



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Inventing the ‘Maritime Silk Road’

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## Abstract

Although inspired by the nineteenth-century term ‘Silk Road(s)’, the phrase ‘Maritime Silk Road’ has its own origins, connotations, and applications. This article examines the emergence of the latter term as a China-centric concept and its various entanglements since the early 1980s, involving the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) political bodies, academia, the ‘open door’ policy, the pursuit of World Heritage listings, and the current ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. These entanglements, the article contends, have resulted in the emergence of what could be called a ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem in the PRC. The analysis of this ecosystem presented in the article reveals not only the processes through which a narrative on China’s engagement with the maritime world has been constructed over time, but also its association with issues of national pride, heritage- and tradition-making, foreign-policy objectives, and claims to territorial sovereignty. As such, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ must be understood as a concept that is intimately entwined with the recent history of the PRC and distinct from its nineteenth-century antecedent, which was used as a label for overland connectivity.

**Keywords:** Silk Roads; Maritime Silk Road; Belt and Road Initiative; UNESCO; Zheng He

Historical and cultural heritages tell vivid stories of the past and profoundly influence the present and future.

—Xi Jinping

## Introduction

A Google Scholar search of the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’ gives over 24,000 hits. While most of the studies listed on the search platform focus on the geopolitical and economic implications of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI; originally the ‘One Belt One Road’ or OBOR) project associated with the term, there are also publications that explain the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in a historical context. Frequently in the publications dealing with the term’s historical context, the centrality of China in Indian Ocean

interactions is asserted and the importance of Chinese ports, actors, and objects (even when not related to silk) emphasized. One recent example is the journal article entitled ‘The rise of the Maritime Silk Road about 2000 years ago: Insights from Indo-Pacific beads in Nanyang, Central China’, which starts with the following lines:

The Maritime Silk Road connects East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, East Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea. This road was established under the influence of the political environment of China in antiquity. (Xu, Qiao and Yang: 2022: 1)

The current article examines the origins of such China-centric narratives of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in the 1960s and its various entanglements since the early 1980s involving the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) political bodies, academia, the ‘open-door’ policy, the pursuit of World Heritage listings, and the ongoing BRI project launched by the Chinese president Xi Jinping (1953–) in 2013.<sup>1</sup> These entanglements over the past four decades or so, the article contends, have resulted in the establishment of what could be called a ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem in the PRC. The analysis of this ecosystem reveals the processes through which a narrative on China’s engagement with the maritime world has been constructed over time as well as its association with a host of other issues, including national pride, heritage- and tradition-making, foreign-policy objectives, and claims to territorial sovereignty. Despite the proliferation of publications on the topic, these entanglements of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ with the recent history of the PRC have not yet been explored. The objective of this article is to address this lacuna.

The inspiration for those who invented the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’, as the next section outlines, was the late-nineteenth-century phrase ‘Silk Road(s)’ (as *die Seidenstraße/Seidenstraßen*), often attributed to the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905).<sup>2</sup> Since the early twentieth century the latter term has inspired academic writing and travel diaries, led to the making of documentaries and films, and provided states and transnational organizations with a metaphor by which to further their respective political, economic, and cultural objectives. Tamara Chin (2013: 194–195) has pointed out that the ‘Silk Road provides a model of idealized exchange’ and ‘offers a kind of geopolitical chronotope, that is, a condition or strategy for geopolitical thought and action, as well as a background context’. This observation applies just as much to the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’, not only because it is inspired by the nineteenth-century label, but also because it has gained similar currency with nation-states, international organizations, academics, and publishing houses.

In Japan, the concept of the ‘Silk Road(s)’ (as *Shiruku Rōdo* シルクロード, a transcription of the English term) became popular after the Second World War as a way

<sup>1</sup>A recent analysis of the BRI is Freyemann (2020). Tim Winter (2019) has examined the initiative from a ‘geocultural’ perspective. Winter (2019: 17) defines ‘geocultural power’ as the use of the past as a ‘mechanism of great power diplomacy’.

<sup>2</sup>On the use of these terms prior to Richthofen, see Chin (2013) and Mertens (2019). A critical examination of the term and its relevance to the ‘realities’ of trans-Eurasian exchanges is found in Rezakhani (2010). For recent re-examination of the ‘Silk Road’, see Hansen (2012) and Frankopan (2015).

of reconnecting with the Eurasian continent politically and culturally (Esenbel 2018: 13–14). Reconnecting to the outside world, including through the newly emerging Afro-Asian initiatives during the 1950s, was also the context within which, as Chin (2013, 2021) further demonstrates, the term ‘Silk Road(s)’ (as *Sichou zhi lu* 絲綢之路) entered the PRC state’s media vocabulary and academia. In addition to serving a similar reconnecting function, the notion of a ‘Maritime Silk Road’ provides a sense of belonging to both Japan and the PRC, which are often considered peripheral regions of the Indian Ocean world.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the case of the PRC, the concept is used to assert not only China’s involvement with, but also its centrality in, exchanges across the Indian Ocean over the past two millennia.

While in Japan the idea of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ was eventually supplanted by a more conceptual analysis of ‘maritime history’ (*kaiiki-shi* 海域史) in the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> in the PRC the former term (rendered as *Haishang Sichou zhi lu* 海上絲綢之路) rapidly won increased popularity after being proposed for the first time in 1981, and by the mid-1990s it was sparking national interest and pride. It has since been used by a broad spectrum of stakeholders in academia, cultural institutions, and government organizations to portray China’s ‘peaceful contributions’ to Indian Ocean interactions, in contrast to the violence inflicted by European colonizers. This China-centric conceptualization of Indian Ocean interactions frequently appears in Chinese academic and state discourses in the modified form of ‘China’s Maritime Silk Road’ (*Zhongguo Haishang Sichou zhi lu* 中國海上絲綢之路; emphasis added). More recently, as part of the BRI project, the term, used in conjunction with ‘Silk Road’, has been interpreted as a way of ‘smoothing’ (Winter 2019) and ‘rebranding’ (Pu 2019) the PRC’s image in foreign relations. This incorporation of the ‘Silk Road’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ under the BRI rubric, where ‘Belt’ denotes the former term and ‘Road’ the latter, has blurred (especially for those unfamiliar with the discourse within the PRC<sup>5</sup>) the distinct origins, connotations, and applications of the phrase ‘Maritime Silk Road’. It has been used domestically, for instance, to endorse the PRC’s ‘open-door’ policy, and officials, museums, and scholars based in several coastal cities of the PRC had emphasized it in their efforts to acquire UNESCO World Heritage listings even prior to the launch of BRI.

<sup>3</sup>The ‘Indian Ocean world’ is broadly defined as ‘a macro-region that runs from Africa to the Far East, and includes the Indian Ocean, Indonesian and China seas and their continental hinterlands’ (Editorial Team 2017: 1). This conceptualization of the Indian Ocean world is similar to the Japanese idea of *kaiiki* discussed in note 4.

<sup>4</sup>Suzuki Hideaki (2018) points out that the origins of *kaiiki-shi* can be found in Japanese scholarship on East–West interactions. However, the concept started taking shape in the works of Yajima Hikoichi 家島彦一 during the 1960s. Yajima’s conceptualizations of ‘maritime history’ (*kaiiki-sekai* 海域世界; also translated as ‘Indian Ocean world’), covering the maritime region from the East African coast to the East China Sea, were republished and became popular in Japan in the 1990s. Rooted in Yajima’s view of the Indian Ocean world as a historical unit, the development of *kaiiki-shi* during the 2000s was also influenced by network theory and Fernand Braudel’s analysis of the Mediterranean. *Kaiiki-shi* emphasizes multidisciplinary understanding and analysis of the Indian Ocean world and is critical of the use of the nation-state framework in studying the region. See also the works of Momoki Shirō 桃木至朗, especially Momoki (2008), for the related concept of a ‘maritime Asia’ (*kaiiki-ajia* 海域アジア).

<sup>5</sup>In fact, a survey of Western-language publications on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ suggests unfamiliarity with the origins or the pertinent discourse on the term in the PRC. See, for example, Gladney (1991), Ptak (2007), Kauz (2010), Kwa (2016), Griffiths (2020), and Gunn (2022).

These various entanglements of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea with PRC stakeholders are the main issues analysed in this article.<sup>6</sup>

In the sections below, I argue that these entanglements between academia, coastal cities, the nation-state, and UNESCO were instrumental in constructing and promoting a China-centric history of Indian Ocean interactions by invoking the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’. As such, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ must be understood as a concept that is intimately associated with the recent history of the PRC, connected to the construction of the country’s maritime heritage, and employed to serve the geopolitical agenda of the state in the South China Sea region. It is therefore distinct from the nineteenth-century term associated with Richthofen with respect to its geographical focus, intellectual discourse, and policy applications, most of which took place within or relate exclusively to the PRC.

The key conceptual framework employed to unpack the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem is Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘invented tradition’, which ‘is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (Hobsbawm [1983] 2012: 1). However, the concept is expanded in this article to include important modifications made by some of Hobsbawm’s critics who have suggested that ‘the term “invented traditions” means rather selecting, choosing, reinforcing, stressing, emphasizing or institutionalizing some of the existing or old traditions, than really inventing new ones’ (Farkas 2016: 35). Unlike the term ‘Silk Road’, which was imported into China, recognized as ‘a neologism of European geographers’ (Chin 2013: 217), and then appropriated by the Chinese state and academia during the 1970s,<sup>7</sup> the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’, although initially conceptualized by a Japanese scholar (see below), developed entirely within the PRC. This article demonstrates the processes of ‘selecting, choosing, reinforcing, stressing, emphasizing *and* institutionalizing’ associated with this development. It was only through following these processes and internal gestations that the idea of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ eventually became entangled with the broader geopolitical and ‘geocultural’ agendas of the state, including the BRI project.

This ‘invention’ of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea, and especially the adage ‘China’s Maritime Silk Road’, the article contends, originates with the Qing (1644–1911) intellectual Liang Qichao’s 梁啟超 (1873–1929) early twentieth-century ‘choosing’ of the Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433) expeditions (1405–1433) and the spread of Chinese diasporic communities as highlights of premodern China’s maritime engagements (Liang 1904). Liang made this choice after the Qing navy had been overpowered by the Western colonial powers and imperial Japan. His resurrection of Zheng He served to

<sup>6</sup>After its appropriation during the 1970s and 1980s, the use of the term ‘Silk Road’ in the PRC indicates a similar, and sometimes overlapping, trajectory as the ‘Maritime Silk Road’. A detailed comparison of the discourse on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ and the overland ‘Silk Roads’ in the PRC is planned as a separate study.

<sup>7</sup>One important facet of this appropriation was the introduction of the narrative about the Han-dynasty diplomat Zhang Qian 張騫 (d. circa 114 BCE) ‘opening’ the ‘Silk Road’ when he travelled to Central Asia in the second century BCE. This story seems to have first appeared in the official *People’s Daily* in 1971 (Chin 2013: 217) and then proliferated through academic publications.



nurse the pain of these instances of national humiliation.<sup>8</sup> Liang's views were reinvented during the 1980s by Chinese intellectuals, inspired by the imported nineteenth-century term and stimulated by the government's 'open-door' policy to undertake the study of and thus accentuate premodern China's contributions to the maritime world through trade, diplomacy, and the peaceful spread of diasporic communities. As the PRC's economy started to burgeon in the late 1990s and the 2000s, and as UNESCO began recognizing its cultural heritage sites as a way of promoting its own agenda of East–West harmony, this intellectual narrative of China's maritime engagement was 'reinforced' by nationalist knowledge production and propaganda systems. A consequence of this was the 'institutionalization' of the China-centric narrative by the Chinese state, now firmly established within the BRI project. Thus, the article reveals how, over time, a range of circumstances, influences, agendas, and stakeholders, both domestic and foreign—all part of the 'Maritime Silk Road' ecosystem—resulted in the invention, reinvention, and imagination in the ideas, research, representations, and politics concerning the 'Maritime Silk Road' in the PRC.

Also important for the unpacking of the ecosystem are the concepts of 'heritage-making' and 'museum effect' outlined by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 1998), which appear in the curating of the 'Maritime Silk Road' narrative in national and international exhibitions organized by museums and government authorities in the PRC. Similarly, the idea of 'friction' put forth by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2004) applies to the tensions evident in the deliberations between Chinese and foreign scholars over the role of China in Indian Ocean connections, in the debates over the politics of the 'open-door' policy in the PRC, and in the pursuit of UNESCO World Heritage listing by contending Chinese coastal cities. Together with Prasenjit Duara's (2003) 'regime of authenticity', the issue of 'friction' also manifests in the PRC's assertion of territorial sovereignty by claiming cultural ownership in disputed regions of the South China Sea, and in its efforts to claim exclusive possession of underwater heritage. These concepts and their applications are discussed later in this article. We begin by examining the origins of the term 'Maritime Silk Road',<sup>9</sup> around which the history and heritage of China's engagement with the Indian Ocean world was constructed, reinforced, institutionalized, and propagated globally.

<sup>8</sup>For critical views on Zheng He during the Ming and Qing periods prior to Liang's intervention, see Kutcher (2020). Other analyses of the Zheng He expeditions that differ from Liang's views include Wade (2005), Finlay (2008), and Sen (2016).

<sup>9</sup>For analysis on the historiography of Chinese maritime history, see Chang (1992), Lai (1995), and Zurndorfer (2016). A detailed study of Chinese-language scholarship on the topic within the framework of the 'Maritime Silk Road' is Gong et al. (2011). There are various Chinese, Japanese, French, and English terms for what is now popularly known as the 'Maritime Silk Road'. In this article the original forms are used only when necessary. 'Silk Road(s)' and 'Maritime Silk Road(s)' appear in quotation marks since they are invented and idealized terms that do not reflect the inherent complexities of cross-regional interactions. Moreover, as I argue in this article, the phrase 'Maritime Silk Road' has a specific meaning and connotation that do not apply to maritime or Indian Ocean connections more generally. This contention about specificity is applicable to other derivative 'Silk Road' terms as well, but that is not discussed in detail here. In Chinese-language publications, these terms were initially also placed in quotation marks. These original quotes are retained in the transcriptions used in this article. Several other terms that are English translations of Chinese phrases also appear in quotation marks. Other than these instances, all foreign terms appear in italics.

