




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Silk Road orientations in Xinjiang archaeology and shifting implications for Eurasian studies

Annie Chan 

Department of Asian Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Munich, Germany; Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale (CRCAO), Paris, France

Email: a.chan@lmu.de

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Abstract

Xinjiang's location naturally makes it a focal point of the Silk Road (hereafter SR). But considering that for the first 60 years (*circa* 1920–1980) of Chinese archaeology—that is, over half of its development—the SR was rarely mentioned in scientific literature, the impact it has had on archaeological studies of Xinjiang remains unclear and poorly understood. With the eponymous Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) now a decade old and the field of Xinjiang archaeology approaching its centennial, this has become a critical subject of enquiry.

In this article, I recount the history of publication and discourse in Xinjiang, followed by a discussion of recent developments in archaeological practice instigated by the BRI. I contend that consistently using the SR to conceptualize the material record of Xinjiang, a prevalent approach in Eurasian scholarship, is based on flawed and unscientific presuppositions. Even in Chinese discourse today, the SR concept has become secondary to the state objective of building scientific and cultural infrastructure that is *Chinese* in method and approach, the goal of which is to amplify 'discourse power'. Although the SR has served as a major banner for unifying studies on cross-cultural contact in Eurasian history, it is laden with complex layers of archaeological history intertwined with a century-old chauvinistic geopolitics that still reverberate globally today. As the scientific role of the SR becomes increasingly muddled, research referencing the SR must navigate the term's biased presentist connotations to unveil the pertinent historical contexts, or consider alternative frameworks that resist totalizing narratives.

Keywords: Silk Road; Xinjiang; history of archaeology; Belt and Road Initiative; Eurasia

Introduction

Since the 'Silk Road' (hereafter SR)¹ gained traction as a concept in Western literature in the late nineteenth century, research under its banner has consistently emphasized

¹The aim of this article is not to problematize Silk Road nomenclature, but to question the scientific implications of using the term. Thus, I use SR as an acronym to capture all prevailing terms of the Silk Road, including Silk Road, Silk Roads, Silk Route, Silk Routes, to eliminate any ambiguities. I do not define

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the region of the present-day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China as a crucial hub for East-West exchange. Sectioned by three mountain ranges and two basins, Xinjiang (known in the early twentieth century as ‘Chinese Turkestan’ or ‘East Turkestan’) is a ‘crossroads’, ‘pass’, or ‘transit hub’ for east-west itineraries that follow the natural topography. The SR term communicated the aspirations of early European scientific imperialism. Moving into the twentieth century, as the volume of scientific literature amassed under the SR umbrella burgeoned, SR-inspired applications of geopolitical nostalgia intensified. The term evolved into a symbol of high-stakes geopolitical discourse power that was being contended for by, mostly, Western and Chinese stakeholders,² throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) (2013–) is the latest reimagining of the SR. In the last decade, the BRI has actively promoted programmes to revive and re-Sinicize the SR narrative in education, research, and the cultural sector, significantly boosting the profile of Central Asian studies in China.

But recently, upon a fresh contemplation on the centennial milestones of Chinese archaeology and how stakeholders of colonial expeditions had leveraged scientific collaborations for geopolitical benefits, China is adapting the long-standing SR narrative for a new cause, a cause anchored to the recovery and assertion of Chinese ‘discourse power’ (*huayuquan* 話語權). As a political dictum that has gained substantial traction in scientific discourse in the last 10 years and as a critical tenet of the BRI stratagem, it is widely used to mobilize resources to contend for the ‘right of speech’ internationally.³ This reorientation reflects an important shift in perspective among Chinese researchers towards the geopolitical role of Chinese culture and ancient civilization, and the research activities to be developed in tandem within China and internationally.

the SR here because, as I will argue in this article, one of the term’s pitfalls is its varied and vague definitions. Additionally, many within and outside academia write about the SR or use the term without specifying its scope. As this article concerns mainly Xinjiang, my focus will be exclusively on the land routes, and not on the regions encompassed by the maritime SR.

