

## Building the New Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative in context

Richard T. Griffiths

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) has recently started a new project of interdisciplinary research aimed at the study of the Belt and Road Initiative of the Chinese government, with special attention on the impact of the 'New Silk Road' on countries, regions and peoples outside of China. The project will be directed by Professor Richard Griffiths, affiliated fellow at IIAS.

Since President Xi Jinping's speech in September 2013 announcing China's 'Belt and Road' initiative (BRI), it has scarcely been out of the news. It has also attracted analysis and commentary from academics and think-tanks throughout the world. In China, the reception has been overwhelmingly positive, rarely straying far from official policy pronouncements. In the West, opinion has been mixed. Most security analysts frame the analysis in terms of 'China's rise' and the threat that it poses to US military hegemony and to the established international order in general. Most economists have been cautionary, highlighting the perceived risks in some countries of over-borrowing. In almost every case, September 2013 is the starting point for analysis, as though China's BRI is the only event of any relevance. China's BRI differs from its earlier 'go global' policy, whereby Chinese firms were encouraged to seek investment opportunities abroad, through its focus on connectivity and infrastructure, and through its restricted geographical definition. China has defined the Belt and Road as involving 64 countries with 40% of the world's population and 20% of world trade. That area includes the entire land mass between China and Central-Eastern Europe and within it, China intends to build roads and railways, ports and power stations and to expedite the movement of goods across frontiers. Of course, much of that infrastructure and much of that trade serves China's interest. As the world's second largest economy and second largest trader, it would be surprising if it didn't. And that is China's 'belt and road'.

Nobody 'owned' the ancient silk roads and nobody 'owns' the new silk road of the 21st century. The trucks journey on existing roads, the trains run along existing lines, the container ships that plough the oceans already exist, and businesses fill them and the transport industry makes it all work. Of course, it can all work better by building better highways, by electrifying railways and by improving the flow through borders controls. Moreover, it is not as though these countries don't need infrastructure. Recently the Asian Development Bank calculated that Asia requires \$1.5 trillion a year in infrastructural investment if it is to sustain a viable development trajectory. At present, it is only capable of financing half of that sum itself. China's help is needed, but it is not enough. Indeed President Xi has exhorted other countries to join in building the 'belt and road'. He did not need to do

this. They are already there. For example, international development banks are financing highway construction and railway electrification projects across Central Asia and the Caucasus. The European Union is pouring billions into improving the transport infrastructure of new member states and the western Balkans. Japanese firms hold contracts for the construction of High-Speed railways in India and Thailand as well as for the modernisation of the harbour in Jakarta. By leaving all of this out of the story and concentrating solely on China, we are creating our own nightmare. Add a twist of wicked intention to the mixture, and it is little wonder that we have trouble sleeping.

IIAS is creating a new pillar devoted to interdisciplinary research on the topic of the New Silk Road. In line with IIAS' inclusive, experimental approach, the IIAS New Silk Road initiative seeks to develop a de-centralised, trans-sectoral network of local partners, able not only to work within the Social Sciences and Humanities, but also with practitioners on the ground (municipalities, local stakeholders, NGOs, artists and cultural actors, community organisations, businesses, trade unions, etc.). Moreover, and whenever possible, the projects within this initiative will engage with existing IIAS programmes under the Institute's three thematic clusters: urban, global and heritage studies. Partners involved in network platforms such as the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), the European Alliance for Asian Studies, the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) and the 'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' and Cultural Heritage Studies platforms, will also be mobilised.

The programme plans to establish formal links with research institutes in China to encourage the widest exchange of information and opinions. It will also create a 'news page' for the notification of seminars, workshops and conferences. In addition, within the programme, IIAS intends to launch a business /academic alliance for sharing up-to-date expertise and insights, and to enhance the effectiveness of policy advice.

In order to promote interest in the subject, IIAS and Leiden University are planning to release a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) entitled Building the New Silk Road early in 2019. The MOOC will be free, and it will be hosted by the Stanford-based Coursera, which, with 33 million enrolled users, is the largest educational platform of its kind. To further help promote advanced teaching on the subject IIAS will host an 'electronic library' of online resources that can be used as teaching materials and as starting points for student essays and theses. Furthermore, the new initiative will organise strategic meetings during the ICAS conference in Leiden, 16-19 July 2019.

To signal your interest in joining this initiative contact me, with the header 'New Silk Road' at [r.t.griffiths@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:r.t.griffiths@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

website: <https://newsilkroad.iias.asia>

Richard T. Griffiths is an affiliated fellow at IIAS and author of the book *Revitalising the Silk Road. China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Leiden, 2017.

Illustration: 'The New Silk Road' by Luke Sky.

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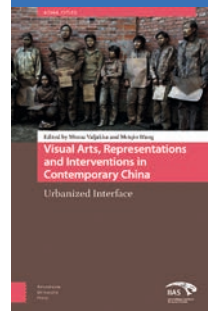


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This edited volume provides a multifaceted investigation of the dynamic interrelations between visual arts and urbanization in contemporary Mainland China with a focus on unseen representations and urban interventions brought about by the transformations of the urban space and the various problems associated with it. Through a wide range of illuminating case studies, the authors demonstrate how innovative artistic and creative practices initiated by various stakeholders not only raise critical awareness on socio-political issues of Chinese urbanization but also actively reshape the urban living spaces. The formation of new collaborations, agencies, aesthetics and cultural production sites facilitate diverse forms of cultural activism as they challenge the dominant ways of interpreting social changes and encourage civic participation in the production of alternative meanings in and of the city. Their significance lies in their potential to question current values and power structures as well as to foster new subjectivities for disparate individuals and social groups.



### Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China

Yujie Zhu

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ISBN 9789462985674

The drums beat, an old man in a grand robe mutters incantations and three brides on horseback led by their grooms on foot proceed to the Naxi Wedding Courtyard, accompanied, watched and photographed the whole way by tourists, who have bought tickets for the privilege. The traditional wedding ceremonies are performed for the ethnic tourism industry in Lijiang, a World Heritage town in southwest China. This book examines how heritage interacts with social-cultural changes and how individuals perform and negotiate their identities through daily practices that include tourism, on the one hand, and the performance of ethnicity on the other. The wedding performances in Lijiang not only serve as a heritage 'product' but show how the heritage and tourism industry helps to shape people's values, dreams and expectations. This book also explores the rise of 'romantic consumerism' in contemporary China. Chinese dissatisfaction with the urban mundane leads to romanticized interests in practices and people deemed to be natural, ethnic, spiritual and aesthetic, and a search for tradition and authenticity. But what, exactly, are tradition and authenticity, and what happens to them when they are turned into performance?

