk Road—the Health Silk Road—comes under scrutiny. While the idea of a Health Silk Road predates COVID-19 (Ngeow, 2020), the pandemic will surely provide impetus to make it a reality. How might public health concerns become prioritized and incorporated within BRI (Winter, 2020)? How will China’s response to the pandemic become part of its project to expand its influence? It seems that medical research and wellness-based projects—notably those involving traditional Chinese medicine—may be deployed to do the work of smoothing that has had been done by culture and history.

The COVID-19 pandemic indicates that the future of BRI will be unpredictable. Winter is right to say in the conclusion of Geocultural Power that ‘instability and uncertainties, as much as grand ambition and coherence, will define the future’ (2020, p. 195) We wish, however, to emphasize that future research on BRI needs to be increasingly attentive to the processes, and critical of the intentions, that underlie China’s production of knowledge. It is worth noting that while connectivity is foundational to the new Silk Road, academic outputs on BRI in China remain disconnected from scholarly outputs produced elsewhere. The different positions presented by China-based and non-China-based scholars must be considered in light of funding sources, political constraints over social science and humanities research, and the institutional surveillance in China over research outputs in both Chinese and English languages. Acknowledging and scrutinizing the politics of knowledge production in China has never been more important and relevant.

2. Re-assembling the Silk Road(s) from a heritage perspective

2.1. Henryk Alff

Few, if any, themes in China-related research over the past few years have evoked as much scholarly interest as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Most of this extensive and rapidly growing body of work has focused on the global and regional geopolitical and economic framing of the BRI’s developmental vision, as well as on its contextualisation in infrastructural interventions around the globe. Tim Winter’s insightful book takes a rather unusual angle in scrutinizing the often-overlooked use of cultural heritage for realizing BRI’s ambitious goals of infrastructural improvement and win-win cooperation. More specifically it draws attention to how a re-constructed history of the Silk Road(s), including its materialisation in artefacts, symbols and ideas, has become part and parcel of China’s diplomatic efforts to forge transnational connectivity along BRI’s corridors. Winter’s critical engagement with the remaking of Silk Road history and heritage in increasingly outward-looking yet Sinocentric terms sheds light on ‘how past is used in present-day politics and in the particular forms of social and spatial governance’ on an ‘unprecedented scale’ (Winter 2019: xiii). On the one hand, the key concepts applied in this endeavour—geocultural power and heritage diplomacy—point to Beijing’s political efforts in trying to achieve ‘sovereignty’ through the reconfiguration of an imagined shared history. On the other, these concepts convey the inherent socio-spatial work of constituting and popularising these very imaginaries among governments, societal elites and the broader public across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. Winter rightly draws on assemblage thinking to explore how Beijing connects ideas of the past to cultural artefacts, such as ceramics, ancient manuscripts or shipwrecks, in order to embed populations and places in BRI discourses.

The Silk Road as a historical instrument to entangle and order actors—human and non-human—and places across space and time, has a key role in promoting contemporary Chinese efforts to create transnational economic and infrastructural cooperation. Winter provides a ‘biography’ of the Silk Road, showing how knowledge of it has evolved in European and Asian thought since von Richthofen’s introduction of the term in 1877. Winter emphasizes the path-dependency of transcontinental and maritime connectivity, as well as economic, cultural and religious exchange, engrained in this highly ambiguous concept. He also notes that the notion of past long-distance, largely uninterrupted, peaceful and linear (rather than networked) connectivity has become the centrepiece of Beijing’s current BRI visions. At the same time, Winter argues, Beijing keeps this official Silk Road discourse intentionally vague, romanticized and simplified to allow for others to connect to it. This strategy becomes apparent in the renewed prominence of Zheng He, the Ming-era admiral who led seven expeditions from China across the Indian Ocean as far as East Africa. Winter convincingly shows how the Chinese state’s appropriation of this historical figure and its rebranding of Zheng He in a discourse of outward-looking diplomacy and of a 21st-century mercantile China erases confrontation and emphasizes a rhetoric of peaceful co-existence. Removing violence, conflict and competition from historic imaginaries thus contributes to what Winter designates as a political technology of ‘smoothing’. This denial of friction increases the credibility of China’s ambitious infrastructural plans, which have Han civilization at their gravitational centre (Winter 2019, pp. 190–191).

While Winter’s book does not claim to provide a thorough historic analysis, focusing instead on the discourses at work in the sociocultural production of BRI, a more in-depth, critical review of historically sedimented Euro- and Sinocentric concepts of the Silk Road(s) would have been a valuable addition. The Silk Road, in fact, hardly ever existed historically in a singular form; nor did it ever exist as a transcontinental, uninterrupted connection between Asia and Europe, except perhaps during the Pax Mongolica, during which commerce and communication flourished thanks to relative political stability (Jackson, 2017). The Silk
Road(s) can be likened more credibly to Pearson’s conceptualization of the Indian Ocean as a historic space of maritime interconnectivity (Pearson, 2003)—that is, as a rather provisional assemblage or networked system of routes that was shaped by the interaction between sedentary and mobile (pastoralist/seafaring), Manichaean, Sufi and Shamanist, populations (Winter 2019, p. 38, see also; Barfield, 1989; Paul, 2012). Such a conceptualization of the Silk Road(s) is clearly far from what Chinese state actors have in mind producing their Sinocentric Silk Road notion. Nonetheless, these (and other) ‘alternative’ discourses of the Silk Road(s), and broader imaginaries of civilization and socio-spatial connectedness, certainly matter not only in academic debates, but also in the meaning-making processes that are shaping contemporary Asia.

This brings me to another minor flaw in Winter’s otherwise fascinating book: a dearth of ethnographic scrutiny of how the Chinese reinterpretation of history is reflected upon, redefined and deconstructed locally. It thus would be intriguing to learn more about the multifarious ways that non-state actors across Asia—for example, students, fishers, shopkeepers or merchants—are positioning themselves vis-à-vis heritage diplomacy and forging divergent assemblages of historical connectedness beyond the spectacle of museum exhibitions, ship models and symphonic concerts. While reading Winter’s book a few months back, I visited the city of Palmyra, Syria, including its famous amphitheatre, where Russia’s Mariinskiy Theatre orchestra performed in May 2016 with Russian President Vladimir Putin on live stream (Putin also gave speech on this occasion, which was covered by the international press). The ‘orchestrated diplomacy’ (Winter 2019: 181) of this event—a carefully staged reassertion of cultural supremacy, much like the cultural production around BRI—barely registered locally. In fact, half a year after the concert, the Islamic State (IS) managed to retake Palmyra and, sadly, further destroyed Palmyra’s archaeological sites (including the theatre), challenging the Syrian regime’s (and their partners’) claims of a re-established geocultural order. An empirically grounded analysis of how human and non-human actors are continuously and provisionally assembled and disassembled to produce ‘heritage’ would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how China’s geocultural power in the context of BRI is simultaneously materialized, deconstructed and renegotiated.