²For a time, mostly from the 1960s–1980s, Japan also partook in earnest diplomatic campaigns inspired by the SR. For this history, see Kazutoshi Nagasawa, ‘Silk Road Studies in Japan: Its History and Present Situation’, in International Seminar for UNESCO Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue, 1988, <https://fr.unesco.org/silkroad/node/8892>, [last accessed 25 March 2024].

³The term ‘discourse power’, discussed in political contexts emerged in scientific literature in the early 2000s. Previously, it was used primarily to denote ‘right of speech’ or ‘narrative authority’ in a more general sense, in expressions such as *jiaoshi huayuquan* 教師話語權, *nuxing huayuquan* 女性話語權, and *ertong huayuquan* 兒童話語權, respectively for teachers, women, and children. The meaning in Chinese geopolitics travels between ‘right’, ‘authority’, and ‘power’, depending on context, but all functioning definitions build towards a sense of possessing and exerting influence by means of speech. See Toni Friedman’s expository essay on *huayuquan* in Toni Friedman, ‘Lexicon: “Discourse Power” or the “Right to Speak” (話語權, Huàyǔ Quán)’, *DigiChina*, published online on 17 March 2022, available at <https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/lexicon-discourse-power-or-the-right-to-speak-huayu-quan/>, [accessed 1 December 2024]. One of the first notable articles explicitly addressing the use of discourse power for the BRI was published in 2015: Wu Xianjun 吳賢軍, ‘Guoji huayuquan shiyu xia de “yidai yilu” zhanlue shixian lujing yanjiu 國際話語權視域下的“一帶一路”戰略實現路徑研究’, *Journal of Fujian Provincial Committee Party School of CPC 中共福建省委黨校學報*, no. 2, 2015, pp. 97–103. I delve further into the use of this term in the section ‘A new era of China-centric discourse for Chinese archaeology’ below.

This change is taking place just as Chinese and Western scholarship is becoming oversaturated with the SR term. In Western academic circles, as in China,⁴ many publications and scientific projects have tapped into the SR term to incentivize academic interest. An advanced search on Google Scholar for the terms ‘archaeology’, ‘archaeological sites’, ‘Xinjiang’, ‘burials’, and ‘settlements’ revealed that out of 230 English-language publications about Xinjiang archaeology in the last 10 years, 179 (about 80 per cent) contain the SR term.⁵

The latest repurposing of the SR in Chinese archaeology raises questions about how effectively SR has served scientific objectives over the past 150 years, and which discourses have been amplified or subdued amid the proliferation of its use across scientific, cultural, and political domains. This article presents a critical review of the ways in which SR orientations have influenced archaeological discourse and practice in Xinjiang, a region long held as a strategic point of the SR and the location where the earliest ‘SR’ expeditions took place.

I examine the fallacies surrounding SR research in the areas of scientific research, cultural diplomacy, and discourse power with reference to the SR’s role in the evolution of Xinjiang archaeology from the 1920s to its current operation under the BRI. I offer three approaches to mitigate its impact on scientific research. I argue that the concept of the SR, increasingly amorphous and coloured by contemporary ideals, offers no more than a reductionist perspective of the archaeological record it is used to characterize. It may even hamper big data-driven research in the future by imposing fixed universalist narratives. Instead of shaping scientific questions with a term that evolves with the prevailing geopolitical climate, challenging its underlying assumptions can offer scholars of Eurasian archaeology new perspectives.

Historical and logical fallacies

Enquiries into the fallacies and mythicism surrounding the SR have multiplied since these theories gained traction in the early 2000s. Scholars in Western academia have identified several reasoning flaws that pervade SR-framed studies. Anthropologist of nomadic cultures Anatoly Khazanov questioned the adequacy of the SR as an analytical concept for Eurasian overland trade and contended that it ‘has already ceased to be a purely scholarly concept because it has found a place in the ideological realm’.⁶ Similarly, Iranian historian Khodadad Rezakhani in his oft-cited article on the SR, ‘The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange’, criticized the facile generalizations brought on by the SR concept, citing the words of Near Eastern archaeologist Warwick Ball that the ‘Silk Road’ has been made ‘the glib

⁴ See the discussion below in ‘Counteract the SR-BRI lockstep’ for publication trends of SR in the Chinese language.

