

**The Diverging Silk Roads: Deromanticizing China's Belt Road Initiative Through Historical
Sinocentrism**

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Introduction

When the Belt-Road initiative (BRI) was officially announced by President Xi in 2013, the infrastructure projects, train routes and trade deals that were established after the initial initiative contributed immensely to the resurgence of the ancient silk road narrative. Officially, President Xi draws parallels of the BRI to the ancient silk road, stating that “The Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in the ancient Silk Road. It focuses on the Asian, European and African continents, but is also open to all other countries.”¹ Echoing the government consensus, media and scholars alike often referred to the initiative as the 21st century revival of the ancient silk road. Subsequently, the “Belt” refers to the revival of the ancient trading routes within China-Eurasia, while the “Roads” refer to the many trading routes that were or about to be established through mutual interest in China and the recipient country. Arguably, the ancient silk road acted as the first vision of globalisation. Globalisation under the context of the silk road refers to economic integration and the interdependence of the empires towards global trade. Through the BRI, China is attempting to reestablish the intimacy in the ancient silk road through the BRI, a series of projects that attempts to connect the world physically, culturally and digitally through a Sinocentric eco-system : Physically, through free-trading zones, Chinese tele-network and Chinese-built infrastructures that are governed by the recipient government. culturally, through educational exchanges and tourism. Digitally, through Chinese AI surveillance systems in foreign countries and the implementation of the Beidou navigation system in space.²

As an emerging superpower, modern China is attempting to expand Sinocentric narratives through a Sino-constructed globalism. Major Western commentaries have labelled the projects as modern imperialism, a collective response towards the increasing threat that the BRI has posed

¹ Xi, Jinping, Keynote Speech from the Opening Ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, May 2017, Beijing, China.

² Mo, Jingxi, China Daily, “Purpose of Belt and Road Is a Win-Win for All.”, 17th October 2017

towards the U.S and other Western superpowers presence in the Indo-Pacific region.³ China has retaliated towards this narrative by inviting Western countries to join the initiative as an option to expand global trade and build closer ties, in attempts to avoid the geopolitical implications being placed on the BRI.⁴ From the public perspective built by China, their role in the ancient silk road has been inherited to modern times, conducting trade and exchanging cultures. However, from a geopolitical standpoint, the dominance of Chinese leadership in the initiative, growing number of countries joining the initiative and the Chinese capital used in the BRI projects increases the global influence of China and challenges the role of the U.S in the global hierarchy.

Being an early instance of globalisation, the centralised role of the silk road in conducting cultural exchanges is immense. The initial contact between ancient civilisations through the trading routes mapped the blueprint to an intrinsically connected world that we live in today. Trade of all forms was established through those roads, eventually leading to ideas, religions and innovations that were developed further in other empires and civilisations. The competition introduced through the trading relationships between empires accelerated the growth of the economy in both sedentary and pastoralist civilizations. The rise and fall of those empires dictated the lives of the oasis towns and passerby that depended on the functionality of the silk road, as the security of the silk road was often disrupted by warfare. There was only one empire that remained to the modern era throughout the history of conflicts : The Chinese empire. The Han Dynasty was historically recognised as one of the main pillars towards the initiation of the silk road. However, the Sinocentric narratives formed regarding their presence on the silk roads can be argued through examining the identity of China that was adapted throughout the silk road era. The ancient silk roads carried the existence of a Chinese civilization to Eurasia, eventually to

³ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, The New York Times, “Biden Tries to Rally G7 Nations to Counter China’s Influence”, 12th June 2021.

⁴ An, Baijie, China Daily, “China invites the US to join the Belt and Road.”, 26th April 2017

the present Europe. The Sinocentric narratives were always changing, as the instability of the Chinese empire created many versions of the Chinese civilization. While the existence of a Chinese civilization never wavered, the overall identity and dominance of the Chinese is challenged throughout the silk road era.

The purpose of this thesis is to deconstruct the Sinocentric narratives of the silk road that were established by the Communist government as the origin of the BRI. By adopting the romanticisation of the silk road as the origin of the Belt-Road initiative, modern China amplifies their dominance in the silk road narratives that are not aligned to historic narratives. The structure follows the presence of the Chinese empire in the two silk roads from ancient, early modern and modern periods through an analytical lens. Chapter 1 will revolve around the contributions of the Han Empire in 130 B.C towards the beginnings of the silk road and turbulent relationship with the Nomads. Chapter 2 will challenge the Sinocentric presence of the Chinese Empire through the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasty from 618 A.D to 1368 A.D. Lastly, Chapter 3 will mainly examine the overall impact of the BRI in the past 8 years since its inauguration, specifically focusing on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a case study of interest. For the ancient and early modern period, this thesis relies on primary sources such as ancient Chinese literature regarding the silk road, ancient maps, as well as correspondences that were found on the silk road. For the modern period, the thesis collects evidence from statistical data on the Belt-Road projects and examines both Western and Chinese narratives regarding the successes of the projects. By comparing the presence of China in the two silk roads, this thesis aims to establish an authentic narrative regarding the role of China in fostering globalisation, the role of state-intervention in the silk road network and the role of the BRI as a continuation of the ancient silk road.

Chapter 1
The Formation of the Ancient Silk Roads

“History is our best teacher. The glory of the ancient silk routes shows that geographical distance is not insurmountable. If we take the first courageous step towards each other, we can embark on a path leading to friendship, shared development, peace, harmony and a better future.”

- President Xi Jinping, at the opening of the “Belt and Road Forum”, 2017

Sinocentrism, as defined by the goals of President Xi outlined in the BRI, is the revival of Chinese dominance within China’s relationships with other countries. The control of the network by one country limits genuine innovation and cultural exchange as the initiatives are mostly one-sided towards the recipient country. Modern Sinocentrism is carefully planned and artificially implemented by the Chinese government through the development of large-scale projects in select countries that accept China’s rising position in the global hierarchy, namely with countries who have close existing relationships with the Chinese government. In ancient times, Sinocentrism was defined as a political thought adopted by ancient China used to unify the empire’s identity and differentiate from other civilisations on a superior level. The central idea was that Chinese civilization was the only civilization that flourished while all other civilisations were “barbarians”.⁵

However, in the historic narrative, the silk roads had no owner. Therefore, the BRI initiative does not facilitate globalisation in the way the silk roads have transformed naturally into a budding network. Rather, the BRI is a Sinocentric economic network intended to solidify China’s modern rise to global power. By drawing a connection between the ancient roads and the

⁵ Chung, Tan, *On Sinocentrism: A Critique.*, China Report, September 1973, 38–50.

modern initiative, President Xi vocalised his strong intent to revive Sinocentrism globally. However, the contemporary narrative of the BRI initiative is romanticised through the inherited story of the silk road. Through the comparison between the formation of the ancient silk roads and the BRI, Chapter 1 will argue that Sinocentrism thought in the ancient roads was naturally-accepted by a wide range of countries due to the economic prosperity of the Chinese empire, the key connection of the existing trade routes as well as the empire's ability to control the Nomads.

Following the romanticised narrative of the silk roads, the ancient silk road was often seen as an unlikely collaboration between all civilisations. Thousands of goods were transported everyday by middlemen and traded by merchants of all cultures through a large trans-Eurasian network. Oasis cities were born and fell where empires also dominated and erupted. Small trading routes, mainly recorded in the Persian empire, existed before the large silk road. However, the silk road was voluntarily sewn together by thousands of small trading routes that created a global network. While commerce was often argued as the most common trading pattern by historians, various trading patterns were observed within the roads. The roads initiated and supported diplomacy at a large scale. Tributes such as gifts and matrimonial alliances were often carried to the next country to ensure peaceful diplomatic ties. Not only were physical goods being transported, but major ideologies such as religions, beliefs and knowledge influenced and passed on to the many communities. Religious figures, such as pilgrims, would often use the roads to cross thousands of kilometres to preach their religion. Buddhism and Islam became major foreign imports to Chinese civilization that is still largely relevant in the community today.⁶ The contribution of the silk road to globalisation was enormous, as the silk road initiated communication, connection and eased the gap between cultures that has never been done on a

⁶ Asimov, M. S. and C. E. Bosworth, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*. 4 Vols. 1998.

global scale. The path was intricately connected and covered vast lands that are not fully depicted in the drawn maps, officially stretching wide beyond from the Chinese empire to the Roman Empire.⁷ Eventually, the booming of the silk road led to the blendings and exchange of numerous cultures that spanned across Central Asia, creating the narrative of the golden age in the silk road. The golden age of the silk road was defined as the peak era of the silk road when there were no major disputes between the civilisations involved in the silk road. The previously restricted borders of ancient China were also open to foreign travellers and merchants, leading to the economic prosperity of the countries involved in the trading and the quick growth of the caravan cities by the silk roads.⁸ Therefore, the silk road was fundamental to the globalisation of the East, as well as facilitating interactions between East and West.

The shifting identities of silk as a gift, currency and commodity illustrates that the invention of silk was instrumental towards the formation of the silk road. Silk quickly became desired to the West due to its preciousness, igniting the silk road economy on an unprecedented scale.⁹ While silk was already used as a payment in the Chinese empire to collect taxes and to trade goods, silk became a currency amongst foreign merchants and traders on the road, later becoming the first widespread common currency that could be traded amongst different civilisations.¹⁰ The first silks that were transported out of the Han empire were lavish gifts towards the tribute system, initially agreed upon between the Nomads and the Qing court to protect the Chinese borders from the constant harassment of the Nomads.¹¹ The Han Empire (189 A.D - 220 A.D) was the first golden era that fully unified the feudal states of China, and created

⁷ James Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.