3. An ancient heritage of one-way traffic?

3.1. Mark R. Frost

In carving out zones of global influence and dependency, China’s leaders have often appeared bent on repeating the earlier practices of European ‘informal’ empires. What is refreshing about Tim Winter’s exploration of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – as both an expression of, and a medium for, what he terms ‘geocultural power’ – is his refusal to be drawn into such paralles. Winter recognizes the potentially disruptive impact of Chinese expansionism along the new Silk Roads of the 21st century, yet he is equally attuned to its cosmopolitan possibilities. Consequently, he provides us with a timely study that serves as one of the more impressive examinations of how ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power today mutually constitute one another in the world of international relations.

Winter achieves this by approaching BRI as a massive exercise in border-crossing heritage-making and ‘heritage diplomacy’. In part, his study examines the way cultural heritage has been deployed to ‘smooth over’ the frequently disharmonious realities of Silk Road history. But Winter is also keen that his readers grasp what this smoothed-over history offers China and its partners—namely, a transnational memorescape from which a new language of state-to-state relations has grown, one ostensibly shorn of imperialist associations and instead rooted in a purportedly authentic tradition of peaceful intra-Asian interactions.

Interdisciplinary in its approach, this book should generate much debate amongst specialists from the many fields it traverses. By examining the sites, objects and practices of BRI heritage-making as operating in relational space and as producing border-crossing itineraries, Winter challenges the field of heritage studies to move beyond its long-held preoccupation with heritage as a form of nation-building. More generally, his book demands of international relations scholars that they recognize the value of geocultural perspectives alongside and within geopolitical analyses. While Winter eschews a causal explanation of BRI, in favor of documenting the myriad ‘entanglements’ it produces, his work repeatedly underscores the political work being done by the supranational imaginaries it has unleashed. Ultimately, he reveals BRI as one great entanglement of the geocultural and the geopolitical, most strikingly when he evidences how China’s international infrastructural developments have mapped directly onto its international heritage partnerships.

This is not to say this excellent volume does not contain gaps. There is more to be said, as Winter acknowledges, about the way China’s export of heritage technologies and expertise could be used (and may already be used) for strategic and surveillance purposes. Additional work is needed to fully comprehend how Beijing ideologically produces BRI domestically, as a patriotic yet international undertaking of its national citizenry. This line of enquiry is important because how the Chinese public and foreign tourists consume BRI as a cultural product will surely impact BRI’s cosmopolitan potential. Beijing’s official projections aimed at home audiences have thus far exposed the cultural hierarchies and outright racism embedded in popular understandings of China’s modern Silk Road partners. BRI-themed segments of the annual China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala, for example, have drawn international condemnation for their condescendingly racist portrayals of the nations on which a benevolent and higher Chinese civilization now bestows its high-tech gifts of information technology, healthcare, and infrastructure.

More research here would, in turn, answer a question Winter only partly addresses: where do African states fit into BRI’s new geocultural order? Winter argues that BRI proponents have so far conceived of it as a largely pan-Asian endeavor; yet Africa featured equally in the 2018 CCTV Spring Gala (albeit in cringeworthy ways) as a key BRI player. The overarching question raised by the book’s analysis of the journeys taken by material heritage across the new Silk Roads is what exactly are the power relations built into and reinforced by China’s heritage diplomacy? The evidence Winter presents suggests that such diplomacy is a tool through which China projects itself to audiences at home and abroad as the beneficient giver to a needy world, from which (for the most part) it has historically required so little. Has BRI heritage-making yet celebrated ancient Silk Road exchanges as a two-way traffic, through which gifts from beyond China’s borders (other than raw materials, gold, silver, ivory, and exotic animals) helped produce its own rich civilization? Or is such heritage-making merely intended to underscore how culturally in debt Eurasia and Africa are to China, whether as the recipients of its superior arts, crafts and manufactures in the past, or of its superior technology, expertise and investment in the present?

It would seem that one major obstacle to BRI’s cosmopolitan potential is that China’s rulers have historically deemed Silk Road imports to be suspect ‘heterodoxies’ – Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and opium for example – and, to varying degrees, such imports are still viewed this way today. Winter notes in passing an Indonesian scholar’s suggestion that if BRI enabled Muslim preachers from Asia to preach in China, this might open the way for a genuine cultural exchange of modern Silk Road equals. But given China’s present policies in Xinjiang, how likely is that future? The book’s brief discussion of the political tensions surrounding the intangible heritage of Xinjiang muqam (a melodic mode described by one author as the ‘quintessential’ Silk Road musical form), underlines how unidirectional the flow of civilization represented through BRI heritage-making remains. Certainly, the evidence Winter has marshalled does not yet show BRI to be indicative of a new age of domestic Chinese cultural openness.

Nevertheless, Winter has intended this book to open such questions...
rather than answer them all, and in so doing he has produced one of the most important steps forward in the ‘cultural turn’ taking place in diplomatic studies (at least since Frank Costigliola (1992), for example, began to situate the history of modern US foreign relations within a broader political imaginary shaped by popular culture). Moreover, at a time when BRI seems suddenly vulnerable to the dark side of global connectivity, and perhaps even in retreat, Winter’s book carries a special significance. For it locates the foundations of China’s global endeavors not only in capital investment, transportation and infrastructure, but also in the person-to-person interactions that help to produce shared understandings of a common history and heritage. Especially in an age of global pandemics and trade wars, the resilience of such relations will surely be key to the modern Silk Roads’ future.

4. The power of geocultural power?

4.1. Martina Kaneti

Geocultural Power makes a case for the centrality of cultural heritage and history in understanding international affairs and global politics today. Focusing on China’s strategic use of Silk Road narratives, Tim Winter provides critical assessment of the power and potency of ‘well-crafted, stylized pasts’ to validate and legitimize geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions, such as the now-embattled Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By emphasizing the combined spatial and cultural reach of the Silk Road narratives, Winter argues for new analytical approaches that speak more effectively to emerging global dynamics. His use of geocultural power seeks to capture such trends and to highlight the primacy of culture and heritage in international affairs, diplomacy, and ideas of world ordering. In contrast to the concept of ‘soft power’, which Joseph Nye (1990, 2009) conceptualizes as the ability of A to get B to want what A wants without the use of force or coercion, geocultural power speaks to the strategic mobilization of select aspects of culture, religion and history in order to “win friends and build loyalties, and to legitimize expansionist ambitions to public audiences, both at home and abroad” (Winter 2019: 18). Using a framework of heritage diplomacy, Winter constructs a meticulous and insightful account of the geocultural power of Silk Roads narratives – both in their past conceptualizations and in the present (re)appropriation as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, what remains unclear in his account is the extent to which the concept of geocultural power itself has leverage beyond the case of the Chinese government’s Silk Road narratives. In this sense, the comments below are meant to stimulate further discussion on the attributes and conceptual framing of geocultural power. For the purposes of this review, I focus on two characteristics of geocultural power identified by Winter: fluidity and smoothing.