### The inventors of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’

In October 1991, the overseas edition of the *People’s Daily* published an article by Wang Xiang 王翔 with the title ‘Who First Proposed [the term] “Maritime Silk Road”?’ Wang (1991) maintained that it was the Japanese scholar Misugi Takatoshi 三杉隆敏 (1929–) who coined the term in 1979, but he was only partially correct. It was actually the French scholar Émmanuel-Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) who, in 1903, made a passing reference to ‘the way of the sea’ (*la voie de mer*) through which Chinese silk was exported to Europe via South Asian ports (Chavannes 1903: 233). Misugi used the term in 1968 (not 1979) in his book entitled *Umi no Shiruku Rōdo o motomete: Tōzai yaki-mono kōshōshi 海のシルクロードを求めて: 東西やきもの交渉史* (In Search of the Silk Road of the Sea: A History of East–West Exchange of Ceramics).

Misugi was most likely inspired by Japan’s attempts to re-engage with Eurasian countries after the Second World War, made evident in a fascinating ‘booklet’ compiled in English by a group of Japanese scholars in 1957. Produced for the first International Symposium for the History of East–West Cultural Contacts sponsored by the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, the booklet outlined the state of Japanese scholarship on ‘East–West’ interactions. Noting that study of the topic, including the ‘treatment of Japan’ within that context, was ‘overshadowed by the strong emphasis on Chinese history’, the editors, Matsuda Hisao and Fujieda Akira, hoped that the ‘booklet might serve as a stimulus for discussion of the terms East–West as both directional terms and geographical terms’ (Japanese National Commission for UNESCO 1957: 4). The 154-page booklet, with contributions by some of the leading Japanese scholars of Asian history, is divided into six parts. After Matsuda’s ‘General Survey’ outlining the trends in Japanese scholarship on ‘East–West’ connections, the work is organized under the framework of ‘three lines of communication that connected the Asian continent from East to West—the Steppe Route, the Oasis Route and the Sea Route’. This is followed by thematic sections on ‘Western Cultural Influences in China’ and ‘Western Cultural Influences in Japan’. The booklet and the Symposium were organized as part of UNESCO’s ‘Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values’ (henceforth the ‘Major Project’) launched on 1 January 1957. Running until 31 December 1966, the decade-long project, which aimed ‘to promote contacts and understanding between peoples of the East and the West through better mutual appreciation of their respective cultural values’ (UNESCO 1968: 9), not only popularized the term ‘Silk Road(s)’ in Japan, it also laid the foundations for UNESCO’s ‘Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue’ project (henceforth the ‘Silk Roads Project’), initiated in 1988 and discussed in the next section.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of this venture to highlight ‘East–West’ connections and the increasing popularity of the term ‘Silk Road(s)’ in Japan are both reflected in the title of Misugi’s book, which contains both terms. According to Misugi, the book originated from his own ‘East–West’ travel in 1966, when he sailed to Istanbul. At the Topkapı Palace Museum in the Turkish city, he saw and became interested in Chinese ceramics from the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties. This, Misugi (1968: 6–8) explains, resulted in him undertaking research on the maritime trade between East

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed analysis of UNESCO’s Major Project, see Wong (2006, 2008).

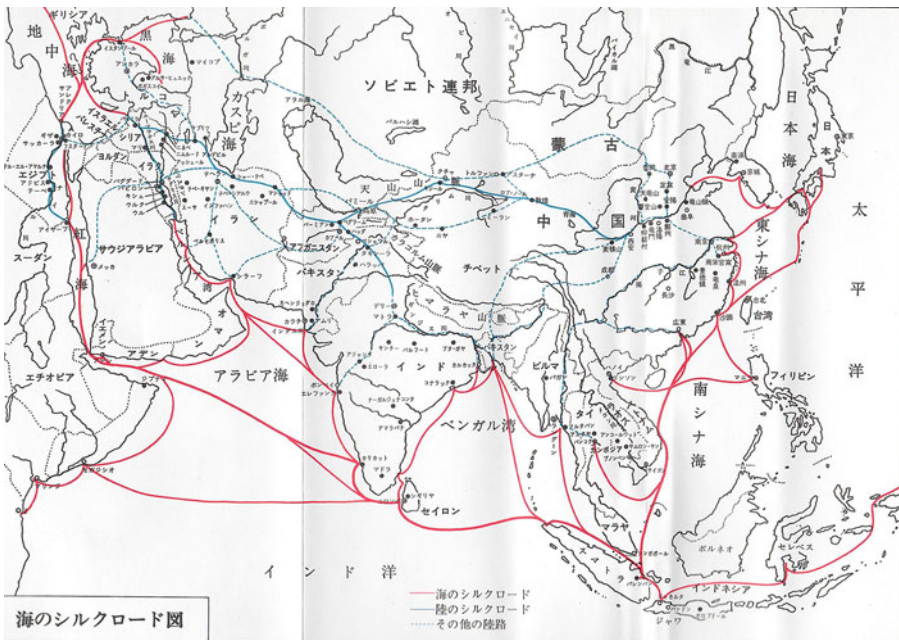


Figure 1. Map of the 'Silk Roads'. Source: Misugi Takatoshi's *Umi no Shiruku Rodo o motomete*.

and West using the 'Silk Road of the Sea'<sup>11</sup> as a metaphor. In addition to describing the trade in ceramics, Misugi also examined the ships, religions, and people that traversed the Indian Ocean world. The book includes one of the first maps of the land and sea 'Silk Roads' (Figure 1). In the 1970s and 1980s, Misugi published several other books and articles on the topic. He was also involved in the Japanese media company NHK's production of books and documentaries and participated in exhibitions highlighting Eurasian maritime connections.<sup>12</sup> Although most of his publications focused on ceramics, Misugi pointed out that silk and spices were also important commodities in these maritime commercial exchanges. Basing his research on Chinese textual materials and archaeological evidence, Misugi saw China as a key player in Indian Ocean interactions from the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). This narrative also became dominant among scholars in the PRC, as seen from the quotation cited at the beginning of this article.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese scholars in the PRC and elsewhere had yet to become aware of Misugi's publications. While the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) prevented scholars from the PRC from accessing and engaging with Misugi's ideas (Zhou 2014), others formulated their own concepts and terms. In an article published in 1974, the Hong Kong-based researcher Jao Tsung-i 饒宗頤 (Rao Zongyi, 1917–2018) coined the Chinese term *Haidao de Silu* 海道的絲路 (lit. 'The Silk Road of the sea path'). While the

<sup>11</sup>This is how the term *umi no Shiruku Rodo* is rendered into English in Misugi's publications.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Misugi (1976, 1988, 1989) and Kobe City Museum (1982). The NHK documentary also appeared in book form in multiple volumes (NHK 1988).

article focused on the early interactions between China and India through Burma, the term appeared in the appendix discussing the export of silk by sea and the ships that are known as *Kunlun bo* 崑崙船 in Chinese sources. Jao referenced Chavannes' *la voie de mer* in arguing that during the mid-first millennium CE silk was exported by sea from Guangzhou to India and subsequently to Rome on these 'Kunlun' or Khmer ships (Jao 1974: 582–583). Jao did not render *Haidao de silu* into English.

The current popularity and widespread use of the Chinese term *Haishang Sichou zhi lu* and its English rendition as the 'Maritime Silk Road' can be linked to several events that took place in the PRC during the 1980s. This included the 'opening up' of China's coastal regions under the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) initiative established by Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) in 1979, which resulted in a revived interest in the study of the history of Sino-foreign interaction (*Zhongwai guanxi shi* 中外關係史). Also important was the first major celebration of the Zheng He expeditions in 1985. By the end of the 1980s, augmented by the launch of the UNESCO Silk Roads Project in 1988, the idea of a Maritime Silk Road took hold in the PRC and around the world. An important figure in all of this was the PRC scholar Chen Yan 陳炎 (1916–2016).

A few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the PRC government acknowledged the mistakes of the 'Anti-Rightist Campaign' of the late 1950s, under which many intellectuals were removed from their academic positions and persecuted by the state. Chen Yan was one such person. A scholar of Burmese language and history, Chen had taught at Peking University since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Branded a 'Rightist' in 1957 and then harassed during the Cultural Revolution, Chen was 'rehabilitated' and was eventually able to resume his academic career in 1979 at the age of 63.<sup>13</sup> A year later, he published an article proposing the idea of a 'Southwest Silk Road' (initially *Xinan Sidao* 西南絲道 and later *Xinan Sichou zhi lu* 西南絲綢之路) which connected the southwestern regions of the PRC (that is, the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan) to India through Burma during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang dynasties (Chen 1980). Chen argued that this 'Southwest Silk Road' was linked to the Central Asian 'Silk Road', as well as to the maritime routes that connected coastal China to West Asia. His article also carried a map depicting the routes through Central Asia, Burma, and across the Indian Ocean. In 1981, at the inaugural meeting of the newly established Association for Historians of China's Foreign Relations (*Zhongwai guanxi shi xuehui* 中外關係史學會, later officially known as the Chinese Society for Historians of China's Foreign Relations and by the acronym CSHCFR),<sup>14</sup> held in Xiamen, Chen became the first PRC scholar to propose the idea of a *Haishang Sichou zhi lu*. The Chinese and English versions of his presentation were published in 1982 and 1983 respectively (Chen 1982, 1983). The English translation, which appeared in the prestigious journal *Social Sciences in China*, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, was entitled 'On the Maritime "Silk Road"'.

Chen Yan did not refer to the earlier writings of Misugi Takatoshi or Jao Tsung-I when he published his essays in the early 1980s. Rather, he drew 'inspiration' from his colleague at Peking University, the renowned Indologist Ji Xianlin 季羨林 (1911–2009).

<sup>13</sup>Details about Chen Yan's life, his academic experience, and his publications can be found in his memoirs (Chen 2010). Also available is a three-volume collection of his articles (Chen 2006) as well as a compilation of English translations of his key articles (Chen 2020).

<sup>14</sup>The organization is subordinate to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

In 1955 Ji had published an article investigating the possibility of early Chinese silk entering India through Burma (Ji 1955). Given Chen's training in Burmese language and history, his interest in (re-)examining this possibility is understandable. It was during the course of writing about the 'Southwest Silk Road' that he also developed an interest in exploring the maritime spread of Chinese silk. In his publications on the 'Maritime Silk Road', Chen (1982, 1983) argued that there was already an 'eastern sea route of the Maritime "Silk Road"' before the Common Era, through which silk was exported to Korea and Japan. Another branch, which Chen called 'the South China Sea "Silk Road"', facilitated the export and imperial gifting of silk to polities in Southeast, South, and West Asia prior to the seventh century CE. For him, the 'developmental phase of the Maritime "Silk Road"' took place during China's Tang and Song dynasties, which coincided with an increase in the production, export, and consumption of silk in China and elsewhere. Concurrently, Chen argued, advances were made in Chinese ship-building and navigational techniques. The 'Golden Age of the Maritime "Silk Road"', according to him, came between the Yuan (1271–1368) and Qing periods, when silk was exported to the Americas through Manila.

Many of Chen's arguments are highly problematic, as is his overall China-centric narrative. For instance, he claimed that 'the export of Chinese silk helped people in these [foreign] areas to dress better', that it 'enriched and lent beauty to the life of [foreign] people', that it also contributed to the creation of Chinese diasporic communities, and that it resulted in the formation of 'a great communication artery connecting Asia, Africa, Europe and America'. He concluded that the export of silk by sea 'exhibited a marvelous splendor in facilitating the exchange of ancient civilizations and had a huge impact on the cultures of various peoples of the world' (Chen 1983: 179). Despite such exaggerations, by the mid-1980s the idea of a China-centric 'Maritime Silk Road' started to have a wide-ranging impact on the intellectual community and policymakers in the PRC.<sup>15</sup> It became intertwined, for example, with the academic interest in the history of Sino-foreign interactions (see below), especially among the members of the CSHCFR and the Overseas Chinese History Society of China (*Huaqiao lishi xuehui* 華僑歷史學會), both organizations established in 1981. The celebrations marking the 580th anniversary of the Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He's Indian Ocean expeditions in the PRC, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia in 1985 furthered these academic interests and more deeply entrenched the concept of the 'Maritime Silk Road' in Chinese academia, popular literature, and the state's propaganda agenda.<sup>16</sup>

The preparations for the Zheng He celebrations started in 1983 with the establishment of an organizing committee under the direction of state leaders Bo Yibo 薄一波 (1908–2007), the vice-chairman of the Central Advisory Commission of the Chinese

<sup>15</sup>During this time, the Taiwanese scholar Ch'uan Hansheng 全漢昇 (1986) also published an article which used the Chinese term *Haishang Sichou zhi lu* to analyse the maritime trade in silk during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He demonstrated how this trade linked Qing China (1644–1911) to the Americas through the Philippines across the Pacific Ocean. Although silk started to be exported from China during the Han period, Ch'uan (1986: 234) argued that it was only after the opening of the shipping lanes to the new world that the trade in the commodity truly flourished.

<sup>16</sup>The Nanjing Zheng He yanjiu hui 南京鄭和研究會 (Nanjing Association for the Research on Zheng He), which publishes the journal *Zheng He yanjiu* 鄭和研究 (Zheng He Research), was established in 1986, after the festivities marking the 580th anniversary of the Ming voyages.



Communist Party, and Fang Yi 方毅 (1916–1997), then holding the position of state councillor. It was decided that the main event marking the anniversary would take place in Nanjing, ‘the second home’ of the Ming-dynasty mariner.<sup>17</sup> The renovation of archaeological sites associated with Zheng He, the establishment of memorial halls and research centres, the construction of an imagined (and often exaggerated) human replica of Zheng He, the production of publications on him and his expeditions, and a media blitz that included a TV series on the eunuch admiral were planned and completed by 1985 (Figure 2). The major commemorative meeting took place in Nanjing from 11 to 13 July and was attended by 3,000 people, including national, provincial, and city officials; military representatives; scholars; and delegates from various overseas Chinese communities. It concluded with a screening of a documentary entitled *Haishang Sichou zhi lu* 海上絲綢之路, especially produced for this occasion.<sup>18</sup>

As part of the Zheng He commemorations, the Chinese and English editions of *China Pictorial* (*Zhongguo huabao* 中國畫報) published a photographic essay on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ based on interviews conducted in 16 countries situated around the Indian Ocean.<sup>19</sup> A comprehensive collection of these photographs, along with those related to the ‘Overland Silk Road’, appeared in *China Pictorial* (1989) (in separate English and Chinese editions) entitled *The Silk Road on Land and Sea* (*Lushang yu Haishang Sichou zhi lu* 陸上與海上絲綢之路). Chen Yan was one of the editors of these issues, which contained a detailed outline of his views on the ‘Southwest Silk Road’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’. Thus, by the end of the 1980s, the foundations of what could be termed a ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem and the related ‘invented tradition’ of China’s Indian Ocean heritage had been laid. This ecosystem involved academia, government officials, the media, and members of overseas Chinese communities. Its stakeholders claimed that 1) China had been the main driver of Indian Ocean interactions through its exports of silk; 2) China’s participation in Indian Ocean interactions dated back to as early as the second millennium BCE; 3) the Zheng He expeditions were evidence of the friendly and harmonious intentions of Chinese engagement in the Indian Ocean; and 4) the connections between overseas Chinese communities and their ancestral homeland had been an essential part of these maritime connections.