⁸ Liu, Xinru, *The Silk Road in World History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63.

⁹ Richter, Gisela M. A, "Silk in Greece." *American Journal of Archaeology* 33 (February 1929): 27–33.

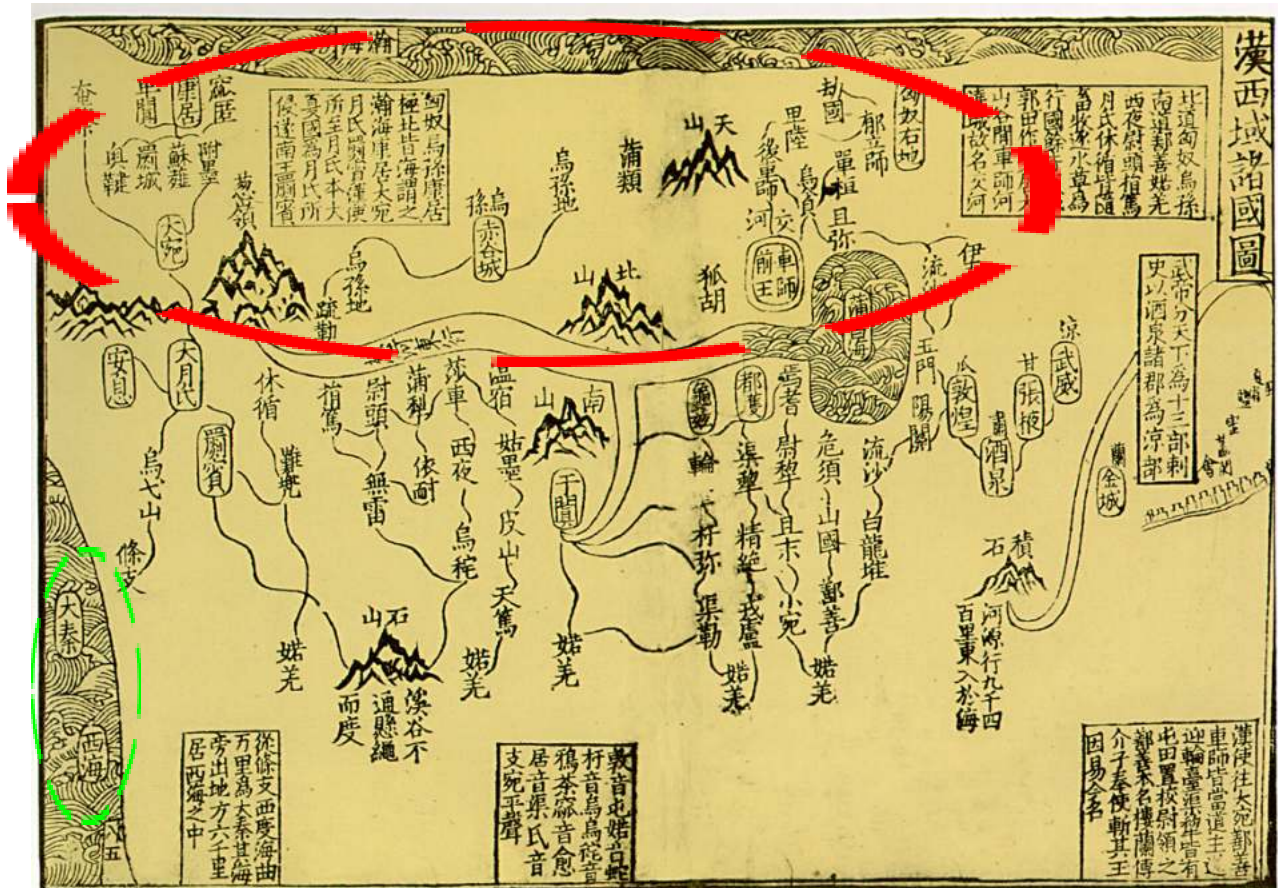
¹⁰ Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, 102

¹¹ Helen Wang, "Textiles as Money on the Silk Road?" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23, no. 02 (2013): 165.

an Imperial Chinese identity through beliefs, writing systems and military tactics that would eventually build upon generations of emperors and continuously influence future dynasties. The empire led an innovative period where major inventions were created, such as gunpowder, paper and silk. In particular, the formation of the silk roads through the conquest of Central Asia led to the global rise of the Han Empire. The control of the Han Empire over the roads led to the flourishing trade between China and other civilisations, creating the first direct route of the silk route with civilisations outside of the Chinese realm. However, large-scale trading of silk between the Chinese empire and the West was not officially established until the Han empire decided to rebel against the Nomadic tribute system.

The ancient silk road was predicated on, and led to, a civilizational discourse of settled agricultural civilisation versus nomadic pastoral civilisation, and the assumption of superiority of the former is over the latter. Before the development of the silk road, for the Han Empire to reach the other countries, the envoys of the Han Empire had to cross the Nomadic region. According to ancient Chinese scripture compiled from the Han period, the Nomads were “barbarians”¹² that free-reigned within Central Asia, foraged around on their horses without a stable base. While the Han empire stretched vast beyond to the borders of modern day Vietnam and North Korea, the Han empire was situated well within the Nomadic territory. The geographic location of the Han empire exposed the empire to the Nomads, as the Nomads constantly raided the Chinese borders for resources.

¹² Hardy, Grand and Behnke-Kinney, Anne, *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*, (Westport, Conn : Greenwood Press, 2005), 123-145



Map 1 : 漢西域諸國圖 (Translation : The Han and Western Regions Countries Map), a early depiction of the Han Empire by the Song historians¹³

Map 1 is a primary source that is one of the earliest ancient maps depicted of Han and the Western regions, dated back to the early thirteenth century during the late Song Dynasty.¹⁴ 西嶼, The Western Regions, was how the Han Empire referred to Central Asia. In the annotated red circle, the map depicts the Central Asian territory known to the Han Empire. The Nomads, specifically the Xiongnu, were ferocious in protecting their territory and had a much stronger

¹³ Cao Wanru, et al., ed, *An Atlas of Ancient Maps in China*, Wen Wu Publishing Agency, 1990. vol 1, 120

¹⁴ Park, Hyunhee, "Information Synthesis and Space Creation: The Earliest Chinese Maps of Central Asia and the Silk Road, 1265–1270." *Journal of Asian History* 49, no. 1–2 (2015): 40-119

military power compared to the Han Empire. Due to the blockage caused by the Nomads, trade relations between the Han empire and the outside realms were hard to form. The three nomadic tribes depicted in the map from left to right are identified as the Kang Ju tribe, the Wu Sun tribe and the Xiongnu tribe. The Sogdia, known as Kang Ju to the Han Empire, was an ancient Iranian kingdom located in Transoxiana.¹⁵ The Wu Sun people were a semi-nomadic tribe located on the steppes, first conquered by the Xiongnu but later became a strong ally for the Han Empire in its conquest against the Xiongnu.¹⁶ The Xiongnus ruled the territory that stretched from “Western Manchuria (Northeast provinces) to the Pamirs and covered much of present Siberia and Mongolia”¹⁷, and often cross their borders to conquer and raid other Nomadic tribes, such as the Wu Sun tribe and the Kang tribe. In the annotated green circle on the bottom left of the map, the Chinese text refers to 大秦, which is the Chinese-given name of the Roman Empire, and 西海, which means the Western seas. The location of the Nomads lands directly blocks the Han Empire from the rest of Central Asia, giving the Nomads a geographic advantage to invade the empire. Despite being land-locked in Central Asia, their constant migration patterns entailed advanced survival skills :

“From the king downwards all ate the flesh of domestic animals, and clothed themselves with the skins, wearing a fur covering over all. The able-bodied ate the fat and choice portions, while the aged ate and drank what was left. The strong and robust were held in esteem, while the old and feeble were treated with contempt. When a father died, they married their widowed mother; and when a brother died, it was customary to marry his widow. Their names were not transmitted to their descendants....”¹⁸ ,

¹⁵ Golden, Peter B. *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic People*, (Harrassowitz Verlag, 1992), 154-170

¹⁶ Pulleyblank, Edwin G, *Why Tocharians? Central Asia and non-Chinese peoples of ancient China*, vol. 1. (Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 426–427.

¹⁷ Hardy, Grand and Behnke-Kinney, Anne, *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*, 201-245

¹⁸ Tan, Jiajian, *Book of Later Han. Encyclopaedia of China* (Chinese Literature Edition), 1st ed.

The barbaric description of the Nomads written from a Han perspective depicts a stark contrast compared to the wealthy empire that depended on agriculture, appeasement and intelligence to strategize war tactics. As a result of the overarching rule of the Nomads, the early periods of the Han Empire initially struggled to secure their Northern borders due to the sudden invasions from the Xiongnu, which began even before the formation of the empire.