I start with fluidity. Based on Winter’s account of the Silk Road, geocultural power operates through fluid spatial and cultural assemblages that exceed the territorial and temporal confines of a nation-state. Because of the geographical ambiguity and indeterminacy of narratives, these geocultural assemblages are reproducible and applicable to multiple environments (Winter 2019: 194). Geocultural power can therefore be appropriated and utilized by different actors in order to produce and legitimate diplomatic engagements, international strategies, and visions for global connectivity. In other words, the fluidity of geocultural power emanates from at least three distinct levels: production of narratives, involvement of actors, and responsiveness of communities. Further, unlike soft power, which reproduces and wields a (pre)determined set of territorially inscribed cultural and political values, geocultural power integrates divergent spatial and cultural imaginaries that engender a sense of commonality and transboundary connectivity. Arguably, whereas soft power represents the ability of A to influence B without the use force or coercion; geocultural power could enable A and B to converge around interconnected pasts to leverage common cultural and political values and to envision a world order of mutually held aspirations.

Yet, an understanding of geocultural power as fluid also exposes several conceptual ambiguities. For example, it is unclear which actors have the capacity to wield geocultural power, and whether such power is only the prerogative of specific leaders, select governments, and/or international institutions. It is also unclear whether geocultural power can be effective without significant financial backing and economic and material resources. Here, I certainly agree with Winter’s decision not to reduce geocultural power to a (nother) analytical assessment of causal mechanisms, whereby ‘the cultural’ leads to multibillion-dollar port agreements (Winter 2019: 132). In other words, I am sympathetic to his insistence that analysis of the power of culture should not be reduced to considerations of the potential of culture to bring forth economic development. Nevertheless, the question of effectiveness and viability of geocultural power remains central to the type of collaborative engagements and mutual understandings suggested above. Is the construction of fluid geocultural assemblages alone sufficient to generate a sustained degree of trust, appeal, and following? And if there is no trust, how would A and B recognize their shared values and aspire to co-produce a joint vision for a world order? This leads me to brief consideration of the concept of ‘smoothing’ and the way it is also linked to some of the questions above.

Winter develops the concept of smoothing in order to emphasize the production of stylized narratives that intentionally eschew memories of confrontation, conflict, or opposition. In the context of the Chinese government’s mobilization of Silk Road narratives, smoothing involves the intentional (re)design of interactions and engagements to emphasize mutual advantages, harmony, and cooperation. Even if the concept provides an astute reflection on the Chinese government’s strategic engagement, it remains unclear whether smoothing is a unique characteristic of geocultural power. Let us be reminded, for example, that a similar process of elimination and sanitization of narratives permeates the entire field of international relations and has undergirded European and, later, American hegemony and ‘civilizational mission’ for several centuries. Here, the formative roles of conquest, colonization, slavery, and racism have been entirely erased from conceptualizations of the existing international society and world order (Seth, 2011). Furthermore, the extent to which the prosperity of Europe and the United States has been contingent on colonialism, conquest, and slavery is entirely absent from the celebratory narrative of civilizational advancement and freedom.

Today the destruction of monuments and the removal of the names of colonizers, slave owners, and political leaders across the United States and Europe are a signal that smooth and sanitized narratives, no matter how pervasive and powerful, can come to a crashing end. In this light, it is also clear that a process of smoothing and elimination of inconvenient narratives does not secure the type of trust and adherence that could be achieved without the use of force or coercion. It should further be pointed out that, in the democratic sense of the word, trust is typically associated with uninhibited flows of information and freedom of expression of different opinions. Such trust emerges as a form of interaction that is largely incompatible with the production of stylized meta-narratives, such as the civilizational superiority of Europe over the coloured barbarians—or the peaceful and prosperous Silk Road. Similarly, the process of smoothing precludes the opportunity for A and B to converge on common understandings of a shared past and mutually shared values. This is because smoothing imposes a particular narrative and presents a viewpoint that is not opened for further consideration (a conceptualization very much in line to Chinese IR scholars’ theorizations, particularly in this case Yan Xuetong’s (2013) moral realism).

This latest notion of smoothing as a strategic imposition could also be linked to forms of cultural governance whereby a government uses symbolic resources as a means of validating and maintaining political authority. As Perry (2017) meticulously illustrates, a selective combination of historical, nationalist, and cultural tropes has allowed the Chinese Communist Party to successfully develop and adapt a ‘cultural-cum-nationalist propaganda’ that legitimizes the party’s right to rule.
The intensive and inventive cultural patronage to suit and shape public sentiment is arguably very much akin to the selective and synthesized speeches, narratives, and representations that Winter identifies as part of the emerging Silk Road connectivity discourse. The question, then, is whether in such a context geocultural power can itself be understood as a mechanism of cultural governance – one that operates both within and beyond the confines of domestic politics.

As I’ve tried to suggest here, Tim Winter’s book stimulates a most welcome and necessary conversation about power, politics, and the role of history and culture in diplomacy and international affairs. Geocultural Power makes a much-needed contribution to interdisciplinary analysis of global dynamics and to holistic understandings of the construction of new world orders.

5. Flights of connectivity, grounded

5.1. Tim Oakes

In 1999, Gerald Segal published an essay in Foreign Affairs that impertinently asked: Does China matter? His answer was, basically, not much. China, he argued, was overrated as a market, as a power, and as a source of ideas: ‘At best, China is a second-rank middle power that has mastered the art of diplomatic theater; it has us willingly suspending our disbelief in its strength. In fact, China is better understood as a theoretical power – a country that has promised to deliver for much of the last 150 years but has consistently disappointed’ (Segal, 1999, 24).

However much we may want to dispute Segal’s provocative and polemical claim, it bears consideration at a time when Beijing’s massive investments in new infrastructures of connectivity across Eurasia promise a Chinese Dream for us all. And while the global impact of Beijing’s newfound international assertiveness is by now beyond dispute, Segal’s ‘disappointment’ has been expressed both by scholars who have unfavorably compared Beijing’s rhetorical building of a new Silk Road with actual conditions on the ground, and by people throughout Eurasia who have encountered the fitful reality of the ‘Belt and Road’.