There was another important facet to this ecosystem in the 1980s, one that involved linking the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ to the PRC’s ‘open-door’ policy. This concept was employed as a metaphor by some Chinese intellectuals and officials in order to endorse the economic reforms instituted in 1979 and express support for the PRC’s renewed engagement with the outside world. This became evident during the celebrations marking the 580th anniversary of Zheng He’s expeditions. Speeches delivered by scholars and officials made reference to Deng Xiaoping’s ‘open-door’ policy, the ‘indomitable pioneering spirit of the Chinese people’ (*Zhonghua minzu dawuwei de kaituo jingshen* 中華民族大無畏的開拓精神), and the ‘patriotic education’

<sup>17</sup>Zheng He was born in Yunnan.

<sup>18</sup>Details about the organization of the event in Nanjing marking the anniversary, including the programme, a list of important attendees, and some of the key speeches, appear in a commemorative publication edited by Zhongguo hanghai xuehui (1986).

<sup>19</sup>These appeared in the October and November 1985 issues of the Chinese- and English-language editions of *China Pictorial*.



Figure 2. Calendar commemorating the 580th anniversary of the Zheng He expeditions. Source: Author's personal collection.

(*aiguo jiaoyu* 愛國教育) that outlined Chinese navigational achievements and could 'help build a socialist spiritual civilization in China' (*zhuyu woguo shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming de jianshe* 助於我國社會主義精神文明的建設) (Zhongguo hanghai xuehui



1986). Three years later, in 1988, a journal article argued that the establishment of the SEZs was similar to the ‘opening’ of the historical ‘Maritime Silk Road’ and was capable of strengthening the economies of the hinterland areas and the coastal regions of the PRC (Wu 1988). That same year, the *People’s Daily* published a commentary introducing a book on contemporary economic relations between China and Southeast Asian countries that invoked the idea of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ to describe the regions’ ‘long history of trading relations’ (Liu 1988). Another commentary suggested that connecting the hinterland areas and coastal regions through railway networks could result in the ‘formation of multiple twentieth-century maritime and overland “Silk Roads”’ (Ji and Yang 1988: 5).

The invoking of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as a metaphor to endorse economic reforms and the ‘open-door’ policy was most likely related to the debates and the political tensions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The six-part China Central Television (CCTV) documentary called *Heshang* 河殤 (*River Elegy*) became a controversial part of this debate by highlighting the superiority of an outward-looking oceanic civilization over the traditional inward-looking Chinese civilization based in the Yellow River (Lau and Lo 1991; Ma 1996). First screened in June 1988, the documentary triggered debate and discussion among Chinese politicians, intellectuals, and students about the pace, extent, and impact of the ‘open-door’ policy. It was banned after a few months because it had allegedly disparaged traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, as well as presenting a ‘critical reflection’ on China’s recent (post-1949) past.<sup>20</sup> Its banning, followed by the crackdown on the student movement in 1989, resulted in a temporary halt to the process of linking the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea to the state’s economic and ‘open-door’ policies, at least until Deng Xiaoping’s ‘southern tour’ in early 1992, which reconfirmed the PRC’s commitment to economic reforms. Instead, the focus shifted to the heritagization of China’s maritime past. The main reason for this shift was UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project, which, despite the concerns over human rights issues related to the Tiananmen crackdown, swiftly integrated the PRC into the Eurasian project. This also paved the way for the PRC to assert exclusivity over, claim cultural ownership of, and ultimately promote the concept of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as ‘China’s Maritime Silk Road’ globally.

### International platform, national pride

Just as the ideas about the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, its role in the construction of a maritime heritage, and its use in the contemporaneous discourse on the ‘open-door’ policy were coalescing in the late 1980s PRC, UNESCO launched its own Silk Roads Project. It is argued in this section of the article that the converging of these two streams between 1988 and 1998 contributed to the worldwide recognition of the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’. At the same time, however, the encounter with foreign academia seems to have kindled nationalist sentiments within the PRC, especially among those trying to use the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ narrative to promote the case for China’s central role in Indian Ocean interactions. Many of these people were members of CSHCFR, which played a significant role in the writing of the history of China’s interactions with foreign regions

<sup>20</sup>Official criticism of the documentary in the PRC is addressed in Lin (1990).

using the framework of the ‘Silk Roads’. These developments in the 1990s and the discourse on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, extending through to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, were all crucial for the invention of a storyline about China-driven Eurasian overland and maritime connections that is now a key feature of the BRI propaganda. This storyline is disseminated through various means and media, including, as discussed later in the article, international exhibitions and performances.

Vadime Elisseeff, the chairman of UNESCO’s International Consultative Committee of the Silk Roads, which oversaw the Silk Roads Project, credited the Major Project of 1957–1966 with serving as a ‘guide’ to the organization’s new initiative.<sup>21</sup> From that earlier undertaking, Elisseeff (2000: 13) explained, ‘emerged the notion of three intercultural routes: the Steppe Route, the Oasis Route, and the Maritime Route’. Like the Major Project, the Silk Roads Project also stressed ‘academic credibility’ and the dissemination of the project’s findings to general audiences as its two main objectives. Thus, academic conferences, exhibitions, publications, and media coverage became the main elements of what was highlighted as ‘the avant-garde of a new type of Unesco project, the “projets mobilisateurs” mobilisation projects’ (UNESCO 1988: 1). By the time the project concluded in 1998, the ‘Silk Roads’ had achieved worldwide recognition.

At the beginning of this new UNESCO project, however, there was ambiguity over the term ‘Silk Roads’ and the methodology for studying it. For example, the ‘Final Report of the Meeting of the Consultative Committee’ of the Silk Roads Project, dated 9–11 May 1988, pointed out that ‘the term “Silk Roads” must be defined’. There was also a call at the meeting to design a methodology that would provide a ‘firm framework for research’. Additionally, the Committee emphasized the need for a ‘careful sifting and verifying of primary sources’ (UNESCO 1988: 3). Other details about the early deliberations and the project’s objectives appeared in the inaugural issue of the Silk Roads Project newsletter, published in 1989. The newsletter (UNESCO 1989: 2) noted that the project, conceived initially as a five-year scheme, aimed to ‘make people living in the present day aware of the need for a renewed dialogue among themselves, and to help them discover the historical records of human understanding and communication which provided a mutual enrichment for different civilizations along these roads’. It also set out the project’s research and dissemination plans. While ‘a series of interdisciplinary seminars, as well as meetings with local specialists’ were highlighted as ways to ‘make significant contributions to contemporary scholarly research and cultural reflection’, the proposal for three expeditions ‘along the main Silk Roads’ was intended to satisfy the project’s ‘popular’ dimension. These expeditions, the newsletter (UNESCO 1989: 2) explained, would ‘provide the opportunity to produce documentary films, publications and exhibitions’. The first of these expeditions, along the ‘Desert Route’, began from Xi’an on 20 July 1990; the ‘Maritime Route Expedition’ commenced from Venice on 23 October 1990; and the ‘Steppe Road Expedition’ started from the Turkmenistan capital Ashgabat on 19 April 1991.

The idea of focusing on the maritime route was introduced during preliminary deliberations on the Silk Roads Project by Bal Krishen Thapar, India’s UNESCO representative to the Consultative Committee. Thapar, an archaeologist, had previously

<sup>21</sup>For a survey of UNESCO’s entanglement with the ‘Silk Roads’ idea, see Whitfield (2020).

served as director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India. At the Consultative Committee meeting on 10 May 1988, Thapar emphasized the 'need to differentiate between the coastal route and the high seas route'. As part of the maritime aspect of the Silk Roads Project, he argued that 'changes in the environment require study, as do advances in the technology of ship-building, astronomy, etc.'. Thapar also stressed 'the parallel importance of archaeological investigation and the study of literary sources', as well as the 'need for close cooperation with those planning the land routes' (UNESCO 1988: 5). He was appointed the coordinator for the 'Maritime Route' sub-committee. At the same meeting of the Consultative Committee, Oman's representative offered a ship called the *Fulk al-Salamah* ('Ship of Peace') on behalf of his government to those coordinating the project's maritime route (UNESCO 1988: 5).<sup>22</sup> The Chinese delegates, who noted the 'absence' of specialists from the PRC at the meeting, seem only to have reviewed the proposed 'Desert Route' expedition. In fact, reports from the initial Consultative Committee and the various sub-committee meetings on the project do not indicate that the Chinese side proposed any academic symposia, research projects, or media coverage on the maritime route at the meeting. It is conceivable that, while the Chinese delegates were easily able to identify the importance of Xi'an and discuss the 'Desert Route' because of the existing popularity of the 'Overland Silk Road' in the PRC, they had no clear knowledge of recent writings on the 'Maritime Silk Road'.

Almost a year later, in March 1989, Jia Xueqian 賈學謙 (1921–), the deputy secretary-general of the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, first visited Quanzhou and encountered the concept of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. Most likely during his interactions with Wang Lianmao 王連茂 (1941–), the director of the Quanzhou Maritime Museum, Jia was told that Quanzhou was internationally recognized as the 'starting point' (*qidian* 起點) of the 'Maritime Silk Road' and that it was also an important *qiaoxiang* 僑鄉 city (that is, the hometown of many overseas Chinese), with its diasporic networks extending to over 90 countries, including about eight million people living in Taiwan (Jia 2004: 133–134).<sup>23</sup> At a meeting with city and provincial officials, Jia (2004: 134) remarked that it would be a 'great disappointment if the international expeditionary research team for the Maritime Route of the Silk Roads did not come to Quanzhou', as this, he argued, would render 'the research [on the route] incomplete'. Jia's visit resulted in the greater involvement of the PRC in the Maritime Route Expedition and Quanzhou's emergence as the main host for the UNESCO delegation.

Shortly after the UNESCO Consultative Committee meeting in Xi'an in late April 1989, representatives from the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Academy of Social Sciences, and other key governmental organizations discussed the Silk Roads Project and jointly asked the State Council to formally approve the PRC's participation in order to 'uphold sovereign rights, be an active participant, strengthen

<sup>22</sup>This was neither the first nor the last time Oman had engaged in such transregional initiatives by offering a ship or boat to sail across the Indian Ocean. In 1982, the Omani government sponsored the so-called 'Sinbad Voyage' on a boat called the *Sohar*, which sailed from Muscat to Guangzhou. For details of this voyage, see Severin (1982). Later, in 2008, Oman funded the construction of the *Jewel of Muscat*, modelled after a ninth-century dhow that sank near the Indonesian island of Belitung. The boat sailed from Oman to Singapore in 2010. On the boat's construction and voyage, see Jackson (2012).

<sup>23</sup>For a detailed analysis of the place of *qiaoxiang* in the PRC's 'Silk Road' narrative, see Candela (2013).

cooperation, [and] expand the influence of the PRC, while acting within financial means' (Jia 2004: 5–6). The State Council's approval led to the establishment of the China Silk Roads Project Coordination Group (*Zhongguo sichou zhi lu xiangmu xietiaozu* 中國絲綢之路項目協調組) under the leadership of Jia Xueqian. Jia returned to Quanzhou in November 1989 to participate in a planning meeting for the conference associated with the Maritime Route Expedition. The China Silk Roads Project Coordination Group met in Beijing a month later to finalize the logistical details and coordination plans with various coastal provinces and cities (Jia 2004: 5–6). These meetings, the local engagement with UNESCO's Silk Roads Project, and the publicity Quanzhou received through its participation sparked strong interest among coastal cities in the PRC in integrating themselves into the 'Maritime Silk Road' discourse and pursuing, as detailed in the next section, its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

UNESCO's Maritime Route Expedition started out from Venice after an international seminar on 'Travel Literature or Travels of Literature'. The *Fulk al-Salamah* set sail on 23 October 1990 flying the flag of the United Nations and 'accompanied by a flotilla of historical boats and heralded by a fanfare of trumpets'. The ship stopped at 21 ports in 16 countries before finally reaching Osaka on 8 March 1991. Various cultural programmes, academic conferences, and field visits were organized at each of these ports, while on board the ship, slide and video presentations, lectures, and 'brainstorming' sessions were held. 'On a rotating basis', 90 scholars from 26 countries formed the 'international team' leading this maritime expedition (UNESCO 1991: 2). Many more scholars attended onsite academic conferences, including Misugi Takatoshi, who participated in the conference held in Brunei's capital Bandar Seri Begawan, and Chen Yan, who did the same in the Philippines and Quanzhou.