Before the formation of the Han Empire, the predecessor, the Qin Empire, erected the first Great Wall by the Northern borders as a defensive tactic against the Nomads and to define the boundary between the Chinese empire and Central Asia. The border marked the beginning of protected organised trade between China and outer Central Asia, which slowly prompted the rise of the pastoral economy outside the Chinese territory.¹⁹ The Great Wall was eventually built at its longest length during the Han Dynasty, largely extended from the North to the South. The extension of the border increased trading patterns with outer cities, as the fragmented borders led to the adoption of diverse trading systems in different areas of the Great Wall according to each outer city's economic system :

“though the character of the regions north of the Great Wall was modified in the east and north by forests that favoured a hunting economy and, in places, the special nomadism of reindeer breeders (in the northern zones of Manchuria, Mongolia, and Urianghai, approximating to Siberia in climate and other characteristics). In the west it was modified by the oases of Chinese Turkestan, which favoured an agriculture quite as intensive as that of China, but only on a minuscule scale, not sufficient to make a foundation for large national states”²⁰

The various trading patterns alternating across cultures paved the path for the silk road to form as the Chinese built efficient trading relations and gained commerce knowledge from the

¹⁹ Psarras, Sophia-Karin, “Han and Xiongnu : A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (II)”, *Monumenta Serica* 52 (2004): 37–93.

²⁰ Lattimore, Owen. “Origins of the Great Wall of China: A Frontier Concept in Theory and Practice.” *Geographical Review* 27, no. 4 (1937): 529–49.

outer realm. However, the stability of the trading relations were constantly disrupted by the sudden Nomads raids by the borders. The invasions caused major losses for the Han military, stumbled the sedentary economy and increased threats towards the invasion of the cities within the walls.²¹ The lack of control the early Han empire had over the chaos of the frontiers of the borders indicated that the fragile trading relations with outer realms could not be extended beyond the borders to the West, as the Nomads were initially controlling the Han empire's access to the outer world.

Despite having control over larger lands and free access to the outer world, the Xiongnu had many reasons to attack the Han empire. On one hand, there was poverty and famine in the Nomad lands as there is a hierarchical system within the tribes. The Shen-Yu (Mongolian equivalent of a King) is offered the hunted prey first, then the rest of the tribe is allowed to consume the remains of the prey.²² The lack of consistent trade between the Han empire and the Nomads perpetuated the Nomads to invade the Northern borders when they had a lack of resources. The Han empire was often unwilling to trade with the Xiongnu as they believed that they were superior to them, contributing to the Sinocentric narratives. On the other hand, the Xiongnu were dwellers that moved freely around Central Asia without a secure foundation. Observing the Han Empire's vast array of resources and stable cities may have ignited the desire to conquer and raid the border cities due to its proximity. Unlike their previous entity, the early Han empire decided to take a diplomatic approach to develop their army, build constant communication and ease tensions between the two civilisations. This strategy proved to be temporarily effective as the Xiongnu lessened the amount of raids by the borders and built stable

²¹ Psarras, Sophia-Karin, "Xiongnu Culture: Identification and Dating.", *Central Asiatic Journal* 39, no. 1 (1995): 102–36.

²² "Gunder Frank, Andre. *The Centrality of Central Asia.*, (Amsterdam: VU University Press. 1992) no. 1: 43–49.

communication with the Han envoys. A formalised system of tributes was then implemented to appease the Nomads under the fragile diplomatic relationship formed between the Nomads and the Han Empire. Tributes from the Han empire included lavish gifts of silk, gold, and matrimonial alliances that would ultimately become the main tactic of the Han Empire to maintain their relationship with the Nomads. The metaphoric power imbalance between the two countries led to the amity being renewed throughout many periods in the Han dynasty, as the Han empire was unable to defend against the Nomad military. However, the tribute system also resulted in the initial exploration of the Han envoys in Central Asia, as the envoys had to travel long distances to arrive at the Nomadic lands. Particularly, the matrimonial alliances increased the diplomatic interactions between the Han empire and outer realms, prompting the outer realms to recognise the existence of the Han empire.

Regardless of the recognition, the interactions between the Han empire and the outer world were limited as the presence of the Xiongnu grew stronger, especially when they conquered the Yue-Te, another prominent Nomadic tribe in Central Asia, Xiongnu Shen-Yu's success in conquering the Yue-Te tribe further pushed the Han Empire to maintain peace by continuing to renew the amity, despite growing tensions from the Han Empire after the series of humiliation and invasions from the Nomadic tribe. The cost of producing silk is great, yet the Han envoys provided massive amounts of silk towards the Xiongnu to ensure the security of their borders. Silk created a hierarchical system of ancient Chinese society. The silks were spun by peasants, woven by noblewomen and worn by the elites of Chinese society. Large scale production of silk was owned by wealthy Chinese households. Silk was mainly produced by large groups of women regardless of their socioeconomic class, demonstrating the early development of the commerce system within the Han society. The collective nature of the silk

producing and distribution system clearly demonstrates the Han empire's strong ability to conduct organised commerce and trade in the early periods. The skills eventually translated into the rising prosperity of the economy within the empire and a wealthy reputation to the far lands. Therefore, it can be argued that the Han empire's rich experience with producing and trading silk later led to the Sinocentric narratives established both historically and in the modern era. Outside the realm, the Xiongnu started to trade the surplus of silk with other tribes, quickly spreading the existence of silk wide beyond the Chinese borders. The Han empire gained a wealthy reputation amongst the tribes, attracting many countries to trade with their silk. Eventually, the cost of diplomacy with the Nomads through the lavish gifts slowly outweighed the need for peace for Han China, as the power imbalance between the Nomads and the Han empire was slowly neutralised by the Han empire's economic and political prosperity after the rise of Emperor Wu-Ti (reigned 141/140 - 87/86 BCE).²³

The peaceful implications of trade in the romanticised silk road, derived from the modern image of global trade, was historically incorrect. Unlike previous Han Emperors who submitted to the Nomads through the tribute system and defensive measures, Emperor Wu's ascendance to the throne entailed aggressive tactics against the Nomads, intended to eradicate the Nomads once and for all.²⁴ However, Emperor Wu determined that they needed Nomadic allies and strong horses that increased their military power in order to pursue a war. The trade conducted on the silk road can and led to the intense warfare between China and the Nomads. Although the Chinese could have obtained the horses from trading with the Nomads, their mistrust towards the barbarians, desire to take control of the Xiongnu lands and the need to create alliances with other tribes enforced their need to further explore Central Asia. In particular, there have been legends

²³ Tan, Jiajian, *Book of Later Han. Encyclopaedia of China* (Chinese Literature Edition), 1st ed.

²⁴ Yu, Taishan, "A History of the Relationships between the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Western Regions." *Sino-Platonic Papers No. 131* (March, 2004):134-200

of horses so strong that they “sweat blood” in Ferghana, which reinforced their need to take full control of the trade routes. To explore the lands, Emperor Wu appointed Chang Ki'en, who volunteered to scout out allies and bring back horses. The lack of united leadership from the Nomads after the strengthening of the Han empire led to the first major Chinese expedition to Ferghana, which was “to the southwest of Xiong-nu and due west of China, at a distance of about 10,000 *li*.”, marking the Han Empire's first step towards the West:

[The Emperor of] China appointed Chang K'ien *T'ai-chung-ta-fu* [Imperial Chamberlain] and gave T'ang-i Fu the title *Fong-shi-kun* [The Gentleman attending the Embassy]. Chang K'ien was a man of strong physique, magnanimous and trustful, and popular with the foreign tribes in the south and west. When Chang K'ien started on his journey, his caravan consisted of more than a hundred men; thirteen years later, only two lived to return. The following countries were visited by Chang K'ien in person: Ta-yuan [Ferghana], Ta-yue-chi [Indoscythians], Ta-hia [Bactria] and K'ang-ku [Sogdiana]; there were besides, five or six other large adjacent countries concerning which he gained information and on which he reported to the Emperor in the following terms.²⁵

The expedition also marks the first official cultural exchange and commerce between Han empire and foreign lands, as the Han empire was more willing to participate in cultural exchanges, trade and establish outward communication.²⁶ Despite losing thousands of men on the way, Chang Ki'en eventually made the journey to Ta-yuan (Ferghana), while being imprisoned by the Nomads on several occasions :

“...he arrived in Ta-yuan. The people of this country, having heard of the wealth and fertility of China, had tried in vain to communicate with it. When,

²⁵ Tan, Jiajian, *Book of Later Han. Encyclopaedia of China* (Chinese Literature Edition), 1st ed.

²⁶ Di Cosmo, Nicola. “Han Frontiers: Toward an Integrated View.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 2 (2009): 199–214.

therefore, they saw Chang K'ien, they asked joyfully: 'Where do you wish to go?' Chang K'ien replied: 'I was sent by [the Emperor of] China to the Yue-chi, and was made prisoner by the Hsiung-nu. I have now escaped them and would ask that your king have someone conduct me to the country of the Yue-chi; and if I should succeed in reaching that country, on my return to China, my king will reward yours with untold treasures. The Ta-yuan believed his account and gave him safe-conduct on postal roads to K'ang-ku [Sogdiana].'²⁷

The positive impression of the Ferghana people towards Chang Ki'en and the Han empire recognised the growing influence of the Chinese silk, as the Han empire's affluence started to spread throughout Central Asia. Upon the return of the scouts from Ferghana, the discovery of foreign goods such as wheat, rice, grapes and the horses fuelled the Han empire's desire to expand their territory and gain more supply of the horses.²⁸ Eventually, the Han empire's relationship with Ferghana strained due to the Chinese's over-demand of their horses for the military. A three-year war between the Han empire and Ferghana commenced soon afterwards, with the Chinese soon gaining dominance over the tribe :

“The people of Yuan (Dayuan, Ferghana's Capital) became panic-stricken and withdrew into the inner city, where their notables held counsel among themselves, saying: 'The reason why the Chinese make war on us is that our king, Mu-kua, held back the superior horses and killed the Chinese ambassadors. If we now kill our king, Mu-kua, and surrender the superior horses, the Chinese army will raise the siege; on the other hand, if they do not raise the siege there will be war to the death. It is not yet too late.’”²⁹

The internal struggle within Ferghana brought an advantage towards the Han military. The insistence of the Chinese empire to dominate Ferghana is vital to the development of the

²⁷ Tan, Jiajian, *Book of Later Han. Encyclopaedia of China* (Chinese Literature Edition), 1st ed.

