Geocultural power: China’s quest to revive the silk roads for the twenty-first century


Rupak Shrestha

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BOOK REVIEW


In the wake of China’s rise as a leader in world politics and economy, how does cultural production figure into and shape narratives of history, connectivity, and worldmaking? How does China employ the Silk Road discourse to realize a BRI future in Eurasia? Tim Winter’s Geocultural Power provides, in a very readable text, answers these questions through new theoretical and analytical ways to examine the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As the academic and non-academic gaze largely focuses on the mega-structures and infra-structures of China’s BRI, Tim Winter’s new book Geocultural Power provides a fresh theoretical perspective, that is grounded in critical Heritage Studies, in understanding the contemporary processes of BRI and historical precedents that lead to China’s future imaginings.

The main contribution of the book, as the title suggests, is the concept of geocultural power. While the chapters in the book build on this concept, they concurrently are themselves nodes that can be pieced together to form geocultural power. As Winter illustrates throughout the book, geocultural power enables the writing and mapping of particular histories. In doing so, geocultural power makes it possible for China to wield strategic arcs of historical narration to craft an imagination of a co-prosperous BRI.

Heritage diplomacy is an accompanying concept that makes visible how artifacts and material pasts “contribute to the interplay of cultural nationalisms, international relations, and institutions involved in the practices of global governance” (22).

Chapter 1 (From Camels and Sails to Highways and Refineries) provides an introduction to the book and to the theoretical frameworks of heritage diplomacy and geocultural power, on which the rest of the chapters build on. Chapter 2 (The Silk Road: An Abridged Biography), as the title suggests, is a condensed yet succinct biography of the Silk Road with emphasis on how the discourse of the Silk Road is intimately connected with imperial desires and imaginations of nation building that seek to rework heritage and history. Chapter 3 (A Politics of Routes) illustrates how the Silk Road discourse is appropriated by Asian states and politicians in a “language of win-win and coprosperity” to aspire for prosperity by become a key node in the BRI network (99). Chapter 4 (Corridor Diplomacy) is very much a study of BRI cooperation in the present, on how BRI aspirations have materialized through infrastructure projects, development corridors, and bilateral and multilateral trade deals at the contemporary moment.

Chapter 5 (Objects of Itinerary) will be of interest to scholars studying the efficacy of objects in international relations. With the emphasis on ceramics, Winter shows how BRI enables particular objects and artifacts to have political valence through exhibitions and movements along smuggling routes. In Chapter 6 (Historical Openings), Winter discusses how academic knowledge production on and about BRI has proliferated along with the rise and renewal of interest in the Silk Roads. Chapter 7 (Geocultural Power) holds the analytical thread of the book. Drawing on Ulf Hannerz’s conceptualization of geocultural
scenarios, Winter discusses what it means to “think geoculturally” and why this shift in thinking presents itself with new modes of inquiry in understanding the linkages between BRI and the Silk Roads of antiquity. In contrast to Anna Tsing’s concept of friction, Winter develops the concept of smoothing to think through political encounters and topographical anomalies in realizing BRI connectivity. Even with smoothing, Winter notes that “it will never be a linear journey of coprosperity” (195).

Geocultural Power contributes to the shaping of how heritage is a key node through which diplomacy is realized in international affairs. The book is timely and pertinent to readers largely interested in understanding the workings of the Belt and Road Initiative. The theoretical node of the book, heritage diplomacy, has the potential for use in other contexts and scales than the BRI. Geocultural power provides a refreshing way to study the workings of a highly technical and methodological Chinese empire that has extended its reach through land and sea through BRI. Moving beyond the analytics of soft power, Winter brings forth geocultural power to understand how heritage, history, infrastructure, and diplomacy are reworked so that “China is able to insert itself at the center, both culturally and geographically, of a story of regional and East-West contact” (182).

A significant part of the inquiry in the book takes place at the scale of national governments. This creates a large vacuum for ethnographic understandings on how geocultural power is understood, enabled, and responded to by local actors. I understand, however, that heeding to local events and processes is beyond the scope of the book and to do so would be a different project all together. This “weakness” is itself a call for Winter and other scholars to engage with the many nodes at which the BRI meets the peoples, cultures, and institutions at local scales in the vast networks that China imagines linking together by wielding geocultural power. On a similar note, although Winter discusses regional connectivity in much detail, there needs to be more discussion to highlight the means through which connectivity is achieved or even imagined in states that have aligned themselves to the Belt and Road. But, the book, as I note earlier, provides a novel way of seeing the BRI and contributes to the large volume of literature that participate in the knowledge production of BRI connectivity. The book contributes specifically to literature on Critical Heritage Studies and International Relations. However, scholars of Political Geography, Global China Studies, History, and Asian Studies will benefit from reading and engaging with this book.

As Winter notes, Geocultural Power is present in all tenses. This new theoretical intervention in understanding the BRI will allow the readers to understand how the past is reworked in the present to imagine and look to the future of history making.

Rupak Shrestha
Department of Geography, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA
✉ rupak.shrestha@colorado.edu  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6665-1779
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