Liu Yingsheng 劉迎勝 (1947–), a Nanjing-based historian of the Mongols who had thus far not published on Indian Ocean interactions, represented the PRC on the Maritime Route Expedition.<sup>24</sup> Liu's 1992 report on the expedition provides important details about the onsite academic conferences and the deliberations that took place on board the *Fulk al-Salamah*. Liu (1992: 109–110) acknowledged the impact of UNESCO's project on 'Silk Roads' studies in China by noting that it had 'strengthened national confidence' (*zengqiang minzu zixinxin* 增強民族自信心), 'expanded academic horizons' (*kaikuo xueshu shiye* 開闊學術視野), and contributed to the 'cultivation of a new generation of scholars' (*peiyang xinyidai xuezhe* 培養新一代學者). Liu's report is especially noteworthy because it indicates how Chinese views on the 'Maritime Silk Road' started to be internationalized through the UNESCO Silk Roads Project. When, for instance, the representative of Oman argued that Chinese ships had not travelled to the Persian Gulf before the Mongol Yuan period, Liu (1992: 102–103) countered that such 'Chinese ocean-going boats' did in fact ferry passengers from China 'sailing directly' (*zhihang* 直航) to the Persian Gulf as early as the middle of the eighth century CE. Later, at a conference held in Sri Lanka where B. E. S. J. Bastiampillai of the University of Colombo interpreted Zheng He's expeditions in terms of Ming China's military expansion into

<sup>24</sup>Liu also participated in the 'Steppe Road' expedition and published separate books on the maritime and steppe routes (Liu 1995a, 1995b). Liu has since emerged as one of the leading scholars of Mongol Yuan maritime history.

the Indian Ocean region and demonstrated its exploitative trade relations with Sri Lanka, Liu (1992: 104) argued that the expeditions were the 'most glorious maritime activities of the Asian people before the arrival of the Western colonizers'. Liu also maintained the primacy of Chinese historical records over those from Sri Lanka, which he noted were composed much later.<sup>25</sup>

This nationalistic framing of the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea and China's exclusivity over it became more prevalent in the PRC during the 1990s, including in the new writings of Chen Yan. In 1991, Chen Yan participated in an onsite conference in Quanzhou organized as part of the Maritime Route Expedition, where he reiterated his views on China's important contributions to 'world civilization' (*shijie wenming* 世界文明) through the 'Maritime Silk Road' (Chen 1991: 4–5). Shortly thereafter, in 1996, when he published a collection of his articles on the 'Maritime Silk Road', Chen acknowledged Misugi's works for the first time. In the preface to the collection, Chen noted that he had come to know of Misugi's publications, but because of the 'Anti-Rightist' movement he had no way of accessing his writings. Chen then explained that 'I felt deeply that this research [on the "Maritime Silk Road"] should be taken up urgently by Chinese scholars because it is part of the glorious history of the Chinese nation. The Chinese people certainly have the right to articulate [on the topic], and, therefore, it ought to be written about by the Chinese' (Chen 1996: vii). Alluding to Misugi's contributions, Chen remarked that the Chinese had been ridiculed by some Japanese scholars, arguing that '[historical] sources were located in China, but research took place in Japan'. This, according to Chen, implied that 'China had the [primary] sources but lacked the skills to research them, for which Chinese scholars had to depend on the Japanese'. He urged Chinese academics not to fall behind foreign scholars, emphasizing that, since the 'Maritime Silk Road' originated in China, it was their research and writing that would 'enhance the glorious history of our Chinese people' (Chen 1996: viii).

Chen elaborated on this latter point by describing his experience of participating in UNESCO's Silk Roads Project, which made him realize the international significance of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. The implication of this, he wrote,

is especially significant for our China. At every international symposium, whenever there is a discussion of the 'Maritime Silk Road,' virtually every paper touches upon the impact of Chinese culture on the political, economic, commercial, cultural, ethnic, religious, and other aspects of countries through which the road passed. The history of the 'Maritime Silk Road' is an inseparable part of the history of the Chinese nation. The 'Maritime Silk Road' not only connected East and West through trade and friendly exchanges, and furthered the friendship and understanding between different peoples, but also gave an impetus to the economic and cultural exchanges between East and West, and wrote a glorious page in the development of world civilization. (Chen 1996: xi)

<sup>25</sup>The papers presented at the conferences under the Silk Roads Project scheme are available at the 'Knowledge Bank' website of UNESCO: [https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/knowledge-bank?field\\_author=&field\\_country\\_entity=&field\\_themes=All&page=11&search\\_api\\_fulltext=&order=field\\_author&sort=desc](https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/knowledge-bank?field_author=&field_country_entity=&field_themes=All&page=11&search_api_fulltext=&order=field_author&sort=desc), [accessed 14 February 2023].

Liu's and Chen's nationalist framings of the 'Maritime Silk Road' follow a pattern of using history for nation-making purposes that has been prevalent in China from the early twentieth century. While Prasenjit Duara (1995) has demonstrated this practice in the case of Chinese historiography of China, Xin Fan (2021) does so for Chinese historiography of world history. Starting with Liang Qichao, Duara (1995: 33–34) explains that 'much of the Chinese intelligentsia rapidly developed a linear, progressive history of China that was modelled in the European experience of liberation from medieval/autocratic domination'. Duara (1995: 35–36) also points out that Liang's 'politics of "great nationalism" obliged him to incorporate the non-Han into the nation' by establishing a threefold linear periodization of Chinese history that highlighted China's encounters with other Asians during the 'ancient', 'medieval', and 'modern' periods.

It was in this context of laying the foundations for Chinese historiography that Liang resurrected Zheng He, a Muslim and a eunuch, and transformed the Ming admiral into a national hero and a key figure in later discourse on the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea. Indeed, the 'invented tradition' of China's Indian Ocean heritage through the 'choosing' of Zheng He started with an essay of Liang's that appeared in the 1904 issue of *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 (*New People's Miscellany*).<sup>26</sup> Liang compared Zheng He to Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan to highlight the superiority of the Ming ships and the admiration the people and states in the Indian Ocean had for Zheng He, for his 'bravery' and contribution to quelling local 'rebellions'. Moreover, Liang claimed that the territories in various parts of Southeast Asia were 'our lands abroad' because of the Ming expeditions and the ensuing migration and economic contribution of the Chinese people to the region. As Liang (1904: 26) wrote,

A large part of Southeast Asia, so-called Indochina and the Nanyang Archipelago, are the places where the Chinese nation extends into the ocean [lit. 'are the geographical nadir of the Chinese nation']. In the future it will again be exclusively part of the Chinese nation's sphere of influence. Speaking about the present situation [there], the white people are in control of its politics on the surface [lit. 'treat its people like corpses'], yet their ability to run the local commerce is no match for ours.

Liang suggests that in the future Chinese migrants will be able to bring the regions into the 'Chinese nation's sphere of influence', and he gives figures for such people already in the various colonial regions of Southeast Asia. As with the widespread acceptance of his historiography of China in the PRC, Liang's portrayal of Zheng He became the prevalent framework for Chinese writings on the Ming's maritime expeditions, including those by Liu Yingsheng and Chen Yan, and, with the emphasis on the Chinese overseas communities, became core elements of the 'China's Maritime Silk Road' narrative.

Xin Fan has pointed to a similar nationalist trend in Chinese scholarship on world history. 'The writing of the ancient past,' he points out, 'was not merely an intellectual practice; it was also a way for Confucian scholars to participate in contemporaneous

<sup>26</sup>On the use of Zheng He in the PRC's recent foreign policy outreach, see Wade (2019).



politics' (Fan 2021: 19). He argues that the CCP state introduced historical materialism and attempted to turn world history into the 'handmaiden of political ideology' (Fan 2021: 89–90). In the early 1980s the field was called on to 'serve China's Four Modernizations movement'. After the founding of the PRC, the national history of China was separated from the study of world history, essentially creating two separate fields in historical studies. In the 1990s, Xin Fan (2021: 154) explains, China's world historians abandoned their use of a Marxist framework, which had thus far dominated historiographical analyses in the PRC, to 'give way to their nationalist emotions'. These scholars with 'nationalist emotions' believed that 'world history in China should be written in a "Chinese" way'. This led to 'deep tensions between local and global identities that confront many Chinese scholars, as they face the pressure to maintain a nationalistic standpoint, while engaging in a subject whose content is considered to be not "Chinese"' (Fan 2021: 196). Chinese scholars of the 'Silk Roads' addressed this 'tension' by integrating themselves into the field of the history of Sino-foreign interactions, which became popular in the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s. This field bridged the gulf between national (that is, Chinese) and world histories by placing China at the centre of transnational research and publications. The 'Silk Roads' framework also provided scholars in this field of study with an opportunity to 'reinforce' the 'invented tradition' of Chinese maritime history and heritage.

Zhang Xinglang 張星烺 (1888–1951), Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞 (1887–1946), Chen Yuan 陳垣 (1880–1971), and Xiang Da 向達 (1900–1966) were four pioneers in this field of research.<sup>27</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, they contributed to the compilation of textual sources on China's historical interactions with foreign lands and the translation of foreign writings on the topic. During the 1950s, scholars such as Zhou Yiliang 周一良 (1913–2001) and Jin Kemu 金克木 (1912–2000) wrote books on these interactions as part of the PRC's agenda to promote 'friendship' with foreign countries.<sup>28</sup> The most comprehensive research on the topic was undertaken by Fang Hao 方豪 (1910–1980), whose five-volume study entitled *Zhong-Xi jiaotong shi* 中西交通史 (History of the Intercourse between China and the West) was published in Taiwan in 1953. Fang acknowledged the emphasis on China in his study by explaining that the fields of the 'History of Eurasian Intercourse' (*Ou-Ya jiaotong shi* 歐亞交通史) and 'History of East-West Intercourse' (*Dong-Xi jiaotong shi* 東西交通史) also concentrated on China. According to Fang (1968 [1953]: 3–28), the study of China's interactions with the 'West' developed through five avenues: 1) research on China's northwestern regions by Chinese scholars, which he saw as beginning during the Jiaqing period 嘉慶 (1760–1820), led by Qing scholars belonging to the *kaozheng* 考證 ('evidential') school; 2) exploration of the geography of foreign regions by Chinese scholars, which started with the Qing's interest in the history of the Mongol Yuan dynasty; 3) studies of China by European and American scholars under the rubrics of 'Orientalology' (*Dongfang xue* 東方學) and 'Sinology' (*Hanxue* 漢學), which began with their focus on 'East-West' interactions during the Mongol Yuan dynasty; 4) the examination of China by Japanese scholars, especially those interested in the 'comprehensive history of China' (*Zhina*

<sup>27</sup>A recent overview of the field in the PRC is by Chen (2021), who does not mention the contributions of scholars before the 1980s nor does he offer a critical analysis of the related publications by members of the CSHCFR.

<sup>28</sup>These include Zhou (1951, 1955), and Jin (1957).



*tongshi* 支那通史); and 5) the archaeology of Central Asia and Dunhuang, studies that began with the exploration of Chinese Central Asian sites in the early twentieth century by Europeans such as the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin (1865–1952) and the British archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862–1943).

Fang Hao's work and his conceptualization of the field were still unknown to PRC scholars when the CSHCFR was established in May 1981 in Xiamen. A report detailing the founding of the CSHCFR in its inaugural newsletter (*tongxun* 通訊) pointed out that the field engaged with both Chinese and world histories, and that it would not limit itself to the issue of political relations, but would also focus on prehistoric cultural interactions between China and foreign regions, including the movement and migration of people into and out of China (Anonymous1 1981: 1–4). The study of the history of Sino-foreign interactions, the report emphasized, did not represent a contemporary foreign-policy agenda, nor were scholars in the field 'spokespeople of the foreign ministry'. It added that the state's diplomatic organizations should not 'assign political responsibilities to academic writings. Only in this way will research on the history of Sino-foreign interactions genuinely develop, and only then will this academic field be able to truly serve foreign diplomacy' (Anonymous1 1981: 2). Despite this desire to detach academic research from the state's foreign policy and diplomatic agenda, the CSHCFR's mission included contributing to 'the realization of the Four Modernizations [policy] for the motherland'. In fact, the relevance of the field to the nation, its policies, and national pride were regularly emphasized at the CSHCFR's conferences and in its publications.

The 1983 newsletter of the CSHCFR published a speech by the famous world historian Zhu Jieqin 朱杰勤 (1933–).<sup>29</sup> Citing Deng Liqun 鄧力群 (1915–2015), then the CCP's propaganda chief, who earlier that year had urged historians to promote patriotic education among the Chinese through research, instruction, and publications, Zhu described China's many contributions to foreign societies in the past. These contributions, he noted, were evident in the research and publications on the history of Sino-foreign interactions. Zhu opined that past exchanges could serve as a model for contemporary foreign relations, and research on the topic could assist in building the 'Four Modernizations' and the 'rejuvenation of China' (*zhenxing Zhonghua* 振興中華) (Zhu 1983: 3–4).

Support for the 'Four Modernizations' and the 'open-door' policy by members of the CSHCFR featured more prominently in its third academic conference, held in August 1988 at Beidaihe with the theme 'Open- or Closed-[Door] Policies During the Ming and Qing Period and Their Impact on the Development of Society'. In his opening remarks, Han Zhenhua 韓振華 (1921–1993), then the CSHCFR's president, pointed out that discussion on the historical theme at the conference had 'real meaning' for the contemporary policies of 'opening up' to the outside world and the revitalization of the domestic economy. Several presenters at the conference argued that the limits placed on foreign trade during the Ming and Qing periods, or its outright banning, were among the main reasons for China's backwardness.<sup>30</sup> It is not clear if this vocal

<sup>29</sup>Delivered at a meeting of the Association for Research on Central Asian Culture held in Urumqi, Xinjiang.

<sup>30</sup>Han Zhenhua's (1989: 1) opening remarks and a summary of the conference topics appeared in the 1989 issue of the CSHCFR's newsletter.

support for ‘opening up’ or the sympathies that some members, including Ji Xianlin, expressed for the student protests in Tiananmen Square had any impact on the CSHCFR’s functioning, but the organization did not mark its tenth anniversary in 1991, nor did it publish its newsletter in 1990 or 1991. In 1992, at its academic conference held in Yangzhou, the CSHCFR passed an updated version of its statutes that reconfirmed the organization’s commitment to the ‘Four Modernizations’. Its statutes also included a requirement that its members should have a ‘patriotic spirit’ and ‘uphold the Four Basic Principles’. Furthermore, the CSHCFR formally added the word *Zhongguo* (China/Chinese) to its official name, the English rendition being ‘Chinese Association of the Historians of Relations between China and Foreign Countries’ (Anonymous 1992: 8–10), which was eventually changed to the CSHCFR in 1999.

The nationalist views expressed by Liu Yingsheng and Chen Yan, the assertion of Chinese exclusivity over the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ narrative, and the tensions between PRC and foreign scholars should be understood in this context of the development of the field of the history of Sino-foreign interactions. In fact, Chen Yan participated in the inaugural meeting of the CSHCFR, where he first presented his views on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ and later served as a permanent member of its executive council. ‘Silk Roads’ studies, which extended to coverage of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’,<sup>31</sup> was from the outset an important focus of the CSHCFR’s conferences and publications. This emphasis was highlighted in 2001, when the CSHCFR marked its twentieth anniversary and held its fifth academic conference in Kunming, Yunnan. The theme of the conference was ‘Comparative Research on the Southwest, Northwest, and Maritime Silk Roads’. Geng Sheng 耿昇 (1945–2018), the then president of the CSHCFR, pointed out that 2001 had been declared the ‘Year of the Silk Roads’ 絲綢之路年 by Chinese academics (Geng 2005: 18–19). He explained that this was the first time that the three ‘Silk Roads’ had been discussed together in an academic forum in the PRC, leading to scholars referring to the conference as the ‘Three Silk [Roads] Stir Fry’ (*chao san si* 炒三絲) because of the multiple disciplinary and research perspectives presented at it.