²⁸ Hill, John, *Through the Jade Gate - China to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes 1st to 2nd Centuries CE. Volumes I & II*, (BookSurge Publishing, 2015), 103-142

²⁹ Tan, Jiajian, *Book of Later Han. Encyclopaedia of China* (Chinese Literature Edition), 1st ed.

first silk road route, as Ferghana was one of the first trading routes of the silk road. After several victories against the Nomads, by 101 CE, Ferghana officially belonged to the Han empire, and the first official trading route to the West was opened through Central Asia.³⁰ The reversed relationship between the Han empire and the Xiongnu became somewhat cordial after the invasions, as the comparative advantage in goods between the two regions meant that the Han emperor allowed the Xiongnu to trade freely by the borders. Despite the overarching control of the Han empire in the Central Asian region, the combination of several pastoral trade-economic systems in Central Asia meant that the Han empire could not gain full control over the entire Central Asia region due to the different feudal-economic system of each Nomadic tribe. After expelling the Xiongnu, the Han empire took control of the Gansu Corridor in the Dunhuang area, and its neighbouring areas. The Han empire then immediately launched a immigration and colonisation program to establish the new Chinese prefectures, creating the first known silk trade route towards the West.³¹

The foundation of the silk road was built off of the tribute system with the Nomads, while the foundation of the BRI was built off of the Chinese capital. In the ancient silk roads, the decade-long conquests against the Xiongnu had opened up to global trading and built a trans-continental network, as the silk roads were born from the contested lands of the Nomads. Holding control of the main trade routes, the influence of the Chinese empire eventually reached deep into Central Eurasia. This caused the initial spread of Chinese goods, stabilising the abrupt change in the power dynamics towards the Nomads, and the blossoming trade relationships with the Western realm. In the modern silk road, China's growing influence in the global stage

³⁰ Wallacker, Benjamin E., and Ruth I. Meserve. "The Emperor of China and the Hobbled Horse of the Xiongnu." *Central Asiatic Journal* 49, no. 2 (2005): 284–302.

³¹ Yang, Jidong. "Transportation, Boarding, Lodging, and Trade along the Early Silk Road: A Preliminary Study of the Xuanquan Manuscripts." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 3 (2015): 421–32.

contributed to the collaborations between the recipient countries. Rather than depending on the inherited route of the silk road to build the new road, China singlehandedly re-constructed the BRI based on their current strategic relationships and competitors, which conveniently consists of Central Eurasia. By shaping the global narrative of the BRI based on the golden age of the ancient silk road, modern China chooses to reconstruct their own silk road memory through propaganda and filter out the complexity of Sinocentric narrative in the silk road experienced by the ancient Chinese empire.

Chapter 2

The Globalisation of the Early Modern Silk Road

“Conquering the world on horseback is easy; it is dismounting and governing that is hard”

- Genghis Khan

As interactions between ancient China and the outer world grew, the complexity of the networks in the silk roads caused the conditions of the trading routes to be volatile and ever-changing due to the constant rise and falls of the empires.³² The main distinction between the silk road and the BRI was the malleability in the identity of ancient China during each period of the silk road, as well as in the silk road itself. As the Chinese empire was malleable due to the change in rulers, the stability of the modern Chinese government indicates that there is no space for new cultural identities to take hold in modern China. The malleability in the identity of silk was what prompted the Chinese empire to be perceived from the outside realms as a strong empire, culturally diverse and open to outside cultures, which in turn prompted other civilisations to accept, establish foreign policy with the Chinese empire. However, there was one consistent factor that carried the dominance of the Chinese empire throughout the silk road - silk. The possession of silk was ancient China's key to economic prosperity, diplomatic relations and the continuation of the silk road. The intimate connection that trading on the silk roads brought to each empire increased the longevity of the silk roads as ancient civilisations experienced exponential growth from interacting with foreign cultures.

In the early periods of the silk road, constant warfare in the Chinese empires led to consistent changes in rulers, who often reform the Chinese identity as a whole. The openness of

³² Thomas, Thelma K. “Perspectives on the Wide World of Luxury in Later Antiquity: Silk and Other Exotic Textiles Found in Syria and Egypt.” In *Silk: Trade & Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, edited by Berit Hildebrandt and Carole Gillis, (Oxbow Books, 2017), 347

the silk road led to an array of Chinese rulers of different cultures and ethnicities, most notably the Mongols, Manchurians, and the Han. The unity of the Chinese empire is often challenged by the physical splitting of the empire, internal rebellions from the peasants and the Nomadic invasions from the borders. Chinese civilians of each generation were forced to quickly adapt to these changes, cultivating a strong, survival mindset amongst the community. The ability to adapt allowed the Chinese empire to maintain a strong presence in the silk roads towards other civilisations despite the consistent overhaul of the Chinese identity. This chapter will navigate the ever-changing identities of the Chinese empire caused by the conflicts on the early modern silk road. The two periods, Tang dynasty and Yuan dynasty illustrate the golden periods of the Chinese empire on the silk road.

Although the instability of the Chinese empire caused major disruption towards the security of the silk roads, the consistent change in rulers, particularly after Genghis Khan's invasion and rule of the Yuan dynasty, fully opened up ancient China's gates to globalisation. As the silk road was not managed by a singular state, the malleability of the roads also adapted according to the strength of each empire that were part of the roads. Diplomacy was naturally embedded within the silk roads, while the BRI is constrained to the policies that are agreed between China and the other country. There is no physical warfare, no instability from the government and a united demeanour between China and the governments of the countries involved. However, concrete foreign policy established between China and other countries involved in the project is for self-benefit. The lack of a shared initiative, different government systems and stable systems of each country deters from a natural collaboration embedded in the early modern silk road. The rigid nature of foreign policies established within the modern silk road, particularly emphasise the dependence of the recipient country on Chinese leadership,

stipulate that it is impossible for the BRI to embody the collaborative spirit of the ancient silk road that kept the cultures and tavern cities alive without complete state intervention.

While the ancient silk roads led to the introduction of the Chinese empire to the West, the early modern period of the silk road was the trailblazer to the recognition of the Chinese Empire and the globalisation of communication amongst diverse civilisations. The abundant formation of the oasis cities along Eurasia further highlighted the independence of the silk road from the state, as these oasis cities had no formal ruling entity. From an overall perspective of all the civilisations involved in the silk road, the shared aspect of the road clearly motivated the maintaining of diplomatic relations. The oasis cities in the silk road grew into small kingdoms and feudal principalities, which became vital towards the growth of the silk road economy.³³ When the silk road economy was affected, individual economies within the roads were to suffer, as evidenced by the rise and fall of the oasis empires within the silk roads. Inter-state relations between China and the West were constantly mediated by tributes and envoys, widening the social sphere of the roads and strengthening China's relationship with the West.

Foreign policy became essential to ensure the stability of the silk road and security of the travellers. The historic phenomenon of silk gifting is important in demonstrating how desired silks were in the silk road economy, as well as individual settlements. Silk was a natural source of diplomacy. The Chinese empire remained the main supplier of silk yarn and silk textiles until the end of the silk roads.³⁴ In particular, silk trading in the Tang Dynasty flourished, which stimulated commerce amongst Eurasia. After the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D - 906 A.D) was considered the second golden period of ancient China. During the Tang rule, the centralised government was effective in unifying the states and opened their communities to

³³ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, 238.

³⁴ Hildebrandt, Berit. "Silk Production and Trade in the Roman Empire." In *Silk: Trade & Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, (Oxbow Books, 2017), 34-50.

immigrants from the silk road. In turn, the exotic goods fueled the curiosity and demand of the Chinese peasants to consume foreign goods. Foreign religions also flourished in Tang China, as the court syncretized major religions to fit into Chinese narratives. Due to its accumulated wealth from trading silk and porcelain, the Tang court also held the most influence over the economy in the silk roads.³⁵ The access to the trading routes quickly became a large source of economic growth for the Chinese empire, as silk was never replicated in the West until the later era of the silk road. The Tang court had the ability to set military garrisons around several silk road paths, which ensured the safety of the travellers and merchants. The relatively stable nature of the silk roads ensured the flow of foreign trade, which encouraged multiple Chinese monopolies to form.³⁶ There was even a trade surplus for the Tang, as The Tang court exported more goods towards the West. However, trade was tightly regulated by the Tang court. The tribute system was officially established under the Tang government, which affirmed the Emperor's status under the Mandate of Heaven as well as Sinocentric narratives. While merchants had to give tributes to the Tang Emperor, the Tang court also sent goods towards foreign courts, which stabilised the trading relationships until the downfall of the Tang court towards the end of the 9th century.