Tim Winter’s book Geocultural Power offers a thorough updating of and rejoinder to Segal’s missive. I say ‘updating’ here because Winter’s book helps us see the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as exactly the kind of geocultural power that Segal claimed China had mastered.

Whether this is intentional on Winter’s part, however, remains an open question (more about that below). And I say ‘rejoinder’ because Winter clearly would say that BRI does matter very much. BRI matters, according to Winter, because it has become a vehicle by which China has taken advantage of a shift in the world’s dominant geocultural scenarios. That shift draws our attention away from Eurocentric narratives of rooted, bounded and clashing civilizations and toward Eurasia (as well as the Indian Ocean and South China Sea) as a space of fluidity and connectivity. Geocultural power, Winter argues, ‘comes from being the author of world history and also from being the architect of the bridge between East and West’ (Winter 2019: 17). That sounds like China matters.

Winter is more interested in documenting these shifts in relatively high-level political pronouncements and in broad narratives of international relations than he is in delving into the concept of geocultural power itself. But the book is in many ways written as an extended discussion of, and engagement with, Ulf Hannerz’s (2009) essay on ‘geocultural scenarios’. Like Hannerz did in his essay, Geocultural Power takes the bird’s-eye or macro-view of cultural processes across territorial space. The geocultural mostly identifies a large-scale version of what human geographers might call the geographical imagination. Geocultural scenarios, then, are spatial narratives of ‘culture’ as it relates to territory and to connectivity. These narratives, for Hannerz, have been propagated by ‘Big Idea’ writers—including Niall Ferguson, Thomas Friedman, Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, Robert Kagan, Paul Kennedy and Antonio Negri, among others—whose works are too numerous to list here. Winter offers Geocultural Power as a candidate for joining this list.

It would be more accurate to say, however, that the geocultural scenarios here are Xi Jinping’s speech writers along with numerous other Chinese officials and academics – not Tim Winter. I don’t mean this point to sound dismissive. For all its illuminations of the ways cultures get wrapped up in geopolitical imaginations, Hannerz’s essay largely ignored producers of geocultural knowledge outside of the North Atlantic metropole. Winter wants to extend Hannerz’s scenarios into the part of the world that is now dominant in the production of new geopolitical imaginations. While I applaud the impulse to undermine Eurocentricism wherever it may be lurking, I’m not entirely convinced that Winter has made his case that China, by harnessing through ‘heritage diplomacy’ the imaginative power of the Silk Roads, has become the dominant geocultural power in the world today. I say this while acknowledging the tremendous scope and ambition of Winter’s book.

Winter seems too eager to join the ranks of scholars, journalists, pundits, officials, and politicians who have propped up the ‘diplomatic theatre’ that is the Belt and Road despite its lack of coherence as policy and its irrelevance to actual practices of infrastructure construction on the ground. The Belt and Road rhetorically celebrates the idea that connectivity reduces suspicion, though we have plenty of evidence throughout Eurasia of how it has mostly increased suspicion of China and its geopolitical intentions. While Xi’s speeches, liberally quoted throughout the book, stress how the dividend of open borders is prosperity and harmony, these borders in practice are not so open, nor has there been that much prosperity and harmony to go around. China’s promise of connectivity is a promise of civilizational revival, not just economic stimulus. But actual practices on the ground have fundamentally undermined and contradicted these promises of cultural or civilizational revival and diplomatic celebrations of heritage.

Probably the most obvious place where this is true is Xinjiang. There, the Chinese Dream of connectivity is deliberately withheld from entire cultural groups for explicitly cultural reasons. The immobilization and internment of over a million Uyghurs reveals the rhetoric of connectivity to be a cynical promise of freedom for only some, and of profits for many others, as cheap incarcerated labor is offered up to global production and supply chains. Winter acknowledges the thorn that Xinjiang represents in the side of China’s dreams of harmonious and prosperous connectivity. But he tends to view the issue in terms of an unanticipated politics of cultural heritage, rather than an intentional politics of cultural genocide that reveals the hollowness and cynicism lying within China’s ‘win-win’ rhetoric of beneficent connectivity.

Why is Winter not more willing to dismantle this rhetorical construction of BRI as a promise of connectivity and prosperity for some and immobilization and poverty for many others? He acknowledges that Xinjiang (along with Tibet and Yunnan) will remain a place where the ‘smoothing’ promise of connectivity will continue to encounter friction, and that there are ‘important questions concerning how the paraphernalia of cultural heritage – museums, tourist sites, urban conservation projects – will come to act as technologies of surveillance or cultural repression’ (Winter 2019: 119). He asks if the geocultural scenarios that China now commands will bring Beijing to recognize Xinjiang as the ‘contact zone’ of religions, cultures, and civilizations that it has been for centuries. But these questions are left unaddressed and unanswered in a book that would seemingly want to focus on them as the conflicted heart of China’s claims of geocultural power.

6. Historical analogues: Zheng He and BRI

6.1. Jonathan Rigg

Tim Winter’s Geocultural Power asks questions of history: What can history do for the present? And what does the present do for history? It poses these questions in relation to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), interpreted through the historical lens of the Silk Road(s) and the
15th century voyages of Zheng He (Cheng Ho). The historical, geographical and disciplinary reach of the book is ambitious. It traces the historical antecedents of BRI, tracks those across geographical space, and interrogates the Silk Road as a leitmotif for China’s contemporary political ambitions.

Geocultural Power is based on an incongruity, although I do not think that Winter puts it quite like this. The Silk Road is history made soft and smooth across the passage of time. The Silk Road discourse is of diplomatic missions and peaceful engagement, of trade and exchange, not of war and profiteering. (This is, of course, a distinctly selective reading of history, but there is not much to be gained from arguing that things were not like this.) Underpinning the diplomatic, trade and exchange discourse and imperatives of BRI, however, is hard infrastructure – and hard currency. Unable to use time to temper and smooth the edges of BRI, the Chinese state uses its history of the Silk Road(s) to muffle and shield the geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations that make BRI worthwhile from Beijing’s point of view.

History, in this way, is not an innocent bystander or a contextual backdrop. It is central to the case and the cause, and it is this which Winter so effectively sets out in his book. A core theme of the book, as he puts it, ‘is understanding the political and economic forces that shape how the “history” of the Silk Roads comes to be revived’ (Winter 2019: 33). And, to this end, the author wants to understand how ‘culture’ manifested through performances, sites and objects is being mobilized in the interests of BRI, and therefore in China’s interests. This mobilization has the intentional effect of obfuscating and distracting attention from China’s military presence and build-up in the South China Sea, and from the repression of Muslims in Xinjiang (Zheng He, it should be noted, was a Muslim).