The fact that Chinese scholars perceived the three ‘Silk Roads’ as distinct and unique routes of communications was apparent in the papers presented at this conference. Some of them directly addressed the problems with the ‘Silk Roads’ narrative that had taken root in the PRC. These included the question of whether every route through which China’s interactions with foreign regions took place should be designated a ‘Silk Road’, and whether the routes where silk was not the primary commodity of exchange should be described as a ‘Silk Road’ for propaganda purposes. The Yunnan-based scholar Yao Jide 姚繼德 pointed out that the term ‘Silk Road(s)’ no longer referred to the trade in silk but had rather come to be used as a metaphor for the ‘communication networks’ between China and foreign countries (Geng 2005: 20). Another Yunnan-based scholar, Ma Yong 馬勇, specifically questioned the narrative of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in his paper entitled ‘Southeast Asia and Maritime Silk Road’. Ma argued that studies of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ had emphasized the Sinocentric view at

<sup>31</sup>In addition to occasional essays on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, the CSHCFR’s publication series, *Zhongwai guanxi shi luncong* 中外關係史論叢 (Collection of Papers on the History of Relations between China and Foreign Countries), devoted a section to the topic in its fourth volume, published in 1994.

the cost of neglecting other regions of the maritime world, especially Southeast Asia and its role in marketing and consuming various commodities (Geng 2005: 29).<sup>32</sup>

However, the celebrations marking the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's expeditions in 2005, followed by the Beijing Olympics in 2008, integrated the terms 'Silk Roads' and 'Maritime Silk Road' into Chinese 'national emotions', national pride, and academia more deeply. The issues raised at the 2001 conference of the CSHCFR went unanswered. Rather, the CSHCFR started to use the 'Silk Roads' theme more frequently for its conferences to signify all forms and periods of exchanges between China and foreign regions. While it is possible that the 'Silk Roads' umbrella initially served the practical purpose of bringing together the diverse research on the history of Sino-foreign interactions in the PRC, from 2013 onwards it became clear that the objective was to endorse and become part of the BRI project by affirming the narrative of China-centric overland and maritime interactions propagated by the state. The latter agenda was conspicuous during the CSHCFR's meeting in 2017, which was entitled 'Historical Changes in the Maritime and Overland Silk Roads and Contemporary Inspiration'. In the foreword to the collection of conference papers published in 2020, the CSHCFR's president Wan Ming 萬明 (2020: 1–3) invoked Xi Jinping's BRI 'national initiative' (*guojia changyi* 國家倡議) and interspersed her essay with several government slogans, such as 'community of shared interest' (*liyi gongtongti* 利益共同體), 'community of shared destiny [for mankind]' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* [人類]命運共同體), 'going global' (*zou chuqu* 走出去), and 'telling the China story well' (*jianghao Zhongguo de gushi* 講好中國的故事). Wan Ming called upon the CSHCFR's members to promote the PRC's 'soft power' (*ruan shili* 軟實力) with research on the 'Silk Roads'. Specifically with regard to the 'Maritime Silk Road', she wrote:

The current construction of the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' is premised on the nation's need for historical and cultural soft power support, consolidates the nation's rich cultural heritage, and inherits and celebrates its commitment to peaceful interactions and cooperation, values underpinning the ancient Silk Roads. It has imbued the Silk Roads of yesteryear with completely new meanings reflective of this moment in history: Animated by the Silk Road ideals of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual learning and mutual benefit, this project aims to forge a 'community of shared interest' in which all countries along the Silk Roads benefit and a 'community of shared destiny' in which development and prosperity are achieved by every participating country. (Wan 2020: 2)

The final sentence of Wan Ming's explanation of the contemporary connotations of the 'Silk Roads' idea matches almost word-for-word the content of the former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's 王毅 (1953–) 2018 speech delivered at the opening of the 'Forum on Belt and Road Legal Cooperation' at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the parroting of such passages has become common in recent academic publications on the 'Silk Roads' in the PRC, which, as Table 1 below indicates, increased

<sup>32</sup>Ma's critical study of the application of the term 'Maritime Silk Road' in China, which overlooked the importance of Southeast Asia, appeared in 2001. See Ma (2001).

<sup>33</sup><https://www.en84.com/5480.html>, [accessed 14 February 2023].

**Table 1:** Chinese-language publications on the BRI, 'Maritime Silk Road', and 'Silk Road'.

| Year | Books on the Belt and Road Initiative 一带一路 | Books on the 'Maritime Silk Road' 海上丝绸之路 | Books on the 'Silk Road' 丝绸之路 | Articles on the Belt and Road Initiative 一带一路 | Articles on the 'Maritime Silk Road' 海上丝绸之路 | Articles on the 'Silk Road' 丝绸之路 |
|------|--|--|-------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| 2012 | 0  | 3  | 22                            | 0   | 21  | 150                              |
| 2013 | 0  | 2  | 26                            | 0   | 19  | 255                              |
| 2014 | 1  | 17                                       | 63                            | 157   | 263   | 970                              |
| 2015 | 97   | 50                                       | 117                           | 3,448   | 410   | 1,367                            |
| 2016 | 302  | 50                                       | 126                           | 4,418   | 396   | 1,202                            |
| 2017 | 488  | 86                                       | 163                           | 8,271   | 366   | 1,045                            |
| 2018 | 475  | 98                                       | 155                           | 7,896   | 290   | 922                              |
| 2019 | 440  | 132                                      | 100                           | 7,531   | 222   | 696                              |
| 2020 | 262  | 91                                       | 96                            | 5,213   | 215   | 571                              |
| 2021 | 251  | 30                                       | 86                            | 3,557   | 96  | 382                              |

Sources: Duxiu 讀秀 for books, and CNKI for articles. Data as of February 2023.

significantly, reflecting how 'Silk Roads' studies and, more broadly, the field of the history of Sino-foreign interactions have been institutionalized to serve the national agenda.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, the field has now been incorporated into what Prasenjit Duara (2003) has called a 'regime of authenticity' (see below), which coastal cities and provinces are using to legitimize their 'Maritime Silk Road' heritage, and that the nation-state is exploiting in order to claim territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea region. The next two sections examine these applications of the 'Maritime Silk Road' in the PRC.

### The messiness of heritagization

The final two sections of this article examine the incorporation of the 'Maritime Silk Road' discourse into the agendas of local and national governments in the PRC. At the local level, as this section illustrates, the 'Maritime Silk Road' concept was invoked by several coastal cities to compete for UNESCO World Heritage listing, while at the national level, the next section shows, it was used to promote a harmonious image of the PRC through international exhibitions and performances at the same time as asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea region. This absorption, and the associated promotion and propaganda schemes, resulted in the expansion of the 'Maritime Silk Road' ecosystem and augmented the China-centric embodiment of the term.

Claims for UNESCO World Heritage listing and to contested territories both require 'authentication' of the past. In both cases, too, national pride plays an important role. 'Bringing a site onto the World Heritage List,' as Christoph Brumann (2019: 21)

<sup>34</sup>One of the important reasons for the increase in the number of publications and the affirming of the state narrative on the 'Silk Road(s)' by scholars in the PRC could be the huge amount of funding that is being provided by the state for research and publication under the BRI scheme. This possible association merits detailed examination.

points out, 'often boosts tourism, national and local pride, as well as the flow of investments and development funds.' The PRC is no exception to this, as instilling a 'strong sense of nationalism and patriotism' and enhancing domestic and foreign tourism are key factors driving its pursuit of World Heritage inscriptions (Zhang 2020: 57–58).<sup>35</sup> Asserting sovereign rights over disputed territories likewise nurtures national pride in the PRC, where such claims are closely associated with the 'national humiliation' discourse (Callahan 2012; Wang 2012). Duara (2003: 25–26) describes the 'regime of authenticity' as a 'regime of symbolic power capable of preempting challenges to the nation-state or nationalists by proleptically positing or symbolizing the sacred nation'. He continues: 'This regime does not simply possess a negative or repressive power. It also allows its custodians to shape identities and regulate access to resources.' The 'regime of authenticity,' according to Duara (2003: 29), 'necessitates a continuous subject of history to shore up certitudes, particularly for the claim to national sovereignty embedded in this subject.'

In the PRC the construction of a continuous or linear history for the purposes of claiming national sovereignty includes an emphasis on 'lost' territories in the South China Sea, a point made by Liang Qichao when he praised the Zheng He expeditions. The 'Maritime Silk Road' narrative, publications on the history of Sino-foreign interactions, and findings from underwater archaeology are harnessed to support the PRC's claims to its maritime heritage and sovereignty over such lost territories. This is done by underscoring the PRC's 'continuous' history of engagement with the maritime world, contending that China was 'the first country to discover, name, and explore' sites in the South China Sea and beyond, and asserting cultural rights over shipwrecks in disputed zones. However, as this section demonstrates, the process of claiming heritage over the 'Maritime Silk Road' has been extremely messy due to the individual aspirations of coastal provinces and cities. Similarly, the fusing of underwater cultural heritage and territorial claims by the PRC in the South China Sea, as the next section argues, has complicated exploitation of the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea in 'soft power' diplomacy. Together, this section and the next illustrate that the rhetoric and the intended practical applications of the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea by the PRC are at odds with one another, leading to various contradictions and frictions.

Already in 1992, a year after it had hosted UNESCO's Maritime Route Expedition, Quanzhou had drafted a plan to nominate the 'Maritime Silk Road' for acceptance onto the UNESCO World Heritage List (Gong et al. 2011: 119). However, it was not until 2001, the so-called 'Year of the Silk Roads', that the issue of nominating the 'Maritime Silk Road' was extensively discussed by representatives of various coastal provinces and cities in the PRC. This revived interest may have been related to the PRC's ongoing negotiations with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre regarding the nomination of cultural properties along the 'Silk Roads'. Coastal provinces and cities also closely followed the PRC's pending application to the World Trade Organization (WTO), with its potential to boost trade and tourism in these places. The broader backdrop was frequently noted at the 'Silk Roads' conferences held in 2001. At the conference in Ningbo, for example, representatives from seven Chinese port cities, including Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Ningbo, signed the so-called 'Ningbo Consensus'

<sup>35</sup>See also Yan (2018) for the UNESCO World Heritage 'craze' in China.

(*Ningbo gongshi* 寧波共識)<sup>36</sup> on submitting a joint application for the inscription of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ on the World Heritage List. The first point in the Ningbo Consensus highlighted this connection to contemporary WTO discourse: ‘at the cusp of the 21st century and in the middle of the historical surge to construct an Oceanic Civilization and China’s entry into the WTO, the vigorous propagation of the long history of “Maritime Silk Road” culture is a historical opportunity and the choice of the times’ (Gong et al. 2011: 120).

Despite this agreement, however, a key debate emerged among the signatories of the Ningbo Consensus over the site of the earliest maritime interactions. The various options put forth by the provinces included the Neolithic site of Hemudu 河姆都 (near Ningbo), Xuwen 徐聞 (in present-day Guangdong), Hepu 合浦 (in Guangxi), and Guangzhou (Geng 2005: 43–63). In order to make their respective cases, the provinces and cities quickly established their own working groups and research institutions. In 2002, for instance, the Fujian provincial government set up a ‘leadership group’ to draft its own proposal for the UNESCO listing. Similar steps were also taken by Guangdong province and the city of Ningbo. Some of these coastal provinces and cities also started building museums to showcase their unique maritime links.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, in addition to this intra-provincial competition to seek recognition as the most important and earliest ‘Maritime Silk Road’ site, there also seems to have been a lack of coordination between the competing coastal initiatives and the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, which was responsible for formally nominating a site for UNESCO World Heritage listing. In August 2003 and July 2004, UNESCO sent ‘expert missions’ to China that aimed to ‘develop a systematic approach towards the identification and nomination of the Chinese section of the Silk Road, and in particular the Oasis Route which, together with the Steppe Route and the Maritime Route, is one of three intercultural routes along the Silk Road, that will tell the story of the Chinese Silk Road in a comprehensive manner’.<sup>38</sup> These expert missions were part of UNESCO’s emphasis in the early 2000s on collaboratively developing a ‘transboundary nomination for the Silk Roads’ (Williams 2014: 3). Ten countries, including the PRC, actively participated in this ‘UNESCO Serial Transnational World Heritage Nominations of the Silk Roads’ project and attended several sub-regional workshops, starting in Almaty in November 2005 and leading to the first meeting of the Coordinating Committee for the Silk Roads Serial Nomination in Xi’an in November 2009.

During this protracted process, proposals for sites to be included on the ‘Silk Roads Tentative List’ in the serial nomination process were collected from participating countries. In March 2008, the PRC submitted a list of 48 such sites. Ningbo and Quanzhou were included in this list under the category of the ‘Sea Route of the Silk Road’.<sup>39</sup> After the 2010 International World Heritage Expert Meeting in Ittingen, Switzerland, which outlined the recommendations for the nomination of

<sup>36</sup>See Geng (2005: 32–43).

<sup>37</sup>Some of these steps are mentioned in the essays included in Chu and Chen (2016).

<sup>38</sup>Report on the ‘UNESCO Stakeholders Consultation Workshop on the Silk Road World Heritage Nomination’, held 1–8 August 2006, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/events/322/>, [last accessed 3 June 2021].