The fate of diplomacy in the Chinese empire was eventually conducted by the Mongols in the late 12th century, after the successful infiltration of the Mongol rule in the Chinese empire. Despite the prosperity of the Chinese empire and its continuous influence on the silk roads, the generations of Nomads never stopped their attacks on the empire. When the Chinese empire was able to control most of the invasions with their tributes, trade and military power, a Mongol

³⁵ Sheng, Angela. "Determining the Value of Textiles in the Tang Dynasty: In Memory of Professor Denis Twitchett (1925-2006)." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23, no. 2 (2013): 175–95.

³⁶ "Rezakhani, Khodadad, "The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3: 45-152.

named Genghis Khan was soon born during the Song empire in the 11th century. The Mongol Empire was the largest empire known in history, consisting of one-third of the land in the world and was the closest to being the main authority of the entire silk roads. In Figure 1 and 2, the green territory represents the scope of the Chinese empire compared to Eurasia in the Tang and Yuan empire respectively. Comparing the two maps, it is clear that the Mongol conquests have greatly expanded the lands of the Chinese empire after the Han-led Tang empire. The Mongols were so successful in conquering and raiding civilisations because the empire itself was created through successful military conquest and supreme military strength.



Figure 2 - A map of the Tang Dynasty depicted against the modern map ³⁷

³⁷ Tan Qixiang. et al, *The Historical Atlas of China*, China Maps Institute, 1992, 43



Figure 3 - A map of Yuan Dynasty depicted against the modern map ³⁸

The complexity of the relationship between China and the Mongols lies in the perspective that without the invasions and control of the Mongol empire, the stability of the silk roads would not have been as secure due to the vast power the Mongols held over Eurasia. However, while the control of the Mongols threatened Sinocentric narratives in terms of the Han Chinese, the control also increased the Sinocentric narratives due to the malleability in the definition of the Chinese empire. Prior to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty, there were three Chinese empires : Jin (金), North Song (北宋) and Western Xia (西夏). The three Chinese empires had varying ethnic identities, the Song ruled by the Han Chinese, the Jin ruled by the Jurstan, and the Western

³⁸ Tan Qixiang. et al, *The Historical Atlas of China*, 65.

Xia ruled by the Tangut.³⁹ Western Xia fell to the Mongols in 1227, and the Jin Empire followed suit in 1234. Soon afterwards, the Mongols defeated the Song dynasty in 1279. The Mongols quickly took power and created the first Mongol-Chinese capital : The Yuan Empire, formed by Khubilai, Genghis's grandson, after Genghis Khan's death.⁴⁰ Unlike his grandfather, Khubilai was enamoured with the Chinese governing system and made himself the first Mongolian emperor of China. Although he announced himself as the emperor, he did not truly integrate himself within the Chinese system. The Mongols acknowledged the successes of the Chinese empire through taking inspiration from the structures of the Chinese government to model their own ruling system, the Yuan administration based their government heavily on traditional Mongol hereditary transmission.⁴¹ The hybridity of a Mongolian-Chinese government in itself is a form of internal diplomacy, as the Chinese who were not killed appeased the Mongols by swearing their allegiance and working under the Mongol government. Internal chaos between Mongol puppets and Chinese civilians ensued as many Han Chinese took their Mongol puppet roles seriously, as they would not be able to obtain the same roles under the imperial examination system. Han Chinese civilians living under the Mongol regime were allowed to take government roles, but only as low-ranking roles under Mongol princes and officials.⁴² Despite the brutalities that came with the Mongols conquering the Chinese empire and the oasis cities in the silk road, once the lands were conquered, the Mongol rulers eagerly promoted diplomacy and trade, opening their land and sea borders to the world after they conquered Southern China later in the

³⁹ Chen, Sanping, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 143-265

⁴⁰ Lieberman, Victor. "Introduction," and "Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas," in Victor Lieberman ed. *Beyond Binary Histories: Reimagining Eurasia to c. 1830*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, 1–18, 19–102.

⁴¹ Wang, Jinping. 2018. *In the wake of the Mongols: the making of a new social order in North China, 1200-1600*.

⁴² Amitai, Reuven, and Michal Biran, *Mongols, Turks, and others: Eurasian nomads and the sedentary world*, (Leiden Press, 2005), 167

dynasty.⁴³ The Yuan dynasty promoted global diplomacy within and outside of the walls, welcoming non-Mongol travellers to come and trade with the merchants. The peace gained from the control of the Mongol Empire was vital towards the safety of the silk roads, as travellers and merchants could cross the roads without the interference of war-zones. The golden era prompted a series of global explorers to explore China and further spread the knowledge of China to the rest of the world :

“The Mongols welcomed, trusted, and lavishly patronised non-Mongol aliens in their service, including such adventurers as the Venetian Marco Polo, efficiency experts such as the Persian Ahmad (or Achmach) and the Uighur Sengge (or Sanga), and advocates of alien religions such as the Christian John of Montecorvino and, especially, Tibetan lamas such as the creator of a new Mongol script, Phags-pa. Several Mongol emperors showered vast sums on lamas for support of their temples, shrines, and ceremonies and for copying or printing their voluminous sutras.”⁴⁴

Such descriptions depict the welcoming Mongol perspective towards foreigners. A more prominent example, Marco Polo’s perspective gives evidence to the Mongols’ desire to widen trade :

“China also acquired a major place in the extension of trade and commerce during Kubalai Khan’s reign. Marco Polo speaks of Cambulac (now Beijing), the capital of Kubalai, in which he witnessed numerous hostleries for the merchants of many countries. He relates that the capital was connected with each of the provinces by many roads and highways. At every twenty five miles of the journey there was a station called Yamb, or the “Horse-Post-House” with a large and handsome building.”⁴⁵

The opening of the Chinese empire towards outsiders majorly increased Sinocentric narratives as more foreign countries became aware of China’s existence. The Mongols spent the majority of the Chinese resources on accompanying the travellers and ensuring that their Mongol

⁴³Asimov, M. S. and C. E. Bosworth, eds, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Vol. 4: The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), 128

⁴⁴ Hucker, Charles O, *The Ming Dynasty: Its Origins and Evolving Institutions*. (University of Michigan Press, 1978), 52

⁴⁵ Polo, Marco, William Marsden, and Manuel Komroff. *The Travels of Marco Polo (the Venetian)*. (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), 289

government was stable within the Chinese empire, rather than further economic development. The approach of the Mongols in conquering, but not governing indicated that there were no functioning governing systems in the Mongol-led Chinese empire. Discrimination towards the Han Chinese in the corrupted selection system of the Yuan Empire indicated that the Mongols put in charge were not experienced in their roles, quickening the fall of the Yuan Empire.

The change from a stable Chinese bureaucracy to the fragmented government of the Mongols caused economic failures within the empire, in turn demonstrating the lack of unity in the Mongol rule. Using the Mongol-ruled Chinese empire as a case study, the absence of organised resource distribution became essential to the demise of the Mongol empire. In depleting the Yuan empire of its resources, the once prosperous empire was quickly de-stabilised. Eventually, the fall of the Mongol empire led to the fall of the land silk road as the road was largely dependent on Nomadic trade. Large incidents such as the Black Death further perpetuated the demise of the roads as millions of deaths occurred in a short span of time. However, throughout all of this chaos, the Chinese empire remained and transitioned into the Ming Empire after a joint uprising against the Mongol rule. By the 18th century, the maritime silk roads were preferred as a transportation method as trade between the East and West had advanced into huge quantities that could not be borne by land transportations. Ships could carry large quantities of goods that fuelled faster growth in the global economy.

Natural relationships formed with Central Asia and the West were more spontaneous, partially harnessed by the Han Chinese, but as presented throughout the prosperous era of the silk road, the silk road changes but survives despite the political instability of Chinese dynasties. The malleability of the Chinese Empire allowed China to remain as a single entity despite enduring many changes to its identity, including many complete reformations. Despite the

historiographic narratives focusing on the negatives of Nomadic invasions through the lens of the Han Chinese, the Chinese identity is not defined by a singular narrative or an ethnicity. Most scholastic work categorises the Chinese into a single Han ethnicity, but the reality was that the concept of the Han Chinese being the dominant Chinese identity did not form until the modern era. The factor that constituted the Chinese identity during the ancient silk road is defined by the tenacity of the Chinese people during the dictatorship of the Mongols, their constant advancing ability in silk, and their flexible ability to reform and rebel according to generational changes. The modern silk road, however, is carried at a planned scale, with China allocating the capital and resources for each recipient country. The identity of communist China is stable compared to its identity in the ancient silk road, yet the lack of hereditary identity of the silk road in the Belt Road Project cloudens the modern Sino-centric narrative. The Silk Road in the past was not managed by a singular state, while the modern silk road blurs the lines between collaboration and colonialism.