The trick of imaginative memory that Beijing wishes to perform is to make us think that BRI is a contemporary manifestation of the historical Silk Road. Winter cites a succession of China’s ambassadors and policy makers who sugarcoat BRI through reference to the Silk Road. He quotes, for example, Sun Weidong, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, in a speech to the National Defence University in Islamabad in 2013: ‘The Chinese Dream is a dream of peace. … China will never seize development through colonization and plundering. … Zheng He led the biggest fleets to South Asia for trade, which stands in sharp contrast to [the] colonization and plundering of the West’ (Winter 2019: 89). Such language draws a clear distinction between China’s Silk Road and BRI, on the one hand, and prior European engagements with Asia, on the other. The sharp edges of China’s expansion are made smooth by reference to a part-imagined history of benign intent.

As alluded to above, the figure of Admiral Zheng He—a seafarer who is made to travel even farther today than he did six centuries ago—is central to this effort. It is not only China who celebrates the man and his feats, but countries across Southeast Asia, as Winter explains. Zheng He’s fleets were large, and China under the Ming Dynasty was a great state, but his enterprise was a peaceful one. Now, 600 years later, the figure of Zheng He is used to assuage the concerns of those countries and people touched by BRI, conveying that while China may be (increasingly) powerful and prosperous, it remains peaceful and trustworthy in its endeavors. History becomes the means to reassure countries and their people touched by BRI, and therefore in China’s interests. This mobilization has the intentional effect of obfuscating and distracting attention from China’s military presence and build-up in the South China Sea, and from the repression of Muslims in Xinjiang (Zheng He, it should be noted, was a Muslim).

The book, evidently, is about geocultural power, and Winter writes that ‘The book asks whether the ancient ways the Silk Road now serves as a platform for China to exercise its geocultural advantage’, and that this history has ‘become the apparatus that orders people and places’ (Winter 2019: 17). Winter has not set out to write a backward-looking imperial history, but rather a forward-looking history of China’s unfolding imperiousness. Arase (2015: 28), whom Winter cites, thus writes that Beijing ‘will use its power to restructure the world around it’.

The trouble and the challenge for China (Winter 2019, pp. 131–132) is that the triptych of trade-peace-friendship that is said to have characterized the expeditions of Zheng He and the Silk Road more widely, and which has become such a valuable analogue for BRI, can quickly be undermined by events and experiences. As Winter details, whether it is the smuggling of cultural artefacts that BRI enables, the economic dependencies it ensures, the environmental destruction it engenders or, even the militarization that it overlooks, “well-crafted, stylized pasts” (Winter 2019: 182) have their limits. As Winter notes, “Asian geopolitics is unlikely to run smoothly any time soon” (Winter 2019: 191).

I have seen this friction between the analogue of the (smooth) Silk Road and the (angular) BRI first hand in Laos, where we have been working in a rural settlement not far from the high-speed railway linking Kunming in China with Bangkok, and onward to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore (Fig. 1). Villagers at the sharp end of BRI see little of value in the railway line. Some work came their way, but it was low-skilled and short-term. Farmland was requisitioned in the wider interests of the project, and subsistence security compromised. The nai baan (village head) struggled to imagine how such a project could bring benefits to his community. But he also recognized that nothing could halt the project or shape it to the needs of the village. Like Zheng He viewed across his historical time, BRI viewed from afar brings peace and prosperity. Up close and personal the story takes on another hue, and the lazy analogue fragments.

7. Beyond sanctioned language and official narratives

7.1. Alessandro Rippa

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted significant attention and has been scrutinized through a variety of analytical lenses. Yet while the strategic, geopolitical, and socio-environmental aspects of China’s ‘project of the century’ have received wide attention, less has been said about how the initiative substantively engages with cultural politics and catalyzes a particular understanding of history to promote Beijing’s agenda. Winter’s book represents a welcome addition to this discussion with its focus on the role of heritage diplomacy in BRI activities, showing how historical narratives are bundled up with geopolitical and economic ambitions in a multifaceted quest to ‘revive’ once dormant Silk Roads.

The book pairs historical analyses of particular Silk Road narratives with a critical assessment of how such narratives are actively—and selectively—mobilized to secure strategic gains today. In so doing, it navigates a difficult path: taking Chinese official narratives seriously for the kind of political work that they achieve, while also drawing attention to their historical fallacies and crucial points of friction in their practical implementations. It is significant, then, that the book opens with a long quotation of Xi Jinping (Winter 2019, pp. 1–4). While bringing to the fore some of the key terms and notions that Winter addresses in his analysis, Xi’s words also set the tone for a book in which much space is given to a discussion of official BRI narratives without always pairing these with critical analyses of how they take concrete shape. In what follows, I will delve into some of the issues that this approach generates. These are not meant to serve as overarching critiques, but rather as points of reflection and further dialogue on a set of processes that will—and I echo Winter here—re-shape Asia and the world in the decades to come.

The third chapter, ‘A Politics of Routes’, is based largely on an analysis of speeches made by Chinese state officials and diplomats, where it aims at [exploring] the more subtle, but perhaps far more powerful, metaphors and ideas that have come to be embedded in the appropriation of a Silk Road history and heritage (2019: 85). Moving from the example of Chinese investments in Greece, Winter shows how economic cooperation has ‘energized’ a shared enthusiasm for discovering cultural and even metaphysical affinities rooted in deep histories, and excavating the spiritual and material evidence of a rich exchange between civilizations (2019: 84). Xi’s speeches in Kazakhstan
and Indonesia are subsequently given ample space, alongside comments from diplomats such as Sun Weidong—who is quoted as saying that ‘throughout history, China has sought peaceful relations with other countries’ (Winter 2019: 89). However, Winter leaves this old trope of CCP diplomacy largely un-addressed, as he does with other references to China’s ‘policies of non-interference’ that appear throughout the book. The PRC’s long history of actual interference in the internal affairs of its neighbours (from Myanmar to Vietnam and North Korea) is rather given a pass, and comments such as Sun Weidong’s are taken as near face-value. If Winter does bring critique to these discourses, it is done in far too sublime and non-committal a fashion.