<sup>39</sup>Chinese Section of the Silk Road: Land Routes in Henan Province, Shaanxi Province, Gansu Province, Qinghai Province, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region; Sea Routes

serial sites for UNESCO World Heritage status,<sup>40</sup> the Coordinating Committee of the Serial Transboundary World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads deliberated and decided on drafting their application based on distinct ‘corridors’ instead of submitting a comprehensive ‘Silk Roads’ application because of the multistate nature and complicated process of a joint nomination. Consequently, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan were the first to jointly apply for one section of the overland ‘Silk Roads’—the Chang’an–Tianshan Corridor—to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List for 2011, and it received inscription in 2014.<sup>41</sup>

It is not clear why only Ningbo and Quanzhou were included in the March 2008 list of Silk Road sites submitted by the PRC. Internal discussions from 2006 indicate that Guangzhou was also supposed to be part of that list. In fact, while the list was being compiled, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Penglai, Beihai, Fuzhou, and Zhangzhou all expressed an interest in being included (Gong et al. 2011: 120). After the decision of the Coordinating Committee of the Serial Transboundary World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads to segment the ‘Silk Roads’ application according to corridors, a reassessment of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ sites took place within the Chinese Cultural Relics Department. This resulted in the decision to include nine coastal cities in the PRC’s Tentative List submitted to the World Heritage Committee.<sup>42</sup> The Tentative List, according to World Heritage Committee guidelines, should include properties that states ‘consider to be cultural and/or natural heritage of outstanding universal value and therefore suitable for inscription on the World Heritage List’. The guidelines also mention that ‘States Parties should submit Tentative Lists, which should not be considered exhaustive, to the World Heritage Centre, at least one year prior to the submission of any nomination’.<sup>43</sup>

At a conference held to deliberate on the nomination of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, held in Quanzhou in 2014, representatives from the nine coastal cities selected for the Tentative List signed the ‘Quanzhou Consensus’ (*Quanzhou gongshi* 泉州共識) affirming their joint efforts during the application process (Chu and Chen 2016: 2–4). However, in February 2016, when the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO formally submitted the Tentative List for the ‘Chinese Section of the Silk Roads’, Beihai and Penglai were not included. More significantly, the submission of this Tentative List came a few days after the organization had separately nominated ‘Historic Monuments and Sites of Ancient Quanzhou (Zayton)’ for the Tentative List.<sup>44</sup> And in 2017 only Quanzhou was formally nominated by the PRC for inscription on the World Heritage List.

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in Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province and Quanzhou City, Fujian Province—from Western-Han Dynasty to Qing Dynasty’, UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5335/>, [accessed 14 February 2023].

<sup>40</sup><http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2010/whc10-34Com-9Be.pdf>, [accessed 14 February 2023].

<sup>41</sup>The nomination dossier is available as *Silk Roads: Initial Section of the Silk Roads, the Routes Network of Tian-shan Corridor*, and can be accessed here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/129563>, [accessed 14 February 2023]. A detailed outline of the serial nomination process, including the origins of the corridor idea, can be found in Williams (2014). On the debates and deliberations, similar to the contentions among coastal cities vying for listing under the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ rubric, that ensued among the overland sites in the PRC, see Cheung (2019: 109–136).

<sup>42</sup><https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6093/>, [accessed 14 February 2023].

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*



The reason for nominating Quanzhou and not the other coastal cities that had signed the Quanzhou Consensus is revealed in the ‘Comparative Analysis’ section of the PRC’s application to UNESCO (ICOMOS 2018).<sup>45</sup> The ‘State Party’, it states, compared

Quanzhou with other Chinese port cities that form parts of the ‘Great Maritime Routes,’ including: Guangzhou, Ningbo, Yangzhou, Beihao, Zhangzhou, Fuzhou, Nanjing and Penglai. Each of these has important cultural heritage features relating to maritime routes and trade. The State Party considers that Quanzhou preserves the largest number of historic buildings with different typologies linked to the maritime trade. The analysis also emphasized the significance of the proposed property during the Song and Yuan dynasties. (ICOMOS 2018: 71)

This issue of tangible buildings and monuments authenticating maritime interactions and heritage may also have been the reason for the messiness that marked the discussions, debates, and negotiations among the coastal cities that were vying over the heritagization of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’. In addition to the fact that Quanzhou houses the greatest number of surviving structures connecting it to the Indian Ocean world, the city was also mentioned in the works of Marco Polo (1254–1324) and Ibn Battuta (1304–1369), confirming, according to the application, its role in East–West connections and the ‘outstanding universal value’ that sites nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage List must demonstrate. Moreover, as noted above, Quanzhou had been involved with UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project since the early 1990s, another point highlighted prominently in the application. In other words, the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO may have concluded that Quanzhou had the best chance of achieving UNESCO inscription compared to the other coastal cities, or even to a joint application under the rubric of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’.<sup>46</sup>

During the evaluation process, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) consulted its International Scientific Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage, its Committee on Historic Towns and Villages, and ‘several independent experts’. In its final decision, ICOMOS rejected all the arguments and criteria presented in the application and, in its report dated 14 March 2018, recommended that the ‘Historic Monuments and Sites of Ancient Quanzhou (Zayton), China, should *not be inscribed* on the World Heritage List’ (emphasis in the original) (ICOMOS 2018: 79). Among the key reasons for this rejection were: 1) the failure to provide a satisfactory analysis of Quanzhou comparing it to other sites in China and elsewhere; 2) the lack of any proper justification for the inclusion of the 16 sites from Quanzhou in the application; and, more pertinently, 3) the unconvincing overall framework of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea that was used to make the argument for the city’s importance (ICOMOS 2018: 68–79). In fact, in several places in its evaluation, ICOMOS pointed

<sup>45</sup>The original nomination text submitted by the PRC is not publicly available, as is the case for all other nomination dossiers rejected by ICOMOS. Parts of the nomination text are cited in this ICOMOS decision text.

<sup>46</sup>There has been speculation that Quanzhou’s nomination in 2017 was connected to Chinese President Xi Jinping, who had served as the governor of Fujian Province and had in 2001 convened a meeting to discuss the nomination of the city for World Heritage listing. In fact, this connection was highlighted in a glossy brochure produced in 2017 to mark the formal nomination of Quanzhou. See Chen and Fu (2017: 2).

out the inadequacies of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ framework employed in the application. For example, it registered a concern that ‘current global thematic studies are not yet able to establish a clear overall thematic framework on the maritime silk routes that could guide the consideration of properties for the World Heritage List’ (ICOMOS 2018: 71). It clarified further that,

For the most part, the idea of ‘maritime silk routes’ underpins the justification for Outstanding Universal Value, but ... this concept is not yet well established. The network of trade routes across the East and South China Seas and across the Indian Ocean region changed significantly over time as certain polities embarked on trade and military campaigns, and port cities waxed and waned in their importance. The city formed part of a cluster of port cities in China and was part of a wider network of port cities in the Indian Ocean Region. It is important to read the significance of Zayton with this larger picture. (ICOMOS 2018: 72)

In addition to questioning Quanzhou’s, and more broadly China’s, exclusivity over and cultural ownership of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea, ICOMOS also objected to the ‘associations drawn’ in the application with the Zheng He expeditions in order to highlight the importance of Quanzhou. The report pointed out that ‘there is no correlation between the period of Quanzhou’s peak (10th–14th centuries) and the later (fifteenth-century) voyages of Zheng He’. It also noted the existence of ‘contested interpretations about the regional historical impacts of Zheng He’s voyages because they involved military campaigns and battles in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. ICOMOS therefore considers the linking of this later period of history, and the voyages of Zheng He in this nomination to be controversial; and that neither the associations with Zheng He or Marco Polo are directly relevant to this serial nomination’ (ICOMOS 2018: 74).<sup>47</sup>

The outright rejection of the nomination by ICOMOS indicated that it had denied that Quanzhou had any ‘Outstanding Universal Value’. However, the World Heritage Committee, diverging significantly from this recommendation, ‘decided to refer back the examination of the nomination and recommended the State Party’ to address concerns raised during the review process and resubmit the application (ICOMOS 2021: 220).<sup>48</sup> The rejection of Quanzhou’s application, a rarity for sites nominated by the PRC,<sup>49</sup> resulted in criticism of the city and its application in Chinese social media. It also led to deeper introspection by officials and academics, including those based in

<sup>47</sup>See also the ‘Summary Record’ of the debates of the 42nd session of the World Heritage Committee held from 24 June to 4 July 2018 in Manama, Bahrain (document no. WHC/18/42COM/INF.18), pp. 398–399, which includes the transcription of the ICOMOS report presented at the 42nd session. This report noted the submission of additional information on the nomination by the PRC, but ICOMOS considered that ‘these were not accompanied by sufficient comparative studies and evidence, but these new ideas received at a later point in the process underscore the view of ICOMOS that this proposal is still a work in progress with much new and interesting work yet to be undertaken’.

<sup>48</sup>Such reversals of ICOMOS’s recommendations by the World Heritage Committee, as Christoph Brumann (2021: Chapter 6) points out, have become common due to ‘lobbying pressure’ by the state parties.

<sup>49</sup>On the first such case of rejection (and the subsequent renomination), and for a comparison to the Quanzhou nomination process, see Yan’s (2018: 126–154) detailed study of the nomination of Mount Songshan in 2008.

Quanzhou. Writing in the 2020 edition of the *Quanzhou lanpi shu* 泉州藍皮書 (*Quanzhou Blue Book*), Wang Wanying 王萬盈 of Quanzhou Normal University outlined four key problems that stood out in Quanzhou's failed application. First, Wang noted that there was a lack of in-depth research and understanding of the city's maritime heritage during the Song and Yuan periods, especially regarding the site's pluralistic economy and society. While, for example, the multireligious aspect of Quanzhou was often emphasized, Wang (2020: 193–197), agreeing with some of the concerns raised by ICOMOS, argued that the multidirectional interactions between the port city and foreign regions had been neglected. Second, the emphasis in the application on Quanzhou being a 'product' of the 'Great Maritime Routes' between the tenth and fourteenth centuries disregarded the fact that the period from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries witnessed a 'global age of sailing and maritime discoveries' that had a greater worldwide impact. To make a case for the earlier period, during which Quanzhou emerged as one of the world's leading port cities, the broader contexts of transregional maritime trade, the arrival of Arab traders in the city, and their contributions to the global economy needed to be outlined. Third, the 16 sites in the city that were included in the application were either not related to or had no connection with Quanzhou's maritime heritage. Fourth, invoking Zheng He and including Luoyang Bridge as one of the 16 sites was inappropriate because Quanzhou was not the point of embarkation for the Ming expeditions, as suggested in the application, while the bridge was reconstructed during the Ming period and thus fell outside the timeframe of the application.

In 2020, the PRC formally resubmitted its application, but with a narrower focus on the Song and Yuan periods. Entitled 'Quanzhou: Emporium of the World in Song–Yuan China', the application listed 22 sites in the city, including the Luoyang Bridge.<sup>50</sup> However, neither the reference to Zheng He nor the framework of the 'Maritime Silk Road' were highlighted in the (re-)nomination dossier or the Executive Summary.<sup>51</sup> Rather, the nomination provided a 'specific geo-historical background context to explain the key role played by Quanzhou (known as Zayton in Arabic and western texts) in the 10th–14th centuries AD,...sets out the factors that made Quanzhou excel as a maritime emporium in the Song–Yuan period, a highly significant period for maritime trade in Asia, and clearly links these factors to the nominated component parts' (ICOMOS 2021: 221). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the review of the application was postponed to July 2021, when a meeting of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, initially scheduled for Fuzhou in the PRC, took place virtually. In preparation for this meeting, ICOMOS reviewed the revised submission from Quanzhou; in its report to the World Heritage Committee it recommended the inscription based on only one of the three criteria proposed in the nomination dossier. According to the report, while Quanzhou's application met the criterion to 'be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history', the nomination did not justify the criterion that it exhibited 'an important interchange of human values, over a span of

<sup>50</sup>'Quanzhou revamps UNESCO World Heritage listing application', *China Daily*, [http://fujian.chinadaily.com.cn/2020-04/24/c\\_473338.htm](http://fujian.chinadaily.com.cn/2020-04/24/c_473338.htm), [accessed 14 February 2023].

<sup>51</sup>The relevant documents can be found here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1561/documents/>, [accessed 14 February 2023].

time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design', nor did it bear 'a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared' (ICOMOS 2021: 226).

As meeting just one criterion sufficed for the World Heritage Committee to inscribe a site on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Quanzhou's nomination was formally accepted on 25 July 2021. Press reports on the successful listing did not refer to the 'Maritime Silk Road' framework, but rather highlighted the role of the port city as an important maritime hub of East and Southeast Asia between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, as the ICOMOS evaluation noted.<sup>52</sup> In fact, it is no longer clear whether the quest for the heritagization, and thus the cultural ownership, of the 'Maritime Silk Road' through UNESCO will continue in the PRC.<sup>53</sup> Most of the port cities initially involved in the process have shifted their focus to promoting the BRI project instead, a project that is also entwined with a 'strong sense of nationalism and patriotism'.

### In the service of the nation

Starting with Chen Yan's initial proposition of the term 'Maritime Silk Road' in the early 1980s, its internationalization in the late 1990s, its entwinement with national pride, and through to the PRC's attempts to heritagize it through UNESCO in the first two decades of the 2000s, the relationship between the Chinese academia and the state, as the discussions above have demonstrated, were always intimate. Indeed, the expansion of the 'Maritime Silk Road' ecosystem during these four decades was fostered through this important and interdependent relationship. This relationship manifests yet again, as this section illustrates, in the exhibitions and performances related to the 'Maritime Silk Road' organized within and outside the PRC as well as in the use of the field of underwater archaeology to assert territorial claims in the South China Sea region. On the one hand, these two trends represent the continued expansion of the 'Maritime Silk Road' ecosystem in recent years and, on the other hand, they underscore not only the China-centric connotation of the term 'Maritime Silk Road', as emphasized throughout this article, but now also its deep entanglement with the foreign policy goals of the PRC government.

### Curating the 'Maritime Silk Road'

The two decades of discourse on the heritagization of the 'Maritime Silk Road' in the PRC, outlined in the previous section, resulted in the emergence of various museums, research centres, and cultural performances. Explaining the idea of the 'museum effect', Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 51) writes: 'Not only do ordinary

<sup>52</sup>See, for example, 'Quanzhou added to UNESCO World Heritage List', *Xinhua*, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/25/c\\_1310084985.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/25/c_1310084985.htm), [accessed 14 February 2023].

<sup>53</sup>In November 2022, Macau hosted a forum entitled 'The Protection and Sustainable Development of the Maritime Silk Road Heritage', which seems to have revived the idea of a serial nomination of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. Shortly after the forum, ICOMOS set up a task force to 'explore whether and how the Maritime Silk Trade Routes might be recognised by the World Heritage Convention'. On the forum, see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/events/1693/>, [accessed 23 February 2023]; and <https://www.culturalheritage.mo/msricf/2022/en/index.html>, [accessed 23 February 2023].

things become special when placed in museum settings, but the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls.' Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 72) also points out that the appeal of festivals and performances, 'with their promise of sensory saturation and thrilling strangeness, is the insatiable and promiscuous human appetite for wonder'. While the exhibitions and performances that tell the story of the 'Silk Roads' also produce such effects, the objects displayed and the stories enacted are often not ordinary to begin with. These exhibitions largely involve the display of luxury items, such as precious stones, gold objects, silk textiles, and porcelain vases, while the performances and festivals tell stories of extraordinary voyages and daring long-distance travel. Together they are 'a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 370), meant to serve a variety of purposes, including heritage-making, tourism-making, and, in the context of foreign relations, image-making.