Chapter 3 **The Continuity of Modern Silk Road**

“The Belt and Road Initiative originated in China, but it belongs to the world. It is rooted in history, but oriented towards the future”

- Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative

The rise of China in recent years has presented an unmistakable challenge to the Western-centric world : to become the next superpower in the global hierarchy. A superpower is defined as a country in a dominant position with the power to influence global affairs.⁴⁶ However, the narrative of true global collaboration depicted in the ancient silk road is inhibited by global competition. Comparing the connectivity of the BRI to the ancient silk road creates an romanticised impression that the BRI is conducted for pure collaboration rather than establishing a hegemonic network based on mutual interest. Long gone are the admirations of Chinese silk from ancient Eurasia, now replaced by the Western powers that remain cynical about China’s explosive growth. Western powers, mainly represented by the U.S, often oversee global affairs by wielding great power in historical alliances. To challenge the U.S narrative as a global leader, China created the BRI as a tactic to gain global influence, secure allies and reconstruct the Sinocentric narratives formed from the past silk road. The target of securing developing countries as key allies of the BRI further the notion of increasing Chinese influence on a global scale. The purpose of the BRI, rather than for China to only reinvigorate the silk road as a secondary role, is to propel China into this center of connectivity through providing Chinese capital as potential leverage to the recipient countries, and reignite the Chinese economy.

⁴⁶ Gordenker, Leon, “The Superpowers and International Organization.” *International Journal* 35, no. 3 (1980): 448–77.

Despite the massive development China has made in the past decade, the growth of the Chinese economy is slowing down. As the world's largest producer, China manufactured over 27.8% of the global output in 2021. China is also the world's largest exporter, exporting over 2.6 trillion dollars in 2020, over a trillion dollars more than the U.S.⁴⁷ In the last 20 years, China's GDP growth averaged at 4.8% per year, positioned to take over as the world's largest economy by 2030.⁴⁸ In contrast, the developed U.S economy has not grown at such a rate since the Great Recession. The data implies that the Chinese economy is competitive on a global scale compared to the U.S while projected for an upward trajectory in the future, signalling its emphasis on trade. However, the reliance of the Chinese economy on mass manufacturing, exports and cheap labour is slowing down the overall growth of the local economy. Most notably, the diminishing marginal returns, trade war with the U.S and cheaper labour in other developing countries are negatively affecting China's ability to produce and export their goods.⁴⁹ In theory, recipient countries, particularly targeting the developing countries, can utilise Chinese capital to finance infrastructure projects to encourage further growth. In turn, on top of China's attempt to gain more global influence, the Chinese economy will be reinvigorated through expanding their global production, increasing exports and use of Chinese labour in infrastructure projects. Many scholars have written about the ambiguous intentions of the BRI on a global scale, but many depict a contemporary view that does not question the romanticised connection of the BRI with the ancient silk road narrative. This chapter will conceptualise China's vision for the modern silk road compared to their secondary role in the ancient silk road, challenge both Western and

⁴⁷ Gordenker, Leon, "The Superpowers and International Organization," 448-77

⁴⁸ The World Bank, GDP growth (annual %) - China, World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data, 2020

⁴⁹ Song, Ligang, Zhou, Yixiao, Hurst, Luke et al, eds, *The Chinese Economic Transformation: Views from Young Economists*. (ANU Press, 2019), 43

Sinocentric perspectives on the BRI, and provide a realistic viewpoint on the effectiveness of the BRI for the continuation of global trade from the ancient story.

The geopolitical repositioning of China as the leader in the Belt Road Project further builds the narrative of a never-seen-before Sinocentric world. By creating a network through China's terms and capital, China positions itself as the modern Mongol Empire : conquering the roads through expansion yet governing under their terms at the same time. Despite China's position in portraying the BRI as a continuation of the ancient silkroad, it is clear that China is using the BRI to demonstrate their ability to lead and gain influence in global affairs. Instead of the ancient silk route narratives of leading the roads towards the West, China is leading all the roads to themselves as the center of connectivity.

CPEC - The Developed Project of the BRI

Silk acted as the main propeller of the silk road economy, which acted as the precursor of modern currency. Nowadays, China is mainly importing infrastructure, technology and capital through the BRI. From a geopolitical standpoint, China's mimicking of the U.S in terms of soft imperialism in the Indo-Pacific brings a retrospective in their assumed role as the leader of global trade through the BRI projects. To assert the narrative of their global dominance, many BRI projects adhere to local Chinese terms, a modern rendition of the tribute system in the Tang dynasty that was implemented to increase Sinocentric narratives. For example, the BRI loans for recipient countries are conducted in RMB, acting as a device to globalise the currency and place less reliance on the US Dollar.⁵⁰ Instead of embodying the secondary role as the connector of global trade, China acting as the main propeller of global trade in the BRI creates an inequality in

⁵⁰ Yan, Liang, *RMB Internationalisation and Financing Belt-Road Initiative: An MMT Perspective*, *The Chinese Economy*, 53:4, 317-328

the relationship between China and the recipient countries. The financial origin of the BRI recipient countries being involved in a “debt trap” is often illustrated through the imbalance in the ratio of contributions compared to China, the increasing amount of loans needed from China to finance the BRI projects and the developing nature of the economy in the recipient country. Key BRI projects that illustrate this inequality include Pakistan, a large recipient of the BRI funding.

A historic partner of the BRI is Pakistan, a country that holds the most developed BRI projects. CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) is a 62 billion pilot initiative that plans to upgrade Pakistan’s infrastructures, build power plant structures and construct free-economic zones between the two countries that would transform into economic corridors.⁵¹ The CPEC is one of the most established BRI projects, with a total of 21 projects in progress and 4 fully finished projects within the past 8 years.⁵² Prior to the BRI, Sino-Pak relations have been intimate due to Pakistan’s dependence on China for military-arms and leverage against wavering Pakistan-Indian relations.⁵³ Therefore, Pakistan’s more heavy involvement in the BRI compared to the rest of the recipient countries further increases Pakistan’s economic dependency on China. According to the 2020-2021 Pakistan Economic Survey, 46.7% of Pakistan’s foreign direct investment comes from China, particularly investing in the CPEC projects within the energy sector.⁵⁴ For Pakistan, the CPEC acts as both an opportunity for economic growth, decreasing poverty trap and a power balance against India, its main economic competitor. For China, the

⁵¹ Jiamei, Z. Deepening China-Pakistan relations through cultural exchanges [Conference session]. Proceedings of the international conference on CPEC, December 10, 2019, Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan.

⁵² Khan, Muhammad Zahid Ullah, and Minhas Majeed Khan. “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Challenges.” *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2019): 67–82.

⁵³ Hoo Tiang Boon & Glenn K. H. Ong, “Military dominance in Pakistan and China–Pakistan relations”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75:1, 80-102

⁵⁴ Pakistan. 2020-2021 Economic Survey. Islamabad: Economic Advisor's Wing, Ministry of Finance, Page 200. 2021.

Gwadar port acts as an alternative route to the Malaysian strait, as well as a shorter route to access the Maritime Silk Road. By establishing the economic corridor, nearby countries such as Central Asia, Middle East and South Asia can also gain economic and trade benefits.

As the epicenter of the CPEC, the Gwadar region consists of the most development since the initial rise of the BRI projects in Pakistan.⁵⁵ The construction of the Gwadar Port holds the most geopolitical implications for China due to its position in the strait. Pakistan loaned the authority of the Gwadar port to China Overseas Port Holding Company, a Chinese state-run company as a major token for the BRI, allowing the port to act as a Chinese port and use Chinese labour and systems.⁵⁶ According to the mutual agreement leased to the Chinese government for 40 years, Pakistan has agreed to only collect 9% of the annual revenue collection that comes from the marine operations of the port.⁵⁷ Despite the projected billions in revenue for the future of the port, the quick passing of authority to China may be attributed to the Chinese promise of continual investments in Pakistan. For the future benefit of Pakistan, the operations of the Gwadar port could decrease the burden on the two other local ports, Port Qasim and Port of Karachi, both reached maximum cargo capacity and unable to grow in size in the future. Through the use of the Gwadar Port, Chinese goods take significantly less time to reach West Africa and Africa, also major BRI beneficiaries, shortened from the current 9500 miles route to 2500 miles.⁵⁸ China's heavy reliance on oil for its industrial expansion is hindered by the Malacca Dilemma. As the largest importer of oil, China imports around 80% of their oil from the Middle East and Angola.⁵⁹ To import the oil, Chinese ships rely heavily on the Malacca strait. The

⁵⁵ Khetrn, Mir Sherbaz. "The Potential and Prospects of Gwadar Port." *Strategic Studies* 34/35 (2014): 70–89.

⁵⁶ Amir, Faaiz, "CPEC and Regional Integration." *The Pakistan Development Review*, 2016, 579–96.

⁵⁷ Amir, Faaiz, "CPEC and Regional Integration, 579-96.

⁵⁸ Inayat Kalim and Areeja Syed. Maritime Economy and Gwadar Port: A Growth Catalyst. *Policy Perspectives*. Vol. 17(1):73-82.

⁵⁹ Gilmartin, Heather. "The Malacca Straits as Catalyst for Multilateral Security Cooperation." *Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace* 26, no. 4 (2008): 220–26.

Malacca strait is located between Malaysia and Indonesia, and the closest opening to the strait from China is located at Singapore. Singapore, often holding joint military drills with the U.S, could potentially leverage the strait in the case of future conflicts. The Gwadar Port could act as a potential alternative trade route for China, which decreases some reliance of Chinese ships on the Malacca strait and increases the amount of land shipment through the port. If realised, the Gwadar Port could create more interdependence between Sino-Pak relations, as well as acting as a successful story to convince the initiation of more BRI projects to the rest of the world.