Chapter Four focuses for the most part on sea corridors. Winter notably points out how China’s heritage of diplomacy significantly predates the launch of BRI. He also notes, however, that ‘the Maritime Silk Road of the twenty-first century takes this to a new level introducing new players and a new narrative for injecting funds into archaeology, conservation, museums, and heritage tourism attractions’ (Winter 2019: 119). While this is undoubtedly true, what is missing is a critical analysis of specifically why BRI narratives are able to mobilize such resources of knowledge production. Too much credit here is given to the ‘powerful’ and ‘flexible’—and Winter is certainly correct in calling it such—tropes of the Silk Road, and far too little to the ways in which the Chinese political system works: by replicating and making strategic use of a particular vocabulary, not because it is appropriate or effective, but because it is sanctioned by the leadership.

Winter (2019: 101) recognizes that BRI and its main corridors are, largely, ‘an exercise in tidying up’ and that China’s heritage diplomacy is embedded in processes of ‘punitive cultural politics’ (p. 132) of which today’s situation in Xinjiang is a key example (noted in Chapter Four). But such assessments are unfortunately not always paired with a critical investigation of the on-the-ground realities that the discrepancies between official discourse and practices lead to. It is unsurprising, then, that Winter concludes by counterpoising heritage diplomacy as a process of smoothing to Anna Tsing’s notion of friction as ‘a metaphor for understanding the global connection of today’ (p. 190). Yet while official narratives certainly make attempts at ‘smoothing’ particular connections, this does not say much about the actual circumstances in which such rhetorical exercises are put into practice. Tsing’s friction and Winter’s smoothing, then, operate on two very different, and largely incommensurable, levels. Tsing is interested in the ‘heterogeneous and unequal encounters’ (2005: 5, emphasis mine) between global universals and the specificities of particular localities. Winter, on the other hand, has chosen as his analysis the level of representation: of how certain narratives about Silk Roads’ pasts and presents are produced, by whom, and for what purposes.

This largely unaddressed tension between official narratives and realities on the ground also puts into question one of Winter’s main arguments about the cultural consequences of BRI. While Winter’s claim that pre-15th century intra-Asian history has thus far received relatively little attention is well taken, there are many reasons to doubt that BRI will help shed light on some of its lesser researched aspects. In fact, as Rezakhani (2010) has argued, the ‘grand narrative’ of the Silk Road has served mostly to ‘obscure important details’ of regional history—specificities too often overlooked in order to appraise such an artificial notion. It seems, in fact, that China’s BRIs mirroring this very process by funding exhibitions on trans-regional connections across the planet, and by framing the active destruction of Uyghur culture in the language of heritage. Winter addresses the case of Xinjiang in Chapter Four and elaborates on the connection between Uyghur cultural dispossession and the development of ‘Silk Road World Heritage corridors’. However, his conclusion—that ‘Silk Road pasts may well provide new politically productive connections and opportunities for various social groups, including those living in Xinjiang’ (p.132)—remains largely at odds with a situation in which claims of inclusiveness, people-to-people connections, and win-win cooperation are made alongside massive destruction of cultural heritage (cemeteries, mosques, etc.) and the suppression of any expression of non-Han cultures in the region.

To conclude, my critique lies perhaps is a different disciplinary approach to a topic of such urgent relevance. It should not be read, however, as an overall critique of the arguments that Winter develops in Geocultural Power. What Winter covers in this book is, in large parts, uncharted territory. Following in the footsteps of the legendary Silk Road travelers recounted in the volume, he does so in a nuanced, yet accessible manner. Hence, the book is a crucial read for understanding the breadth and complexity of China’s global aspirations and what it could mean for the rest world.
8. Topology of heritage and history

8.1. June Wang

The field of critical heritage studies has explored the way “heritage” has become a sphere of activity that requires state intervention through policy and legislation. This insight opens new lines of inquiry into the politics of heritage conservation. The idea of heritage was born in post-Napoleonic Europe, when a Westphalian understanding of modern state was solidifying; heritage has therefore been commonly treated as a resource connected to the making of the national state (Ashworth, Graham, & Tunbridge, 2015). Scholarship on the geopolitics of heritage has likewise concentrated on inter-state conflicts and disputes over the right to possess and mobilize territorial resources (Harrison, 2009).

Geocultural Power is an attempt to rethink the use of heritage through transnational cultural routes, traveling humans and non-human things, and selected historical openings. Through the lens of heritage diplomacy, the book traces the entanglement of two Silk Roads—one from the past and the other of the present. This book highlights how particular historical moments and artefacts have become instrumental in enacting contemporary infrastructural projects that connect cities and countries through transnational cooperation and trade. Winter argues that both heritage and history are at the core of China’s strategies of constructing and exercising geocultural power to establish a new order regionally and globally. Winter also calls for an expansive reading of diplomacy that moves beyond government ministries and politicians. His conceptualization of heritage diplomacy encompasses a variety of actors who operate across multiple territories, including philanthropic agencies, cultural and archaeological authorities, scholars, travellers, traders and smugglers. These state and non-state actors constantly turn heritage into a dynamic process that allows them to “represent themselves and their interests to one another” in international contexts (Murray et al., 2011: 709). Winter refuses a singular reading of heritage as property or as a territorial resource that serves its owner exclusively; instead, he shifts attention to routes and nodes, and to itinerancy and encounters, across national boundaries. The focus on routes requires an epistemological shift from the conventional territorial state to concepts of networks and historical topographies.

Winter’s account of the Silk Roads story in its past and present versions exemplifies the complexity of an assemblage in its entirety and its constitutive components (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The Silk Roads have been the object of multiple, distinctive archaeological projects since the nineteenth century, including those connected to imperial rivalries in Central Asia—for instance, Russia’s expansion through inland railways, the development of Britain’s naval resources in the Indian Ocean, and Japan’s diplomatic missions to the Ottoman Empire. The geographical concept of the Silk Road was coined and popularized in the first wave of archaeological projects undertaken by Western scholars, with financial support from Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Later efforts of discovering, exhibiting, and memorializing the history of the Silk Roads were carried out by Japan, in alliance, for example, with Italy, Iraq, the Soviet Union, and Syria. Today, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for cultural and commercial infrastructures has been undertaken by China, in alliance with Greece, Pakistan, Iran, Kenya, Indonesia, among others. The book thus traces the genealogy of the Silk Roads to a variety of actors—both rivals and allies—providing a subtle, dynamic and complex account rich in variegation and contingency.

