much of this scholarship has tended to be geopolitical, circling around questions of how a rising China will affect global political, economic, and indeed, military power. But the question Rippa asks—how is the local being transformed?—is at least as interesting and, I suspect, where the second wave of BRI scholarship will focus.

That Rippa’s fieldwork coincided with the rise of an increasingly assertive and self-assured China makes the book all the more important. By way of critique, I found Rippa particularly generous—perhaps even overly so—in acknowledging his debts to scholarship. The reader will find that Rippa frequently makes references, not in the footnotes but in the body of the text itself, to scholarship that may not be about China or its borderlands. How much these frequent—if short—references to scholarship in anthropology or critical geography add to Rippa’s already sophisticated analyses is not always clear to me. Occasionally, I found these breaking the narrative flow, as, I must admit, I found the parenthetical citations distracting in a book.

These are minor points. Borderlands Infrastructures deserves wide readership from scholars and advanced students interested in China’s border regions, the Belt and Road Initiative, or China’s role in Asia. Beyond China and Asia, Borderlands Infrastructures will also be of interest to scholars of critical border/infrastructure studies, both emerging fields in the social sciences.

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The launch of the Belt and Road (yidai lilu, 一带一路) Initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013 has led to an eruption of Silk Road publications around the world. Most of these focus on the economic and geostrategic implications, but other writings describe the historical background to the Belt (the overland routes) and the Road (the maritime routes). These point out, often uncritically, how these routes fostered the earlier Eurasian trade in silk, ceramics, aromatics, and forest products, as well as the central role of ancient China in this trade. Geocultural Power is different. Tim Winter sets out to examine the twenty-first-century Silk Roads within a framework of what he calls “heritage diplomacy.”

“Heritage diplomacy,” Winter explains, “seeks to understand how cultural pasts and material culture become the subject of exchanges, collaborations, and forms of cooperation with wider configurations of international relations, trade, and
geopolitics” (22). This helps him explain the ways in which culture, especially history and heritage, is employed for “political ends” (5) in the discourse about the Belt and Road to “soften and alter the nature of China’s engagement” (17) with foreign countries. The use of the past as a “mechanism of great power diplomacy” (17), according to Winter, defines the term “geocultural power” used as the book’s title.

Geocultural Power is divided into seven elegantly written chapters. The first, “From Camels and Sails to Highways and Refineries,” provides a brief overview of the Belt and Road Initiative, explains its “dream” of creating an integrated Eurasia through economic collaboration, outlines the concept of “heritage diplomacy,” and summarizes the book’s main arguments and sections. The next chapter provides a “biography” of the Silk Road through the prism of the “geocultural imaginary of the modern era” (37). In addition to pointing out the origins of the term “Silk Road,” the chapter also explores the role of the British, Russian, and Japanese empires in the exploration of Central Asia. The postimperial phase, highlighted by UNESCO’s “East-West Major Project” in the 1950s and the decade-long “Silk Roads” project from 1988 to 1997, is also examined in the context of the Cold War, film production, and curating of exhibitions. The objective of narrating this biography of the Silk Road, Winter notes, is to “show how the concept has become entangled with, and arises from, processes of international diplomacy, geopolitics and imperial ambition, and particular forms of state cultural governance” (38).

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the contemporary use of the Silk Road metaphor by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). While chapter 3, “Politics of Routes,” surveys how the PRC’s leaders, such as Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping, have employed this metaphor in international relations, chapter 4, “Corridor Diplomacy,” examines how the PRC has used the cultural sector to advance its “heritage diplomacy” initiatives. Chapter 4 showcases the ways in which the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) admiral Zheng He 郑和 (1371–1433) and his expeditions across the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century are used to promote this heritage diplomacy by “introducing new players and a new narrative for injecting funds into archaeology, conservation, museums, and heritage tourism attractions” (119).

The next two chapters detail some of the main historical elements of the “Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road” narrative and its contemporary use as part of heritage diplomacy. Chapter 5, “Objects of Itinerancy,” applies the “commodity-chain” concept to highlight “how certain objects and their itinerant histories afford new forms of international relations and diplomacy today” (135). It focuses on the trade in Chinese porcelain and the shipwrecks in the South China Sea that provide archaeological evidence, the exhibiting of maritime objects, and the trafficking of antiquities. “Historical Opening,” the next chapter, reviews precolonial Indian Ocean interactions and their conceptualization by earlier scholars and the contemporary reconstruction of Zheng He’s expeditions.
The final chapter, “Geocultural Power,” summarizes the main arguments of the book. The emphasis on culture, the “expediency of well-crafted, stylized pasts” (184), the “geocultural form” of the Silk Road, and the potential of the Belt and Road Initiative as a “transformative” force, especially in the arena of knowledge production, are underscored in the chapter. Also stressed is Winter’s framework of “heritage diplomacy,” which, he contends, “captures the asymmetries, both cultural and political, which inhabit the forms of international co-operation created by a Silk Road strategic narrative” (188–89). He argues that the concept of heritage diplomacy contrasts with Anna Tsing’s use of “friction” as a metaphor for understanding contemporary global connections. “In heritage diplomacy of the Silk Road,” he concludes, “smoothness is aggregated” (190).

*Geocultural Power* is essential reading for those interested in the Belt and Road Initiative, the PRC’s foreign relations, and issues related to Chinese heritage making. Unlike the hoard of other publications on the Belt and Road, this book offers a new angle and an innovative framework for understanding what is undoubtedly the PRC’s most consequential foreign-policy initiative. Nonetheless, one shortcoming, common to most studies of the initiative that depend solely on English-language sources, needs to be mentioned. Completely missing in the book are the role and involvement of Chinese intellectuals in the discourse on the old and new Silk Roads. The early twentieth-century Chinese scholar Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), who first compared Zheng He to Columbus and devised the narrative of the Ming admiral as an emissary of peace and harmony, and Chen Yan 陳炎 (1916–2016), a former faculty member at Peking University who popularized the term “Maritime Silk Road” in the 1980s, along with current Chinese scholarship on the Silk Roads, all merit in-depth analysis. Similarly, the disagreements among officials in various coastal cities in China, especially in Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Ningbo, over the issue of UNESCO’s world heritage listing also merits examination. This is essential if the Hegelian view that China is all state—a perception that tends to predominate in English-language publications and reports from the PRC, as well as in the utterings of its political leaders—is not to be perpetuated. Nonetheless, Winter must be commended for offering an alternative perspective and a useful framework for future analyses and evaluations of the PRC’s still evolving Belt and Road Initiative.

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