While both the Pakistani government and the Chinese government hold the future of the Gwadar Port to great accord, the reality of limited cargo activity, poverty-stricken area of Gwadar and massive community protests since the opening of the port emphasises on the poor resource allocation of the CPEC as well as the focus on bilateral governmental interests. The Gwadar Port, while located strategically in the sea strait, is located in the poverty-stricken Balochistan province of Pakistan.⁶⁰ Prior to the Chinese construction of the port, Gwadar was first and foremost a fishing port. With the increasing trawling from Chinese ships within the Balochistan sea, the essential livelihood of the Gwadar fishermen have been seriously affected due to the lack of technology on Pakistani fishing vessels compared to Chinese vessels.⁶¹ Zhang, the chair of COPHC, writes : “It (Gwadar) is a very neglected area with huge challenges not only on the health and education fronts but also as far as electricity and water are concerned”, with little improvement to the lives of the community since the implementation of the Gwadar port due to the lack of job opportunities. The Gwadar Port was subjected to many protests by the Baloch nationalists, many who hold Sinophobic attitudes towards the CPEC, and intolerance

⁶⁰ Gilmartin, Heather, “The Malacca Straits as Catalyst for Multilateral Security Cooperation.”, 220-26

⁶¹ Baloch, Behram. “Gwadar Fishermen Hold Rally against Grant of Fishing Rights to Chinese Trawlers.” *Dawn.com*, Dawn Media Group, 16 June 2021,

towards the increasing number of non-Baloch people in the area.⁶² The increasing number of local competition from the Karachi and the Punjab people further escalates the hostility of the Baloch people against the growing Chinese influence on the port city. Chinese workers and infrastructure projects alike have been attacked and destroyed by Baloch nationalists, which in turn increases both Chinese and Pakistan military presence in the area. The increasing military presence highlights the Pakistani government's priority of the CPEC and bilateral relations with China over improving the welfare of the Pakistani people, and China's determination to maintain their presence in the port as a sign of dominance to the world. In line with all the other privileges that Pakistan has given to China, the increasing bilateral relations provided numerous advancements towards the infrastructures and socio-economic values in Pakistan, the inconsistencies in the local government narrative of the use in Chinese capital creates a lack of momentum in the development of the BRI projects, as well as backlash from the local Pakistani communities.⁶³

Economical Implications of the BRI towards recipient countries

From an economic history viewpoint, the ancient silk road had no imposed restrictions in terms of global trade. The freedom to trade was attributed to the mix of sedentary and pastoralist economies in the silk road that traded based on mutual benefit. As evidenced in the Tang dynasty, such strict trade systems were only initially developed under a wealthy, centralised government. The Chinese funds used to finance infrastructure projects in the BRI are primarily loans funded by the Silk Road Fund, which is a sovereign wealth fund in China, with loan

⁶² Noraiee H. The Baloch nationalism in Pakistan: Articulation of the ethnic separatism after the end of the Cold War. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. 2020;11(1):72-85.

⁶³ Akhtar, Nadeem, Hidayat Ullah Khan, Muhammad Asif Jan, Cornelius B. Pratt, and Ma Jianfu. "Exploring the Determinants of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Its Impact on Local Communities." *SAGE Open*, (October 2021).

investments from the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, China Investment Corporation, China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China.⁶⁴ The large, increasing loans carried by the recipient countries to finance BRI projects, particularly the developing countries such as Pakistan, increase the reliance of the country on Chinese capital and decrease their ability to pay the loans.⁶⁵ To illustrate this reliance, as of 2022, Pakistan owes China USD 18.4 billion, which is the largest loan ever lended by any country or financial institution.⁶⁶ Despite the high risk of lending to recipient governments, according to Aid Data, “nearly 70% (of Chinese capital) in the BRI is now directed to state-owned companies, state-owned banks, special purpose vehicles, joint ventures, and private sector institutions.”⁶⁷ As the majority of the BRI countries are developing countries, most of the capital goes to the recipient governments to finance several key local infrastructure sectors. Economically, the advantages of the BRI mainly refers to the ability to finance infrastructure projects that were unable to gain traction due to the

⁶⁴ Bräutigam, D. (2020), ‘A critical look at Chinese “debt-trap diplomacy”’, *Area Development and Policy*, 5(1), 1–14

⁶⁵ Faisal, Muhammad. “Impact of Geo-Economics on Pak-China Strategic Relations.” *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2018): 66–84.

⁶⁶ International Monetary Fund, Total External Debt for Pakistan, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

⁶⁷ Malik, A., Parks, B., Russell, B., Lin, J., Walsh, K., Solomon, K., Zhang, S., Elston, T., and S. Goodman et al. “Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects.”, Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, 23-36

lack of capital.



Figure 4 : Total export value of goods from China to BRI countries from 2017 - 2021 in trillion Yuan ⁶⁸

In total, the Chinese investment overcedes any country's contribution to the BRI. In Figure 1, the upward trajectory of total export values of goods from China to BRI countries indicates that China is building closer trade ties with the BRI countries. However, official statistics conclude that the overall BRI investments of China in 2021 was USD 19.3 billion, which was a decrease of USD \$44 billion from the peak of the BRI financing in mid-2019.⁶⁹ The maturing of the BRI projects signals the protectionism built in place for both China and the

⁶⁸ Yihan Ma "Total export value of goods from China to countries in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2017 to 2021" chart, February 11, 2022, *Statista*,

⁶⁹ Nedopil Wang, Christoph, "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report H1 2021", *Green BRI Center, International Institute of Green Finance (IIGF)*, July 2021, 54-67

recipient countries, as more data from past projects can now be taken to ensure that the scope of the project is feasible under bilateral terms.

The BRI-countries based on development of local economy in 2021

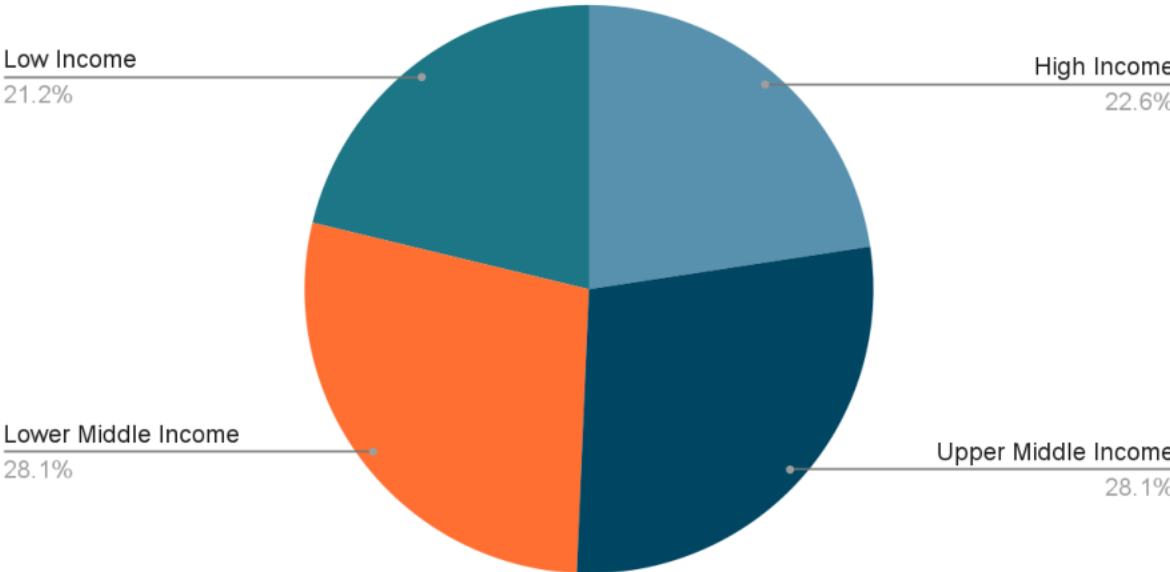


Figure 5 : The BRI countries based on the development of the local economy, 2021⁷⁰

In Figure 5, the equal distribution in the types of economies involved in the BRI reveal the successful expansion of the initiative since the initiation of the initiative. Out of 145 countries involved in the BRI, 33 countries are high income, 41 countries are upper middle income, 41 countries are lower middle income and 31 are low income. The balance in data suggests that the global connectivity that the BRI is aiming to foster is coming to fruition. On a macro-level, the connectivity, trade and improvement of infrastructure in theory should lead to higher quality of

⁷⁰ National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) People’s Republic of China. “China signs over 200 BRI cooperation documents with 145 countries and 32 international organizations”, People’s Republic of China, December 2021.

life for individuals in the BRI country. As a result, the capital invested into the BRI acts as a method for China to gain voting power in global affairs. On a micro-level, the individual benefits such as employment rates, higher quality of living and decrease in poverty remain lesser than the negative impacts due to the government focus on the macro-level rather than individuals in the economy.

The Feasibility of the BRI in the Long-Run

China's use of the ancient silk road story as the origin of the BRI proved to be majorly successful. As of 2021, 145 countries are involved in the BRI, with most of the countries located in the Asia-Pacific.⁷¹ The projects of the BRI touches upon 61% of the world's population as well as economic output, and there has been USD \$6 trillion worth of trade made between China and the BRI countries.⁷² As seen from Figure 6, the dark pink lines depict the significant improvements that the BRI has made to Eurasia railway routes in the past 8 years according to the official BRI statistics. The increasing global governance of China through the BRI is exemplified by their increasing presence in the affairs of the BRI countries. This leadership is especially prominent within the current Russian-Ukraine war. Currently, the future of the BRI in Europe is halted due to the ongoing invasions. Both Russia and Ukraine are valuable members of the BRI. China's silence in the recent invasion of Ukraine could be related to Ukraine's identity as a historic trading partner and current BRI country despite historic all-weather bilateral ties with Russia. On a global scale, on-going sanctions imposed on Russia are already affecting the trade routes between China and Europe, which primarily rely on the trans-european BRI railroad.