Conventional approaches to cultural diplomacy examine soft power as the export of domestic social and cultural goods; this, as cautioned by Winter, still assumes a boundary-oriented reading of sovereignty. Winter argues that the deployment of geocultural power sheds new light on how one official narrative, when constructed in particular ways, can be used to deal with international relations and domestic governance. To demonstrate his argument, Winter discusses the new spatiality of cultural diplomacy—namely, “corridor diplomacy”, relating to the mobility of people and culture, and “objects of itinerancy”, relating to the mobility of things—in Chapters Four and Five. For instance, when Beijing constructs the history of the Silk Roads as one of cultural exchange that has nurtured geopolitical cooperation among civilisations in Asia, it imposes a moral requirement for peaceful cooperation on all Central Asian countries and regions, Xinjiang included, so that the renaissance of the Silk Roads may be realized.

China has deployed the celebration of Zheng He’s voyage both in high-profile ways—including the Huagang Reef 1 project, meant to soothe tensions between China and Vietnam—and also in low-key forms of subject-making—for instance, the use of the young Kenyan woman, Mwamaka Sharifu, as an “informal ambassador” between Kenya and China (Winter 2019: 123). Winter’s book offers a network-oriented reading of sovereignty through the two chapters on the mobility of people, and culture and things. He unravels how geoculture is reconfigured topologically by transcending borders, scales, and historical openings.

This book’s interrogation of heritage diplomacy, however, does not delve into how the actual diplomatic negotiations occur or how inter-state agreements or transnational conventions might be institutionalized. This is a missed opportunity. China’s quest to revive the Silk Roads through heritage represents an ideological shift towards connectivity-oriented heritage and transborder governance—a shift that strategically plays on the UNESCO World Heritage Committee’s (UNESCO-WHC) recognition of disparate sites linked historically by the mobility of people, things and ideas (Wang, 2019). China’s active participation in rule-making about heritage in and beyond UNESCO has been duly noted (Meskell et al., 2014), but more work needs to be done on the ways international and local experts compare, categorize and reassemble sites/places, and how, in doing so, they can legitimize new political and territorial arrangements.

This leads to the issue of Winter’s use of silk, and especially the smooth touch of silk, as a metaphor for China’s diplomatic exercises on projects. Given the book’s primary focus on unpacking how political actors are weaving historical-cultural imaginaries into a new regional order, analysis of the actual implementation of these imaginaries, and the resulting frictions, is limited. For instance, most of China’s corridor projects (except the China-Pakistan and China-Indochina Peninsula Corridors) have failed to make substantial progress in practice. The creation of a new regional order, in other words, has not been a smooth-as-silk process. These critiques aside, Geocultural Power, by revealing the representational construction of the Silk Roads, ushers in a new era of research on heritage diplomacy.

9. Geocultural dialogues: A response

9.1. Tim Winter

I must begin by thanking the seven critics, as well as Shaun Lin and Yang Yang, for their time and generous engagement with the book. It is a real privilege to be the recipient of such carefully constructed critiques, each of which highlights fascinating and important questions. In reading the responses together I was struck by the diversity of themes and questions addressed. The topics and different geographical contexts I consider in the book are undoubtedly complex and require further examination. There are many more books to be written on the Silk Road/Belt and Road nexus, as a number of the critics highlighted, and I intentionally scoped out Geocultural Power in ways that hopefully open up questions and lines of enquiry for others to explore. The premise of the book was to analytically map out connections and patterns occurring at the regional, even continental scale, and to join dots between locations and events that fold together history, culture, and religion with national and international politics. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a project in the making—a fragmented, incomplete endeavor. In that respect I agree with a number of the “what about” and “what are the implications of” questions raised across the seven reviews. A number of
reviewers raised the issue of “local” responses to BRI, and I agree these are extremely important questions that will help us better understand the social and cultural points of resistance to regional architectures of connectivity in Asia and Africa today. For sure, we are yet to see the full consequences of the geocultural politics of BRI play out. For this reason, I did not offer definitive conclusions regarding the Silk Road as a form of cultural governance/violence in Xinjiang, as suggested by Oakes and Rippa. I leave that to others who, over time, will be better placed than I to do so. Similarly, my reluctance to delineate the effectiveness or not of individual Silk Road initiatives, as noted by Kanetti and Rippa, stems from a desire to understand power at a different spatial register. As a number of the reviewers noted, I prioritized state actors in large part because this is where so much of the Silk Road diplomacy is being formulated and funded. As I tried to emphasize, universities and cultural sector institutions—public and private—have also responded to the overtures of governments and their ambitions for international connectivity.

I chose the term “geocultural” to point towards scale, rivalry, and the ways in which fragmented, disconnected strategies somehow find coherence in a grand narrative. Interestingly, it is a scale of analysis that seems to generate contrasting responses among the critics. Rigg seems comfortable with the analytical work it can do, whereas Oakes more skeptically suggests it “props up” the “diplomatic theatre” of BRI. From this perspective the latter questions my reluctance to “dismantle” the rhetoric of BRI connectivity. Oakes emphasizes Xinjiang to substantiate this point, but my argument in the book primarily rests on the evidence of developments outside China. As noted elsewhere in the reviews, the explanation of heritage diplomacy and its infrastructure and trade entanglements is intended to signal that these are far more than merely rhetorical.

Frost correctly notes that reading BRI through simplistic parallels with the age of European empire is of limited benefit. I agree, but in introducing the term geocultural to the analysis of BRI, my hope is that ideas about imperial historiography and about culture as a form of governmentality, both of which are pivotal to postcolonial studies, will permeate today’s debates about “rising” powers. Since finishing the book I am seeing this become an increasingly complex space, with India, Turkey, Iran and Russia among those mobilizing expansionist histories to gain influence across their respective regions. I strongly suspect the coming years will be a period shaped, in part, by geocultural competition and rivalry. Here, then, I return to the question of how the geocultural is conceptualized, an issue that a number of the critics suggested remains somewhat ambiguous in the book. Alif, Frost and Rigg note that I build an argument around the Silk Road as the key geocultural form, analyzing the political work it does in BRI, as well as the ways it overlays with other geocultures, such as Chinese civilization. I agree there is much more to say about geocultural theory, a task I am now undertaking as a book project.

But in the space here, I seek to offer some additional clarity by returning to Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1993) description of “development” as one of the defining geocultures of the twentieth century. In labelling it as geoculture, he means “the historical construction of a cultural pressure for all states to pursue a program of ‘modernization’ or ‘development’” (ibid., p. 217). Several decades would pass before scholars were able to fully comprehend the deep implications of a development geoculture, and the norms, values and ideologies it advanced around the world. In the same way, I would say in the Silk Road/Belt and Road nexus lies a cultural pressure for states to build forms of connectivity, and it may well take a similar time frame to comprehend the deeper consequences this holds. Its mana of connectivity straddles multiple sectors in ways that make distinctions between soft and hard power frequently meaningless. People-to-people (P2P) connectivity has long been a central pillar of Beijing’s ambitions for BRI, one that has too often gone unnoticed in Western academia. COVID-19 has shown us that stock markets, energy markets, the global logistics industry, education markets, and so forth, all thoroughly depend on P2P ties. We are now seeing the Health Silk Road enter this space. I anticipate that as we transition into a post-COVID world, people-to-people connectivities, including those oriented around public health, will play an increasingly important role in BRI’s architecture.