The cultural productions that originated as part of the application for UNESCO World Heritage inscription of the Maritime Silk Road were integrated into the BRI project in order to serve and advance the PRC's 'heritage diplomacy'.<sup>54</sup> Heritage diplomacy, Tim Winter (2019: 22) explains, 'seeks to understand how cultural pasts and material culture become the subject of exchanges, collaboration, and forms of cooperation with wider configurations of international relations, trade, and geopolitics'. As a framework, heritage diplomacy 'seeks to understand how the cultural past sits in that interface between international relations and governance, involving multiple state and nonstate actors as it straddles sectors as diverse as architectural conservation, development, urban and infrastructure planning, and international trade' (Winter 2019: 23). Winter (2019: 182) points out that the PRC uses its status as the "'home" of silk production' to 'insert itself as the center, both culturally and geographically, of a story of regional and East-West contact'. By doing so, Winter (2019: 190) contends, the PRC is 'smoothing' its global image. This 'process of smoothing,' he suggests, 'can be contrasted with Anna Tsing's notion of friction as a metaphor for understanding the global connections of today' (Winter 2019: 190).

However, Tsing's idea of 'friction', which reveals 'the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interactions across difference' (Tsing 2004: 4), is also evident in the PRC's 'geocultural' and 'geopolitical' aspirations as embodied in the BRI project. The dispute over underwater cultural heritage in the South China Sea, discussed here, is an example of the friction that ruffles the 'smoothing' effect of heritage diplomacy. In fact, the need for 'smoothing' itself implies pre-existing tensions that need to be overcome. It must be recognized that these tensions, the methods of 'smoothing' them, and the broader geopolitical objectives differ significantly given the terrains and countries involved, the specific concerns about territorial sovereignty, and the distinct narratives about Chinese heritage in Central Asia and the South China Sea region. Although the 'Silk Roads' have been consolidated under the BRI rubric, the use of distinct terms 'Belt' and 'Road' itself indicates a region-specific (that is, overland and maritime) formulation of the policy objectives of the PRC. This distinction is also evident in the

<sup>54</sup>The '13th Five-Year Plan for Museums and Cultural Heritage' of 2017 required, as Da Kong (2021: 49) points out, Chinese museums and heritage institutions to 'expand cultural exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries and build the "Belt and Road" cultural heritage corridor'.

various cultural productions intended to promote the narrative of China's historical interactions with foreign regions as part of the BRI propaganda schemes.

Cultural productions related to the 'Maritime Silk Road' emerged against the backdrop of the Cold War, with the aim of forging an idealized sense of a 'universal' East–West heritage, one that in many ways sanitized the violence of the colonial period. The first set of exhibitions promoting the idea of the 'Maritime Silk Road' was held in Japan. In 1982, the Kobe City Museum organized an exhibition of the 'Silk Road on the Sea' that highlighted the Dutch East India Company's role in connecting Japan to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Supported by the government of the Netherlands, the exhibition was held to commemorate the opening of the Kobe City Museum and was closely associated with the city's aim of projecting itself as a key 'international port city'. Titled 'International Exchange: Contact Between and Changes in the Eastern and Western Cultures', the exhibition attempted to help Japanese viewers 'ponder over', as the sponsors noted, 'the exchanges made in those days, and comprehend that our culture also incorporates various outside elements; and further that our culture may be enriched by contacts with different cultures if we keep an open mind' (Kobe City Museum 1982: 5).<sup>55</sup> The exhibition catalogue made no mention of Dutch colonial exploits in the Indian Ocean world. Six years later, the city of Nara collaborated with the Japanese public broadcasting corporation NHK and the Syrian government to organize the 'Grand Exhibition of Silk Road Civilizations', which included an exhibition entitled 'The Silk Road: The Sea Route'. However, the exhibition displayed few objects related to maritime interactions and instead focused on artefacts associated with the Mesopotamian civilization.<sup>56</sup> In this case the concept of the 'Maritime Silk Road' was clearly being used as a metaphor to promote the idea of East–West connections.

Exhibitions relating to the 'Maritime Silk Road' during the 1990s took place either under the auspices of UNESCO's Silk Roads Project or were inspired by its goal to promote the idea of a 'universal heritage' of connected places and peoples. In 1993, Japan hosted a display of ceramics recovered from shipwrecks in the South China Sea as part of its cooperation with the PRC in the field of underwater archaeology (Takashimaya Tōkyō Shiten et al. 1993). A year later, the Musée de la Marine in Paris organized an exhibition entitled 'In Search of Sinbad: The Maritime Silk Route' (UNESCO 1998: 8). The UNESCO project may also have resulted in the curating of an exhibition in Hong Kong in 1995 entitled 'The Maritime Silk Route: 2000 Years of Trade on the South China Sea'. Jointly organized by the Guangdong Cultural Bureau, the Guangzhou Museum, and the Hong Kong Museum of History, it underscored the role of Guangzhou and Guangdong province in Indian Ocean interactions (Ting 1996).<sup>57</sup>

The Hong Kong exhibition marked a shift from an emphasis on the universal/East–West heritage of the 'Maritime Silk Road' to giving prominence to China's role in Indian Ocean interactions. The number of China-focused exhibitions increased significantly during the 2000s as the PRC's coastal provinces and cities pursued UNESCO

<sup>55</sup>Misugi Takatoshi (1982) contributed an essay entitled 'New Evidence for Maritime Exchange of Chinese Ceramics' to the exhibition catalogue.

<sup>56</sup>See the bilingual exhibition catalogue produced by the Association for Silk Road Exposition, Nara (1988).

<sup>57</sup>On the role of Guangzhou in asserting its maritime cultural heritage, see Chan (2018).



World Heritage listing.<sup>58</sup> One such exhibition was entitled ‘Over the Sea: A Joint Exhibition of Cultural Relics from Eight “Maritime Silk Road” Cities’, launched in Ningbo in May 2012 and subsequently displayed in eight other coastal cities collaborating on the UNESCO application (Haishang Sichou zhi lu yanjiu zhongxin 2012; Ji 2014: 178–180). In 2014 another important exhibition on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ was organized jointly by 51 museums in seven coastal provinces of China. In addition to these collaborative, multi-city exhibitions on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, several local exhibitions on the same topic were also held in coastal cities. The ‘Maritime Silk Road’ theme also appeared in exhibitions that pertained to the ‘Silk Roads’ more broadly, including one held at the National Museum in Beijing in 2014 (Haishang Sichou zhi lu yanjiu zhongxin 2015: 308–309). Since 2013 these domestic curations of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ have been integrated into the global propaganda activities of the BRI project, with exhibitions curated by PRC museums taking place in countries such as Singapore (in 2013), Tanzania (in 2014), the Maldives (in 2015), Germany (in 2017), and Sri Lanka (in 2017).<sup>59</sup>

Dance and drama performances often accompany these exhibitions. The most popular of these is the *Bihai Silu* 碧海絲路 (‘The Blue Sea Silk Road’), first produced in 2008 by the Beihai Song and Dance Drama Theater (Figure 3). Initially performed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in 2011 this dance drama was staged in Malaysia as part of the celebration marking the thirty-seventh anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia. It was also performed in Sri Lanka, perhaps associated with the launch of China’s port-city development project in Hambantota. The following year it toured South Korea. By 2013, as Emily Wilcox (2019: 200) points out, it had been performed more than 200 times. In fact, *Bihai Silu* is a key part of the PRC’s heritage diplomacy because it tells of a love story between a Chinese sailor and a Sri Lankan princess. This fictional tale stems from archaeological findings of South Asian artefacts in Western Han-period tombs located in the Hepu region of Guangxi province and a vague historical record of the maritime voyage of a Western Han diplomat supposedly to South Asia.<sup>60</sup>

In 2018 a cultural show called ‘Floral Whisper along the Silk Road—Culture Journey of the Maritime Silk Road’, produced by the city of Guangzhou to mark the fifth anniversary of the launching of the BRI, was performed in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Cyprus. Exhibitions were also organized at each of these sites ‘as part of [the] cultural

<sup>58</sup>This period also coincided with an emphasis on culture as one of the important aspects of the PRC’s foreign-policy agenda, leading to frequent exhibitions of Chinese history and culture abroad, including those related to the ‘Silk Roads’. For a detailed study of the role of museums and exhibitions in promoting Chinese culture and image in foreign countries, see Kong (2021).

<sup>59</sup>On some of these exhibitions, including their objectives as well as organization and funding issues, see Kong (2021).

<sup>60</sup>Most of the artefacts dating from the Western Han period found at Hepu may have originated in northern India and Persia (see Xiong 2014). The textual record, the original inspiration for the dance drama, is extremely vague about the Han envoy’s route and destination. We can only speculate as to which sites he visited. However, placing some of the sites in South Asia fits with the narrative of the early entry of China into Indian Ocean interactions. On problems with this narrative, see Sen (2017).





Figure 3. Poster for the performance of *Bihai Silu* in October 2013. Source: Author's personal collection.

exchange activities series of the Maritime Silk Road'.<sup>61</sup> Although the Xinhua News Agency noted that these events were intended 'to promote the research, preservation,

<sup>61</sup><https://cnnetwork.cn/en/floral-whisper-along-the-silk-road-culture-journey-of-maritime-silk-road-event-on-26th-september-2018-at-hilton-park-nicosia/>, [accessed 15 February 2023].

development, and cultural ties between countries along the Maritime Silk Road' and were 'part of an initiative to retrace the ancient sea route that connected eastern and western civilization',<sup>62</sup> they were clearly related to Xi Jinping's emphasis on 'telling the China story well' and the PRC government's push to promote the BRI project abroad.

The emphasis on 'telling the China story well', pursued through exhibitions and performances reflecting the 'Maritime Silk Road' theme, is often carried out in coordination with museums, research centres, local governments and scholars, publishing houses, and the PRC's diplomatic missions abroad. The Quanzhou Maritime Museum, established in 1959, and the Ningbo Museum, which opened in 2008, have also been actively involved in such events. Already in 1991, for instance, the Quanzhou Maritime Museum and Huaqiao University jointly hosted international delegates participating in UNESCO's Maritime Route Expedition and showcased the city's maritime heritage. Huaqiao University had been focused on studying the overseas Chinese, but shortly after the launch of the BRI project, in 2014, it established a Maritime Silk Road Institute/Center for 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Studies (*Haishang Sichou zhi lu yanjiu yuan/21shiji Haishang Sichou zhi lu yanjiu zhongxin* 海上絲綢之路研究院/21世紀海上絲綢之路研究中心). The Institute claims to be the 'first of its kind in domestic universities—which aims to build itself into an academic highland for the 21st Century MSR ["Maritime Silk Road"] and a major think tank at the service of the BRI'. The organization of various conferences, workshops, training programmes, and publications to promote the BRI project both within China and abroad (including among overseas Chinese) has since become the *modus operandi* for the Institute.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the Maritime Silk Road Research Center at the Ningbo Museum, established in 2011 in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has been involved in curating exhibitions, researching, and disseminating the 'Maritime Silk Road' story in China and abroad.<sup>64</sup>

An important museum highlighting the theme of the 'Maritime Silk Road' to domestic and foreign audiences is the Maritime Silk Road Museum of Guangdong (*Guangdong Haishang Sichou zhi lu bowuguan* 廣東海上絲綢之路博物館, also known as the Nanhai 1 Museum), located on Hailing Island near Guangzhou, which opened to the public in 2009.<sup>65</sup> This is a unique museum because it was built on-site to accommodate a Song-dynasty shipwreck. Despite frequently asserting its claim to be the 'Chinese port city which established contact with overseas at the earliest date', Guangzhou was not prominently featured during UNESCO's Maritime Route Expedition. The lack of surviving architectural remains and its role in the opium trade also complicated its claims to 'Maritime Silk Road' heritage (Chan 2018). The recovery of the Song-dynasty ship, now called *Nanhai 1*, in 2007 provided Guangzhou with an opportunity to display an important object related to its maritime heritage, set up a distinctive maritime-themed museum, and formally join the competition over the heritagization of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. In this process, the museum also displayed the PRC's prowess in underwater

<sup>62</sup>[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/23/c\\_137488287.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/23/c_137488287.htm), [accessed 15 February 2021].

<sup>63</sup>[https://msri.hqu.edu.cn/en/About\\_MSRI1.htm](https://msri.hqu.edu.cn/en/About_MSRI1.htm), [accessed 15 February 2023].

<sup>64</sup>The Maritime Silk Road Research Center regularly publishes books and annual reports on the state of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. These publications provide important insights into the pre- and post-BRI understanding, conceptualization, and agenda of 'Maritime Silk Road' scholarship in China.

<sup>65</sup><https://www.msrmuseum.com/Home/Enindex>, [accessed 15 February 2023].

archaeology, which has now become an important tool, as outlined below, in claiming territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea region.

### *The 'Maritime Silk Road' and territorial sovereignty*

The excavation of *Nanhai 1*, which entailed lifting the entire 30-metre vessel from a depth of 25 metres, signalled a significant development in the field of underwater archaeology in the PRC.<sup>66</sup> The interest in developing underwater archaeology in the country dates back to a 1985 episode of 'national shame'. The British scavenger Michael Hatcher recovered the so-called 'Nanjing Cargo' from the Dutch ship *Geldermalsen*, which had sunk in the South China Sea in 1752, and sold it through Christie's in Amsterdam. The auction, which took place over the objections of the PRC government, led to an investigation by the Chinese Ministry of Culture. The investigators recommended that the government develop technical knowledge and personnel by paying 'attention to underwater archaeology'. The ensuing discussion on this recommendation resulted in the establishment of the Underwater Archaeology Research Unit (*Shuixia kaogu yanjiushi* 水下考古研究室) at the Chinese Historical Museum (now the National Museum of China) in 1987.<sup>67</sup> One of the first underwater archaeological excavations initiated by the Unit was conducted in the South China Sea in collaboration with a Japanese team. The findings of this excavation were displayed in the 1993 exhibition held in Japan, mentioned earlier. With the establishment of various research units in coastal cities, the training of underwater excavation teams, and the induction of foreign know-how and technologies, underwater archaeology in the PRC gradually became entwined with a 'sense of cultural ownership' and with the 'larger national "heritage boom" fuelled by growing national pride' (Adams 2013: 263). Excavations in foreign countries, including in Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya, led by archaeologists from the PRC are projections of this sense of national pride (Storozum and Li: 2020). Indeed, as Storozum and Li (2020: 295) point out, 'by engaging with the histories and archaeologies of other countries, Chinese archaeologists can amplify Chinese interests and involvement in the contested past'.

