Geocultural power: China’s quest to revive the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century

by Tim Winter, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 304 pp., US$27.50 (paperback)

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the United States jostle for gain and influence surrounded by a series of smaller – though not insignificant – others. It is a multipolar space with what Medcalf rightly calls “a tangle of interests overlapping, aligning, converging, diverging and conflicting” (p. 174). It is an arena for competition, and could easily become one of armed conflict if differences are not managed well and the Chinese Communist Party’s worst instincts not properly addressed.

Medcalf provides an astute and clear-eyed assessment of all those tendencies. He argues that, under Xi Jinping, China has shifted to what he calls a “high-risk strategy propelled by intense insecurity”. “Xi is trying to lock in relative gains in global influence now,” Medcalf observes, “in a window of perhaps a generation, before a perfect storm of national difficulties begins to strike” (p. 132). Slower growth, mounting debt, popular frustration, inequality, pollution and of course an ageing population haunt the Party, threatening the continuance of its rule. Eschewing economic and political reform, it has determined to employ ever more sophisticated methods of surveillance and repression at home, and to gamble abroad, most obviously with BRI and its incipient bid to control the South China Sea. And in international relations, Medcalf rightly notes, “Xi has set a very high bar for success: China will only meet its strategic goals if it can compel other countries to do its bidding” (p. 135).

For that reason, Beijing will likely fall short of its objectives. Any strategist worth their salt will tell you that compellence – coercing other parties to change their behaviour, as opposed to merely deterring them from doing something – is extremely hard. It is even harder in a context such as the Indo-Pacific, where so many players are mistrustful of Beijing and unlikely to cooperate in the construction of Xi’s “Community of Common Destiny”. Such a China-centric regional order will almost certainly not come to pass. More likely is a situation in which China’s ambitions generate heightened tensions and a greater risk of conflict, arising out of frustration or miscalculation. To avoid that predicament, Medcalf argues, we need to “set course” for “coexistence” – recognising that competition will occur, but “discouraging confrontation” (pp. 246–247). And that, he suggests, is going to take three “D’s” – “development, deterrence and diplomacy”, as well as resilience and solidarity.

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**Geocultural power: China’s quest to revive the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century**, by Tim Winter, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 304 pp., US$27.50 (paperback)

Diplomacy values a historical foundation of interconnectivity. Tim Winter’s *Geocultural Power* vividly explains how cultural heritage and its historical narratives shape the geopolitical landscape. Focussing on China’s reconstructive use of the Silk Roads as a geocultural imaginary in the Belt and Road Initiative, Winter convincingly argues that a historical narrative of the Silk Roads is of great use for rising China to enhance its policies of peaceful exchange and interregional cooperation. Transcending the traditional historiographical narratives of nations and states, the idea of transboundary heritage is an engine to cultivate new political
and economic relations and enhance the global reframing of territorial space and material redistribution.

The use of the Silk Roads history and culture as a political resource is by no means new. As Winter illustrates in Chapter 2, the imaginary vision of the Silk Roads was closely linked to great power competition from the mid-19th century onwards. As Russia, Britain and Japan sought to expand their zones of influence, their geographers, archaeologists and religious scholars examined forms of transnational shared heritage that could be linked back to their home countries. Just as programmes such as Japanese pan-Asianist expansionism developed side by side with the language of cultural and historical connectivity, transnational cultural discourses both reflected and contributed to imperial competition. The Japanese case is particularly important as it marks the significant impact of European arrival in Asia. Asian experience of European imperialism encouraged the development of a pan-Asianist narrative of the past based on the civilisational connections in Asia including Japan, China and India. The idea flourished after Japan’s victory in the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905. The narrative of transboundary interconnectivity is not simply a product of politics but the outcome of global social and cultural interactions.

Winter demonstrates in detail China’s extensive efforts to reconstruct the Silk Roads history and heritage in the international arena. China’s endeavours to construct the “Maritime Silk Road” discourse and search for material evidence in support of its claim are particularly interesting as the Maritime Silk Road is less visible than the land-based one. However, the blurred nature of this history is a greater asset for those who want to influence the geopolitical landscape in their favour. Imagination can fill in the void of history and memory. As Winter demonstrates, the legacy of the 15th-century Chinese Admiral, Zheng He, has been central to Chinese Maritime Silk Road discourses and narratives of friendship, trade and exchange. Such discourse spreads internationally through China-funded museum exhibitions, celebrations and academic research, often as a joint project with other countries.