The geoculture of connectivity that China is attempting to build through the Silk Road/Belt and Road nexus can be juxtaposed with Lemberg’s (2019) and Sanchez-Sibony’s (2014) arguments regarding the emergence of US international power in the twentieth century and the gradual shaping of a world order through the dissemination of certain norms and values. Hamner (2016) points to democracy as a geocultural scenario that formed part of the arsenal of power for the United States and its allies. Such arguments connect with Rippa’s observations here that there is a long history of interference in internal affairs by China, and with Wang’s comments regarding the issue of sovereignty “and the spatiality of governance”. This indeed could have been recognized more explicitly in the book. As Wang notes, cross-border Silk Road collaborations involve the folding together of experts and institutions to create new forms of knowledge and power. Some completing the text, I have witnessed this in Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Central Asia and elsewhere. And whilst I am unable to detail such examples here, they do exemplify an assertion of the book that Rippa finds problematic concerning the Belt and Road’s potential for rearticulating the historical significance of Eurasia’s cities.

Kanetti, Frost and Rippa discussed how the so-called revival of the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century opens up new spaces for the recreating and rewriting of history. Frost discusses this in terms of cosmopolitan possibilities, and all three correctly warn of the dangers of Sino-centric histories in the making. BRI’s political geographies have challenged academics and analysts to think at different spatial scales and to reconsider how the relations between space and power are constituted. The political geographies of BRI combine land and sea, continents and corridors, in a seemingly integrated web of connectivity. By looking across borders and regions, much of the academic and think-tank analysis of BRI has embraced transnational epistemologies and methodologies. An abundance of books and articles have shown us the various ways BRI is trans-spatial, whereby the rearranging and reassembling of space and geography suggests the need for new conceptual categories, and perhaps, in the long-run, for a new conceptual architecture, of political geography. But we also need to read BRI in trans-temporal terms. Of course, there has been extensive debate concerning how we should “place” BRI in the historical shifts of the twenty-first century. Does it really foreshadow the rise of Asia, a new global superpower, and a declining West? But what I have endeavored to show in the book is that the co-opting of the Silk Road narrative demands a critical reading of how time is being rearranged and recategorized, and why this is important. Again I agree, future ethnographic studies will hopefully tell us much about the ‘on the ground’ complexities these Silk Road developments will inevitably create.

Let me elaborate the issue of time and re-ordering of the past further. Gulli and Armitage (2014, p. 20) point to the importance of long-term visions of the past that from Machiavelli onwards have constructed over the centuries to make sense of their own presents, and, crucially here, how such representations of history have been “bound up with policy making and public conversations about the future”. Halford Mackinder’s notion of the Heartland and Alfred Thayer Mahan’s arguments concerning seapower were enduringly influential for military and governmental policy in the twentieth century. Their accounts of continental geopolitics and power were particularly informed by a deep history. For Gulli and Armitage, increased specialization in the field of history has created a void filled by economists who lack the training to adequately interpret contemporary events through the lens of deep histories. It is a debate that bears upon how we interpret the significance of the Silk Road/Belt and Road nexus. Central to my argument in the book is the identification of the Silk Road as a reconstructed past—one that is invented in the late nineteenth century and travels across a multitude of contexts reaching global fame at the end of the Cold War. I
show that the Silk Road emerges as a geocultural imaginary of pre-modern globalization based on romanticized ideas of harmonious exchange, trade and dialogue across regions, peoples and cultures.

Within the burgeoning field of BRI studies, centuries of history spanning regions and continents are being reduced to overly simplistic, even clichéd, ideas about trade and exchange. The Silk Road as a geocultural imaginary has deeply penetrated BRI studies in the academy and in commentaries that seek to influence those in office. To take one problematic example, in 2018 Robert Kaplan proclaimed Eurasia was entering an era of declining state power, fading empires, receding borders, and the diminishing relevance of the Westphalian model of competing states. In the coming decades, Kaplan (2018) argued, the political map of the region will look more like “medieval times”, and that we are witnessing the “return of Marco Polo’s world”. He cites Laurence Bergreen’s (ibid., 2018, p. 11) description of Polo’s travels across a “complex, tumultuous, and menacing, but nonetheless porous” Eurasia as the precise lens through which we should interpret the region’s geopolitical future. The essay was first written for the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment before being republished in book form two years later. In this account Marco Polo stands in for the world of the Silk Road, which through BRI “provides as good an outline as any for defining the geopolitics of Eurasia in the coming era” (ibid, p.11). Picking up Beijing’s rhetoric of “reviving” the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century, he compels his readers to pay attention to the historical parallels now playing out. In an account where Marco Polo is used as a metonym for a region of the world and a particular moment in history, we might ask whether he is using the Silk Road as metaphor or as a point of empirical comparison. In stating “the current Chinese regime’s proposed land-and-maritime Silk Road duplicates exactly the one Marco Polo traveled, there is no coincidence”, it appears as though history is more than just a resource for building analogies (ibid., p. 11).

His thesis is that the twenty-first century shares distinct characteristics with the thirteenth. But BRI does not duplicate exactly the route taken by Marco Polo. Rather, the overland and maritime Silk Roads are invoked by the Chinese government to signal themes such as long-distance connectivity, exchange, win-win cooperation and dialogue. His contention that borders are receding to the extent that Asia mirrors “medieval times” is misleading to say the least. Evocative as it may be, an analysis tabled to the US government stacks one metaphor for understanding the past (Marco Polo) upon another (the Silk Road) which I have shown in Geocultural Power now circulates as a highly stylized, romanticized representation of Eurasia’s history. Kaplan’s account of Marco Polo’s world provides an example of how the Silk Road has become both analogy and metaphor and—in such combinations potentially highly misleading for those involved in crafting foreign policy strategies and for those analysts seeking to interpret the geopolitical implications they might hold. Indeed, the arguments made by Medhurst et al. (1997) concerning the use of metaphors by analysts during the Cold War should be a cautionary reminder of what is at stake in the depiction of Silk Road histories. As they noted, metaphors did not merely reflect the realities of the period, but played a formative role in constructing them.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest in this submitted manuscript to Political Geography.

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