⁵ Search conducted in April 2024. As this article is aimed at a Western, English-speaking academic audience, I have cited only the English language publication count as an illustration.

⁶ Anatoly M. Khazanov, ‘The Overland “Great Silk Road”: Myths and Realities (A Politically Incorrect Paper on a Politically Correct Subject)’, in *Caravans in Global Perspective: Context and Boundaries*, (eds) Persis B. Clarkson and Calogero M. Santoro (Abingdon: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2021), pp. 122–167.

answer to all questions of trade and communication' in all discussions of East-West trade.⁷

But critiques of this kind are still scarce compared to those advocating the SR. This is not because they are controversial, however; similar arguments have intermittently surfaced in earlier periods as well. Marc Aurel Stein, a British archaeologist who is known for his expeditions in Central Asia in the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, appeared to have been a SR sceptic.⁸ In the titles of his publications, he did not use the SR term. During this time, researchers of Xinjiang archaeology in China were also lukewarm about the SR even after the term gained popularity from the publication of Sven Hedin's *The Silk Road* (1938).

With reference to the development of archaeological research and SR discourse in Xinjiang, I examine below the nature of these fallacies, which I argue stem from two key frames of reference: SR hegemonies and the SR 'be-all and end-all' imperative.

From colonial legacies to avatar of the BRI

The impact of politicized historicism on future scholarship and diplomacy in Asia and beyond is an area of growing concern.⁹ The SR has been an instrument of conflicting modern local-global heritage politics—its geography is inevitably nuanced and fluid.¹⁰ Tim Winter, a foremost scholar of contemporary SR cultural politics, worried that the celebration of 'shared' pasts 'has rapidly become a forum of heritage diplomacy through which China exercises new forms of geocultural power',¹¹ and that depictions of these pasts would grow increasingly Sinocentric with China at the helm of generating new narratives.

But these new forms of geocultural power that comprise the BRI are not solely a Chinese creation; on the contrary, they draw heavily upon the legacy of SR studies.¹²

⁷Khododad Rezakhani, 'The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2010, pp. 420–433; Warwick Ball, *The Monuments of Afghanistan* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2008).

⁸Li Bozhong 李伯重, 'Sichou zhi lu de zhengming—quanqishi yu quyushi shiye Zhong de sichouzhilu 絲綢之路的“正名”—全球史與區域史視野中的“絲綢之路”', *Zhonghua Wenshi Luncong 中華文史論叢*, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1–45. Li argued that Stein, like English diplomat F. E. Younghusband, had eschewed the SR term since he thought the geographical scope of his field research in East Turkestan and Central Asia was at odds with the one initially outlined by von Richthofen who based his SR concept on secondary sources rather than first-hand exploration.

⁹See, for example, Maximilian Mayer (ed.), *Rethinking the Silk Road. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Emerging Eurasian Relations* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); R. K. Mishra, 'The "Silk Road": Historical Perspectives and Modern Constructions', *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2020, pp. 21–39; Susan Whitfield, 'The Expanding Silk Road: UNESCO and BRI', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 81, 2020, pp. 23–42; Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); and Tim Winter, *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories and Futures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁰See, for example, Kate Franklin, 'Archaeology of the Silk Road: Challenges of Scale and Storytelling', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, vol. 32, 2024, pp. 263–308; T. Williams, 'Mapping the Silk Roads', in *The Silk Road: Interwoven History*, (eds) M. N. Waler and J. P. Ito-Adler (Cambridge: Cambridge Institutes Press, 2015), pp. 1–42.

¹¹Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 134.