⁷¹ NDRC, PRC. "China signs over 200 BRI cooperation documents with 145 countries and 32 international organizations"

⁷² Nedopil Wang, Christoph (July 2021): "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report H1 2021", 21

Therefore, it is imperative for China to hone their leadership position to ensure that their trade is unaffected with the rest of the BRI countries.

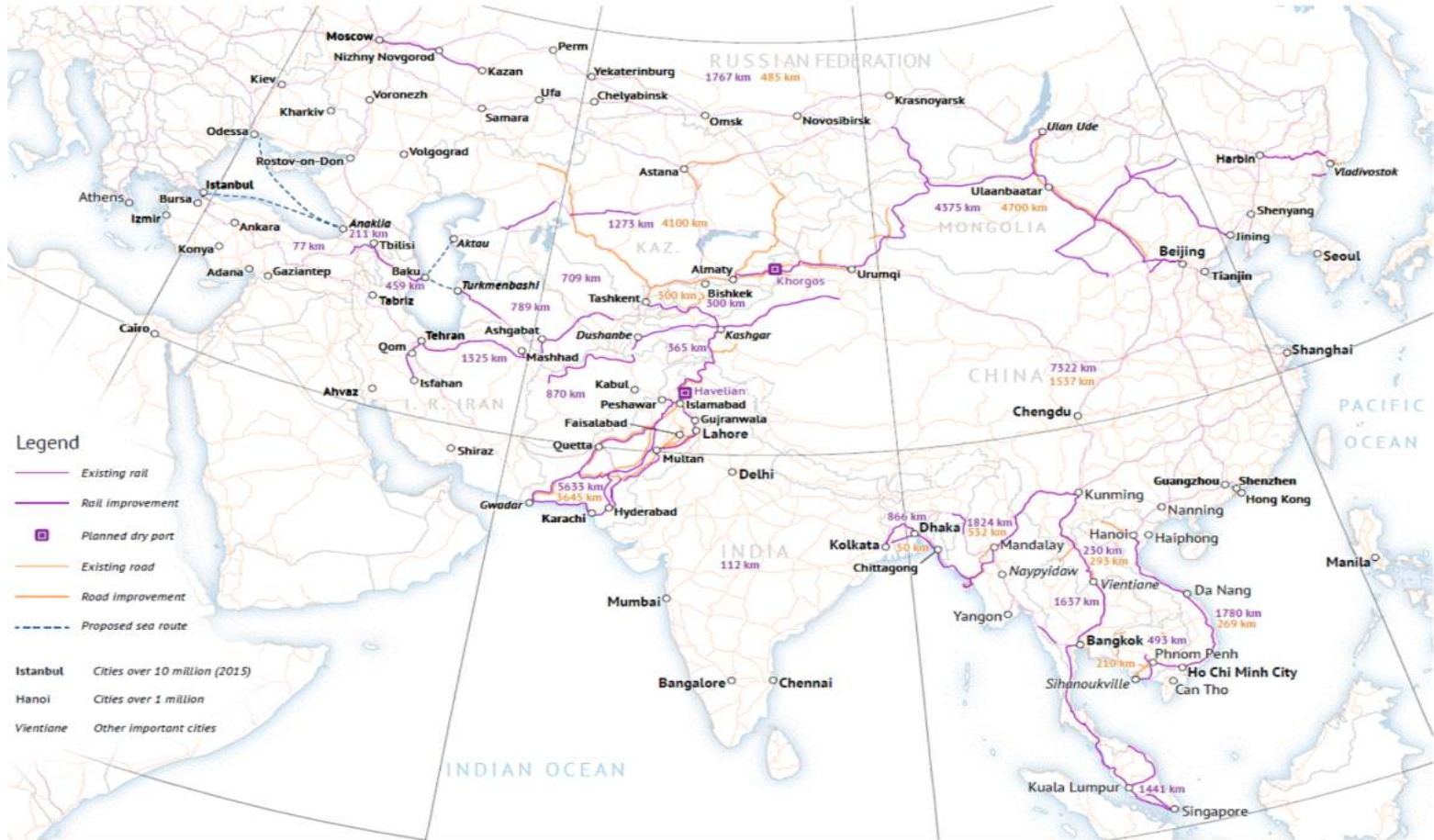


Figure 6 - The progress of the BRI routes in Eurasia⁷³

With the support of technology, diplomatic connections and mass capital, the long term prospects of the BRI could be realised. Modern China’s foreseeable presence in the future secures their leading position in the long term. This security puts China in the position to lead the modern silk road, as the futures in the majority of the BRI countries are not as stable as China due to their developing status. The BRI acts as an advanced version of trade conducted in the

⁷³ Reed, Tristan and Trubetsky, Alexander, *Assessing the Value of Market Access from Belt and Road Projects, Policy Research working paper, no. WPS 8815, World Bank, 3*

ancient silk road that is made possible by modern communication, technology and mutual aid. However, the disadvantages of the BRI are apparent. While China provides capital to the recipient country, the effectiveness in the projects lies on the recipient countries to ensure equal distribution of capital for the infrastructure projects to be feasible. As the majority of the countries involved in the BRI are developing countries, reforms through the BRI capital are largely dependent on the recipient government regardless of their status as a legitimate or a corrupt entity. The term change in recipient countries' governments also creates an inconsistency towards the relationship, speed and implementation of the projects. Because China presents the BRI as a global initiative based on the recipient country's active participation, China's inability to directly intervene in certain recipient government proceedings presents a challenge for the BRI projects in the long-term.

The effectiveness of trans-cultural trade in the ancient silk road was based on the empires that were each powerful and had goods to contribute in their own right. The past wars between empires that progressed the development of the silk road are no longer feasible in the modern world. Rather, the development of the modern silk road is entirely dependent on diplomatic communication, the needs of each country and Chinese capital to make progress in the BRI projects. In ancient China's perspective, the silk roads acted as a catalyst that fully reconstructed the Chinese identity in multiple dimensions due to the pressure from other great empires. In retrospect, the connectivity of the silk road not only caused severe problems for the Chinese empire, but collapsed many Chinese empires until the roads ceased to exist. Shallow relationships between the Chinese empire and other empires were formed only on a tribute system, and fell to warfare when tributes were not enough to satisfy the empires. Through the Han, Tang and Yuan dynasty, Sinocentric narratives arose in the silk road due to the open nature

of the centralised government. Later periods of the silk road, without loose state intervention by the Mongols, the silk road could not prosper and globalise in the way where the empires were highly connected. The lack of a central power after the Mongols propelled the silk road to its demise as the connectivity between the East and West sharply declined. The comparison between the natural development of the ancient silk roads and the state-intervened nature of the BRI disrupts the romanticisation of the silk roads. The legacy of the ancient silk roads persisted throughout history because of the powerful empires that accepted, protected and expanded the trade routes. In the modern day, complex geopolitical aims have diluted the true collaborative narrative between countries. While it is evident that China is attempting to expand its global influence through the connections established in the BRI, it is unclear whether the recipient countries are participating in the BRI with the aim to increase global connectivity.

Conclusion

The ancient silk road may have served as the initial step to globalisation for the Chinese empire, but to facilitate the global network as the leader is a task that has never been a part of the historic narrative in the ancient silk road. The internationalism presented in the concept of the BRI has long been in line with individual countries' interest, particularly from Western powers. In recent history, the unipolar world defined by the U.S after the Cold War deflects the opportunity for the genuine collaboration inherited from the silk road to rise. The unevenness in the economies of the developing countries compared to the U.S presents no advantage to conducting trade at the scale of the ancient silk road. As the power of the world is slowly redistributing, the world enters a multi-polar world which creates more balance in the global trade. The emerging position of China as a superpower creates a possibility that a network could be established through the BRI, but the intimacy driven through the ancient silk road could not be replicated in the modern era. Sinocentric narratives derived from the BRI further centre China in a position that was never achieved during the silk road. However, as told from the perspective of the ancient silk road, the silk road was never a path that was deliberately created by the empires. Central Asia served as the artery of the ancient silk roads, as the West and East were the ends of both sides in the silk roads. In the BRI, Modern China bypassed the intermediaries established in the ancient silk roads to create their own connection. There are no ends to the BRI, which complicates the ability for the Belt-Road to thrive in a modern world. The links in the network are cultivated and controlled fully by the Chinese government, which limits the natural ability of the roads to develop on their own accord.

Despite being the leading authority of the BRI, whether the BRI can succeed in the long term does not fully depend on China. Rather, the initiative depends on each country's willingness

to actively participate in the project. With careful implementation, selection and research, the capital offered from the BRI can serve developing countries and developed countries alike towards developing global economic inclusivity, which could develop into more intimate trading relationships, constant communication and foster peaceful global ties. The history of the silk road can only serve as a mnemonic device, but it is China's responsibility to ensure that the modern silk road fits the historic narrative in a way that continues the global connectivity weaved from the ancient silk road.

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