Geocultural Power connects heritage and cultural policy studies and the study of international relations. Although the impact should not be exaggerated, China’s “great power diplomacy” in which China becomes the “author of world history” and the “architect of the bridge between East and West” (p. 17) should not be neglected when reading world politics in the longue durée. Civilisational rhetoric has a powerful strategic value because it invites the imagination of culture and history deeply rooted in the land and sea as well as people’s lives. The shared vision of Silk Roads corridors helps China to craft a narrative around the longevity and stability of Chinese civilisation, which is appealing especially in times of big transformation marked by globalisation and global power shift.

The hard edge of such heritage construction is its relations with territorial disputes. Although Winter is not a “China threat” theorist, he warns against China’s smooth and silky rhetoric of shared heritage. A new language of open connections and free passage raises in neighbouring countries a fear of reordering of future space based on the past memory. If the rhetoric of the Silk Roads functions as a “strategic narrative” by which China can influence the discursive international environment (p. 188), one cannot help but remember George Orwell’s famous dictum that those that control the past control the future.

It is possible to read the chapters in any order. Chapter 1 introduces a broad framework for this study, followed by Chapter 2, the biographical history of the Silk Roads, and Chapters 3 and 4 on how the Silk Roads narratives have been built, extended and communicated in the form of international cooperation. Chapter 5 focusses on the Silk Roads’ objects while Chapter 6 points to the academic knowledge production of the Silk Roads. For readers intrigued by the concept of geocultural power, jump to Chapter 7, where Winter touches
on the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz’s discussion of “geocultural scenarios”. What geocultural power provides is an ability to initiate a mapmaking process to distribute “things cultural” over territories and populations. Although the explanatory leverage of this coined term needs further scrutiny, Winter provides much-needed insight into the intersection of politics, history and culture, and an empirically rich account of China’s reconstruction of the Silk Roads’ transboundary history.

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Asia’s regional architecture: alliances and institutions in the Pacific century, by Andrew Yeo, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019, 264 pp., US$70.00 (hardback)

This book explains change and continuity in the East Asian institutional structure over the long term. East Asia has evolved from being under-institutionalised to a complex patchwork of multiple arrangements comprising bilateral, trilateral and multilateral arrangements. Many factors have been used in the literature to explain this evolution (balance of power politics, national interests, ideational considerations, and so on), but Yeo offers a refreshing perspective through the use of the historical-institutionalist framework.

The book focusses on endogenous processes of institutional change. It argues that East Asia’s institutional structure rests on two foundational nodes, the US-led alliance network and ASEAN, and that these nodes have shaped the institution-building process since the Cold War. Many new multilateral arrangements have been introduced since the Cold War, but Yeo argues that they have not undermined or replaced the foundational entities of the East Asian structure. Instead, the US-led alliance network and ASEAN have been strengthened, and their mandates expanded and amended in line with shifting external environments. In fact, these pre-existing arrangements have set the material and normative parameters that influence the institutional design and adaptation of new institutions. This process has resulted in a layering of the East Asian institutional structure where old and new arrangements complement each other.

The argument presented is bold in its efforts to look beyond the traditional school of theoretical International Relations (IR) to explain the evolution of the East Asian regional structure. The historical-institutionalist framework is well chosen for two reasons: first, it befits the long-term perspective adopted in the analysis; and second, it facilitates the incorporation of the effects of multiple variables from various theoretical paradigms to explain the complex evolution of the East Asian institutional structure. The book clearly justifies why the historical-institutionalist framework was more appropriate than other schools of IR theory and offers an elegant discussion of the framework.

The task of combining different and competing variables such as threat perceptions, ideas, institutions and domestic politics to explain a specific outcome is not easy. The book does this well. For example, Yeo uses a combination of realist factors, along with ideational and institutional ones, to explain the alliance consensus, which is usually explained solely through a realist lens. The case study chapters are well organised and result in a rich and lucid analysis of the complexities of the East Asian institutional story, beginning with the origins of bilateralism to the complex