¹²I keep brief my following account of the origins of the SR concept to avoid belabouring a subject that has been extensively discussed. See, for example, D. Waugh, 'Richthofen's Silk Road(s): Toward the Archaeology of a Concept', *The Silk Road*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–10; Rezakhani, 'The Road That Never

It is by no means the first time the connotations of the SR have been adapted for nationalist agendas and transnational cultural-economic goals. The practice of overlaying selected nodes of historical SR corridors on 'routes Beijing has identified for Belt and Road development'¹³ evidently mirrors the way Ferdinand von Richthofen's *die Seidenstrasse* overlaid accounts of historical mobility, trade, and exchange with 'a cartographic imperative to connect Asia to Europe via direct lines of rail' almost 150 years ago.¹⁴

Widely recognized as the neologist of the SR term that emerged in the late nineteenth century, German geographer von Richthofen was, more accurately, a proponent of the SR who helped carry the term into modernity through his referencing of earlier nineteenth-century geographical works.¹⁵ In the first volume of his *China, Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien* (1877), von Richthofen used *die Seidenstrasse* (the Silk Road) to denote specifically the overland route to the Land of the Silk Mariner of Tyre that he had learnt of from his informant,¹⁶ and the plural, *die Seidenstraßen* (the Silk Roads), to refer to 'routes both east and west of the Pamirs'.¹⁷ He had also deduced from Chinese annals that the terminus of Marinus's route is Chang'an, capital of the Han dynasty during the time of Ptolemy, who publicized Marinus's maps. That Chang'an was the starting point is still the prevailing view today among scholars who adopt a more literal/ historiographical definition of the SR. This presupposition is mostly based on the annals' description of Zhang Qian's diplomatic missions to the Western Regions, which originated in Chang'an, then capital of Han China. However, the descriptions in these accounts of the routes of his travels were not very specific.¹⁸ The detailed itinerary attributed to the SR is actually sourced from texts from the Sui and Tang dynasties, in which routes leading to the Western Regions are precisely outlined—but these routes originated instead from Dunhuang.¹⁹

Was', pp. 420–433; Scott C. Levi, 'Silk Roads, Real and Imagined', in *The Bukharan Crisis*, (ed.) Scott Levi (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), pp. 201–208; Tamara Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 194–219; Armin Selbitschka, 'The Early Silk Road(s)', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, (ed.) David Ludden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1–23.

¹³Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 134.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵Matthias Mertens, 'Did Richthofen Really Coin the "Silk Road"?', *Silk Road*, vol. 17, 2019, pp. 1–9. Mertens found that before von Richthofen, others such as Robert Mack, Hermann Guthe, and Johann Kaeuffer had used the term, or variations of it. The usage could be traced back further to Carl Ritter, who employed the phrase 'Straße der Seren' (road of the Seres) in the second volume of his work, Carl Ritter, *Geography in Relation to Nature and Human History (Die Erdkunde im Verhältniss zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen Oder allgemeine, vergleichende Geographie: als sichere Grundlage des Studiums und Unterrichts in physikalischen und historischen Wissenschaften. 13)* (Berlin: Reimer, 1847).

¹⁶Waugh, 'Richthofen's Silk Road(s)', pp. 1–10.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE), *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962); Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209), *Han ji* 漢紀 (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2002).

¹⁹For example, the extant preface of a Sui dynasty text by Pei Ju titled *Xiyu Tuji* 西域圖記 (*An Illustrated Record of the Western Regions*) describes three viable routes during his time—one south of Tarim Basin, one north of Tarim and south of Tian Shan, and another north of Tian Shan. See the discussion in Xu Pingfang 徐頻芳, 'Kaogu xue shang suo jian Zhongguo jingnei de Sichouzhilu

The definition of SR provided by Von Richthofen, not a well-formed theory at the time,²⁰ was further developed by German archaeologist and geographer Albert Herrmann, a close colleague of von Richthofen, who had more robust knowledge of Sinological sources and posited that *die Seidenstrasse* reached as far as Syria (the Roman empire).²¹ Hermann went on to work closely with Swedish explorer and geographer Sven Hedin, who integrated Hermann's historical knowledge of China and the Mediterranean into his cartographic work. Hedin eventually published *The Silk Road* in 1938 (first in Swedish, *Sidenvägen*, in 1936), a travelogue chronicling the fourth Sino-Swedish expedition he led in China to investigate possible routes of automobile travel, at the behest of the Republic of China's Ministry of Railways, specifically between Central China and Xinjiang.²² The book became a bestseller in Europe, primarily as an account of exploration, since the history and definition of SR was only summarized in one of its chapters.²³