Even though the film *River Elegy* was criticized and banned in the late 1980s, one of the documentary's main recommendations—that the PRC vigorously engage with the maritime world—seems to have made its mark on the PRC's leadership. In 1990, the newly appointed general secretary of the PRC, Jiang Zemin (1926–2022), proposed the

<sup>66</sup>On the vessel's excavation and its findings, see Li (2010).

<sup>67</sup>One of its early achievements was the drafting of the 'Regulations of the People's Republic of China on the Protection and Administration of Underwater Cultural Relics'. Included as part of the PRC's Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics, the Regulations were promulgated on 20 October 1989. The training of personnel qualified to undertake underwater archaeology increased from an inaugural class of three in 1988–1989 to 20 in the class of 2009. Over the next two decades, the Underwater Archaeology Research Unit, later renamed the Underwater Archaeology Research Center (*Shuixia kaogu yanjiu zhongxin* 水下考古研究中心), jointly undertook several excavations and training projects with foreign collaborators, provincial and city organizations, and educational institutions. These include the Southern Song-Yuan wreck from Fujian province known as 'Baijiao 1', as well as the 'Nanhai 1' and Nanao 1' from Guangdong. On the emergence, development, and achievements of this field of study in China, see Zhang (2012) and Zhao (2012). On the various laws governing underwater cultural heritage enacted in the PRC, see Jing (2019).

construction of a 'maritime Great Wall for the Motherland' (Chan 2020: 99). This was the beginning of the so-called 'maritime great power' idea among the PRC leadership, and it coincided with the development of academic discourse on the 'Maritime Silk Road' in the PRC and UNESCO's Silk Roads Project. Plans to implement the 'maritime great power' idea were discussed during Hu Jintao's leadership and reaffirmed by Xi Jinping in July 2013, a few months before he announced his vision for a '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' in Indonesia. As a result, the 'Maritime Silk Road', manifested as either 'China's Maritime Silk Road' or the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road', is used by the state to assert, more emphatically than at any earlier time, the historical contribution of the PRC to the Indian Ocean world and its importance to contemporary and future maritime exchanges. Underwater cultural heritage in the South China Sea, together with the development of naval capabilities, are integral parts of this project, used to assert the PRC's 'maritime great power' status, despite causing friction with countries in the region and complicating the 'smoothing' effect of the 'Maritime Silk Road' metaphor.

Friction in the South China Sea region was already evident in 2013 when the idea of the BRI was first proposed by Xi Jinping. A report in the *Wall Street Journal* dated 2 December 2013 quoted Liu Shuguang 劉曙光 (1958–) of China's National Center of Underwater Cultural Heritage saying, 'We want to find more evidence that can prove Chinese people went there and lived there, historical evidence that can help prove China is sovereign owner of the South China Sea' (Perez-Alvaro and Forrest 2018: 376).<sup>68</sup> As suggested by Duara's concept of 'regime of authenticity', Liu's comments reflect the pursuit of authenticity by asserting the ownership of cultural heritage for the purposes of claiming territorial sovereignty.

Two key UN agreements were enacted to address the potential for such tensions in maritime spaces caused by conflicting claims to underwater cultural heritage. In 1982, the PRC signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which defined the parameters of state sovereignty over 'territorial seas'. Only two articles in this agreement addressed the issue of underwater cultural heritage. Article 149 stated that 'all objects of an archaeological and historical nature found in the Area shall be preserved or disposed of for the benefit of mankind as a whole, particular regard being paid to the preferential rights of the State or country or origin, or the State of cultural origin, or the State of historical and archaeological origin'. Article 303 highlighted the need to protect archaeological objects by noting that 'States have the duty to protect objects of an archaeological and historical nature found at sea and shall cooperate for this purpose'.<sup>69</sup> The 2001 Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage (CPUCH) tried to expand upon these two articles in order to 'protect all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years'.<sup>70</sup> It explained the connection between the CPUCH and UNCLOS, elaborated

<sup>68</sup>For the *Wall Street Journal* report, see <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304470504579164873258159410>, [accessed 16 February 2023].

<sup>69</sup>Documents related to the law can be found here: [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/convention\\_overview\\_convention.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm), [accessed 16 February 2023]. On the PRC's perspective on its implementation of the UNCLOS, see Ma (2019).

<sup>70</sup><http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/2001-convention/official-text/>, [last accessed 3 June 2021].



on the four ‘maritime zones’ mentioned in UNCLOS, noted the obligations and cooperation needed among state parties to promote underwater archaeology, and clarified ways in which disputes between state parties could be resolved. It also laid down several ‘Rules’, including one prohibiting the ‘commercial exploitation of underwater cultural heritage’. The articles and rules stipulated in the CPUCH became effective from 2 January 2009. However, Cambodia was the only state abutting the South China Sea to ratify the agreement.<sup>71</sup>

By the time the CPUCH came into effect, the field of underwater archaeology in the PRC had advanced immensely. This development paralleled the PRC’s increasing assertion of its claims over territories in the South China Sea by using the so-called ‘nine-dash line’ as a delineation marker.<sup>72</sup> Liu Shuguang’s statement linking historical evidence to territorial sovereignty occurred within this context and was specifically a reaction to the actions of Chinese coastguard vessels in preventing an underwater archaeological exploration in the Scarborough Shoal by the National Museum of the Philippines under the supervision of the French archaeologist Franck Goddio.<sup>73</sup> This incident took place during an ongoing arbitration case brought by the Republic of the Philippines which had invoked UNCLOS against the PRC’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favour of the Philippines, noting, among other things, that

China’s claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the ‘nine-dash line’ are contrary to the Convention and without lawful effect to the extent that they exceed the geographic and substantive limits of China’s maritime entitlements under the Convention. The Convention superseded any historic rights or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction in excess of the limits imposed therein.<sup>74</sup>

This point countered the PRC’s assertion, expressed in its ‘Position Paper’ on the arbitration dated 7 December 2014, that ‘Chinese activities in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China was the first country to discover, name, explore and exploit the resources of the South China Sea Islands and the first to continuously exercise sovereign powers over them’.<sup>75</sup>

The arbitration and final judgment resulted in detailed discussion of the PRC’s maritime rights in the South China Sea among Chinese scholars and think tank researchers. A number of publications invoked the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ idea, particularly its twenty-first century manifestation, as a solution to territorial disputes through an

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<sup>71</sup>It should be noted that Cambodia’s ratification had an implication for the Gulf of Thailand area in this discourse on underwater cultural heritage. On the PRC’s position and concerns about ratifying the UNESCO convention, see Guo (2017).

<sup>72</sup>A good overview of these claims and disputes is found in Hayton (2014).

<sup>73</sup>See Zhong (2020a, 2020b).

<sup>74</sup>Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague, the Netherlands, Case No. 2013–19: ‘The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)’, p. 41. Documents related to the case are available here: <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>, [accessed 16 February 2023].

<sup>75</sup>[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/201412/t20141207\\_679387.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201412/t20141207_679387.html), [accessed 16 February 2023]. See also Tanaka (2019) for a detailed study of this case.

emphasis on cultural understanding and collaborative explorations of underwater archaeology in the South China Sea. Most recently, Hui Zhong (2020a: 371), critical of the nationalist statements made by Liu Shuguang and others, pointed out that ‘China’s underwater heritage is closely related to the nation-building task of enhancing “cultural confidence”’. Reflecting the views of those advocating cultural understanding, he writes:

Chinese underwater heritage not only evokes China’s primacy of place in ancient times, but also buttresses the country’s great goal of national rejuvenation in the new era. Starting from the Eastern Han dynasty, China played an indispensable role in developing the ancient Maritime Silk Road and connecting its neighbouring states on economic, political, and cultural levels. Over the course of the maritime treasure voyages in the Ming dynasty, China enhanced its control over an expansive maritime network and became the pre-eminent naval power by extending its sea power further into the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and beyond. Based on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, China has proposed the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road to reshape the country’s global profile and build an economic system with China as the centre. China’s underwater heritage can forge pride and unity among its citizens, which is consistent with the country’s re-emergence as a significant power in world trade. (Zhong 2020a: 371)

However, Elena Perez-Alvaro and Craig Forrest (2018: 393) argue that ‘this approach by the Chinese to underwater cultural heritage concentrates exclusively on Chinese heritage to the exclusion, and detriment, of other heritage in the South China Sea. More importantly, this exclusive focus naturally favours the search for, and investigation of, Chinese heritage, constituting evidence for its South China Sea claims, while excluding that which might favour other states’ claims’. Indeed, forging ‘pride and unity’ among its citizens does not prevent friction when the pursuit of territorial sovereignty is also an important objective of underwater archaeology in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

The PRC’s use of the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in connection with its BRI project has introduced new elements to the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem mentioned above. In addition to the ‘time immemorial’ narrative of China’s maritime heritage, the promotion of the Zheng He expeditions as peaceful and harmonious acts of diplomacy, and the intimate history of Chinese overseas communities, all of which predate the launch of the BRI project, the ecosystem now also includes the search for and ownership of underwater cultural heritage in the South China Sea, the economic agenda of the BRI project, and territorial claims in the maritime realm. This expanded ecosystem represents the PRC’s attempts to construct its maritime history and heritage, its present relevance to the Indian Ocean world, and its contributions to the ‘community of shared future [for mankind]’. Since this ecosystem insinuates and promotes the primacy of Chinese history, textual sources and artefacts, individuals, ports, ideas, technologies, and territories, the modified phrase ‘China’s Maritime Silk Road’ more accurately reflects its implicit meaning, symbolism, and ‘invented tradition’.



## Conclusion

Neither the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’ nor its later manifestations reflect the complexities of Indian Ocean interactions. From its beginnings in the 1960s, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ theme implied China’s centrality in maritime exchanges over the past two millennia. It did not involve the study of interactions between other regions of the Indian Ocean, networks of non-Chinese seafaring traders unconnected to China, objects not involved in the China trade, nor the analysis of textual or archaeological sources unrelated to China. Writings on the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ did not account for issues such as the impact of climatic and environmental change, the multidirectional nature of maritime exchanges, or the exploitation of slaves and indentured labour in the Indian Ocean realm. Engagement with conceptual frameworks for the Indian Ocean connectivities outlined by K. N. Chaudhuri (1990), Michael Pearson (2003), Sugata Bose (2009), Philippe Beaujard (2012), and others rarely occurs in such writings. Therefore, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as it was originally conceived and is currently being propagated in and by the PRC does not pertain to the actual or metaphorical connectivities across the Indian Ocean world. Rather, it specifically relates to the study, idealization, tradition-making, and promotion of the role of China in the Indian Ocean world. It is a ‘geopolitical chronotope’ that serves the PRC’s domestic and international strategic needs.

Indeed, the early inventors of the term ‘Maritime Silk Road’—Misugi Takatoshi, Jao Tsung-I, and Chen Yan—used it to convey a China-centric understanding of Indian Ocean interactions. This focus on the maritime world gave the term a distinct formulation, expression, and purpose. In particular, it fostered national pride and nationalist sentiments among Chinese scholars during the 1990s, which were furthered by UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project, despite its efforts to develop a transnational and universal conceptualization of Eurasian exchanges. One consequence of the UNESCO project was also the rush to inscribe the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as Chinese heritage by coastal cities in the PRC. The BRI project integrated the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ into the PRC’s foreign-policy agenda and popularized the China-centric narrative globally through international exhibitions, performances, and propagandist literature. Even though the BRI project has incorporated the ideas of the ‘Overland Silk Road’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, their distinctiveness with regard to academic research, regional engagements, and geopolitical agendas persists in the PRC. With an emphasis on underwater archaeology and the dynamics of Indian Ocean politics, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ ecosystem has continued to evolve and become more deeply integrated with the PRC’s national identity.

It should be noted that the exhibitions, performances, and archaeological excavations related to the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ that have been organized abroad as part of such foreign relations schemes often also help foreign governments to portray past maritime connections as their own cultural heritage and to depict their participation in the BRI project as an aspect of their ‘friendly’ relationship with Chinese civilization in the *longue durée*. In other words, in addition to ‘smoothing’ the image of the PRC, these events potentially also assist foreign authorities in garnering the support of local constituencies for economic and political collaboration with the PRC. These image-building exhibitions and performances, organized by the PRC for foreign audiences, are not unique to the twenty-first century: they frequently took place in the

1950s, when the newly founded PRC wanted to create an image of a friendly and harmonious communist nation-state and to offer a vision of shared progress in the future. Unlike then, however, current image-building initiatives parallel the projection of a strong and assertive PRC in its foreign encounters. This is evident in the South China Sea region, where the PRC makes claims to disputed territories, using historical records and archaeological findings as evidence. Such claims have resulted in episodes of geopolitical friction and tensions with rival states, leading to international arbitration, military build-ups, and even naval stand-offs.

Beyond its deployment in foreign-policy schemes, as argued in this article, the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea has been entwined with domestic trends and developments in the PRC since it was first introduced by Chen Yan. In the initial stages it was associated with the emerging academic field of historical interactions between China and foreign regions, advocacy of the 'open-door' and 'Four Modernizations' policies, and enhancing national pride. These associations reflected how, in the 1980s and 1990s, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals and politicians (re-)encountered, (re-)engaged, (re)negotiated with, and represented the outside world and the PRC's place in it. Those invoking the term were cognisant of these broader trends and attempted to make their writings on Chinese maritime history relevant to contemporary policy decisions. The pursuit of UNESCO World Heritage listing for the 'Maritime Silk Road' was also part of this effort to use the past to serve the contemporary needs of a re-emergent nation.

Ultimately, all these facets and applications of the 'Maritime Silk Road' idea were incorporated into the BRI project to serve the nation through a more intimate relationship between the state, its coastal provinces and cities, academia, and those engaged in cultural production. Thus, while the phrase 'Maritime Silk Road' may not accurately describe Indian Ocean interactions or even the role of China in such exchanges, an examination of its origins, evolution, and applications reveals several facets of the post-Cultural Revolution PRC, including intellectual discourses and negotiations, the proliferation of national pride, heritage- and tradition-making, and the integration of foreign-policy objectives, as well as domestic and international frictions and tensions, all of which are deeply ingrained in the term and its history. Consequently, the term 'Maritime Silk Road' cannot be generalized simply as another 'Silk Road' or examined using that nineteenth-century antecedent term as the guiding conceptual framework.

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