As a result of Hedin's *Silk Road*, the SR became widely known in the West from the 1940s onwards as comprising ancient routes and networks of trade in East Turkestan. Combining a key commodity symbolizing uncharted territory with the route used to acquire it, the term effectively kindled Western explorers' fascination with cultures and commodities of the Orient, as emerging transcontinental transport infrastructure made travels on said 'path' achievable.²⁴ At first, the objective of these SR expeditions was to gather geographical knowledge to enable Western powers to develop economically beneficial infrastructure networks in support of their colonial ambitions.²⁵ Then, after the wars, the concept of the SR was reappropriated for cosmopolitan approaches to peacekeeping; it was used to substantiate bilateral diplomatic efforts that aimed to build crosscultural understanding between nation-states.

Yet, although Xinjiang was considered the quintessential SR territory from the very beginning, its history of archaeological research has never been solely defined by the SR. The SR concept had a minimal effect on archaeological research until the last 30 years, a shift that was precipitated by commensurate interest in the West and other parts of East Asia.

考古學上所見中國境內的絲綢之路', in *Proceedings of Desert Route Expedition International Seminar in Urumqi, August 19–21, 1990*, 'Land Routes of the Silk Roads and the Cultural Exchanges between the East and West before the 10th Century', UNESCO, pp. 239–290.

²⁰Von Richthofen's theory is grounded in a haphazard blend of Greek sources and limited Chinese historiography.

²¹Herrmann's argument is based on the extent of the ancient silk trade. Albert Herrmann, *Die alten seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien: beiträge zur alten geographie Asiens* (Berlin: Weidemannsche Buchhandlung, 1910).

²²Sven Hedin, *The Silk Road* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1938). For a discussion of these interactions, see H. Wahlquist, 'Albert Herrmann: A Missing Link in Establishing the Silk Road as a Concept for Trans-Eurasian Networks of Trade', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2020, pp. 803–808.

²³Li, 'Sichou zhi lu de zhengming', p. 26.

²⁴David Arnold, 'Europe, Technology, and Colonialism in the 20th Century', *History and Technology. An International Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2005, pp. 85–106.

²⁵This is discussed extensively in Winter, *The Silk Road*, especially on p. 30.

Chinese scholarship generally traces the beginnings of SR research in China to geographical studies of northwest China in the 1920s.²⁶ Yuan Fuli 袁复礼,²⁷ a geologist with a Master's degree from Columbia University, joined the Sino-Swedish Northwest Scientific Expedition (1927–1935) co-led by Sven Hedin six years after he returned to China. Also a member of the expedition team was archaeologist Huang Wenbi 黄文弼, widely recognized as the forefather of Xinjiang archaeology.

When Sven Hedin's *The Silk Road* (1938) came out in print, Chinese scholars and journalists became familiar with the SR term, but they considered it as analogous to *Xiyu* 西域 (Western Regions) histories,²⁸ East-West conveyance, and Sino-foreign relations.²⁹ In Xinjiang archaeology, the term was scarcely used. In the decade or so following Hedin's pioneering work, seminal Chinese publications—including Huang Wenbi's *Luobunao'er kaoguji* 羅布淖爾考古記 (1948), *Tulufan kaoguji* 吐魯番考古記 (1954), *Talimu pendi kaoguji* 塔里木盆地考古記 (1958), and *Xinjiang kaogu fajue baogao* 新疆考古發掘報告³⁰—did not employ the SR term. Huang's expeditions revolved around research questions about the locations of the Han Protectorate General of the Western Regions and Tang Anxi Protectorate, the chronology and funerary geography of the Qu Kingdom of Gaochang, and the migration of river courses in Tarim Basin.³¹ In his *Luobunao'er kaoguji*, a text-based study of the Loulan kingdom's historical significance in east-west transport across the Western Regions from the Han to the Qing dynasties, a subject closely associated with the SR, SR was not mentioned at all. Instead, Huang used the term '*fansi zhi lu* 販絲之道' (route of silk sales) to describe Lop Nur's position as a transit stop on an east-west trade route of silk.³²

In the 1950s and 1960s, SR appeared mostly in diplomatic contexts, particularly in relation to China's deepening exchange with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union.³³ The state directives for archaeology at the time were focused on bridging gaps in the knowledge of the past and establishing a disciplinary framework for the burgeoning academic field. In 1960, a new institute of archaeology was established within the Xinjiang division of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

²⁶Ma Lirong 馬麗蓉, 'Zhongguo de "yidaiyilu" yanjiu ji xueshu huayuquan tishi lujing 中國的一帶一路研究及學術話語權提升路徑', *Guoji guanxi yanjiu* 國際關係研究, no. 4, 2023, pp. 21–39.

²⁷Yuan was the first to complete a scale drawing of the medieval city of Tang Beiting 北庭 (later Beshbalik of Uyghur Khaganate) in 1928, a UNESCO (the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage site where excavations are ongoing today.

²⁸Li, 'Sichou zhi lu de zhengming', pp. 1–45.

²⁹Liu Jinbao 劉進寶, "'Sichouzhi lu' gainian de xingcheng yuqi zai zhongguo de chuanbo "絲綢之路" 概念的形成與其在中國的傳播', *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中國社會科學, no. 11, 2018, pp. 181–207.

³⁰Huang Wenbi, *Luobu na'er kaogu ji* 羅布淖爾考古記 (Beijing: Guoli beijing daxue chuban bu, 1948); Huang Wenbi, *Tulufan kaogu ji* 吐魯番考古記 (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue yuan, 1954); Huang Wenbi, *Talimu pendi kaogu ji* 塔里木盆地考古記 (Beijing: Kexue chuban she, 1958); as well as Huang Wenbi, *Xinjiang kaogu fajue baogao* 1957–1958 新疆考古發掘報告 1957–1958 (Beijing: Wenwu chuban she, 1983), which was compiled posthumously by Meng Fanren.

³¹Lin Meicun 林梅村 and Li Qing 李晴, 'Sichouzhi lu kaogu faxian yu yanjiu 絲綢之路考古發現與研究', in *Zhongguo kaoguxue bainian shi* 1921–2021, Vol. 4, Part 1 中國考古學百年史第四卷上冊, (ed.) Wang Wei (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2021), p. 7622.

³²Liu, "'Sichouzhi lu' gainian de xingcheng'; Huang Wenbi 黃文弼, 'Guloulanguo lishi ji qi zai xiyu jiaotong shang zhi diwei 古樓蘭國歷史及其在西域交通上之地位', *Shixue jikan* 史學集刊 no. 5, 1947.

³³Liu, "'Sichouzhi lu' gainian de xingcheng'.

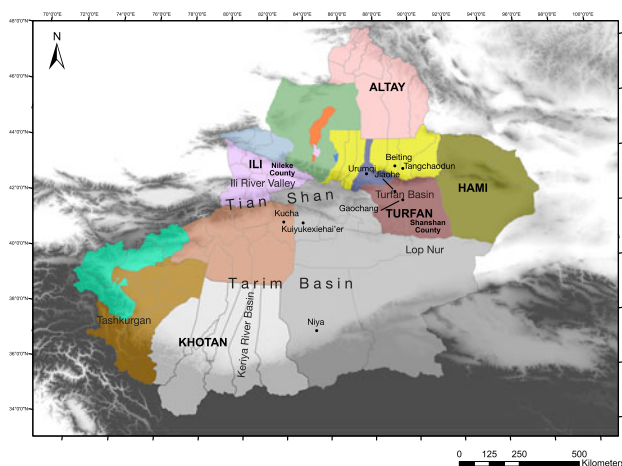


Figure 1. Map of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China today showing locations mentioned in this article. Source: Map created by author using ArcGIS.

Field research in the 1950s to 1970s primarily followed routes of investigation that orbited Tian Shan and Tarim Basin, which formed the topographical basis for zoning the region into East Xinjiang, South Xinjiang, and North Xinjiang—a geographical division still in use today.³⁴ Archaeological expeditions began in the 1950s and 1960s in Ili, Khotan, Kucha, Urumqi, Turfan, Hami, and Altay, and in the 1970s, field research was also conducted in Tashkurgan and Lop Nur. Two larger-scale surveys of cultural relics were conducted in 1953 and 1959, focusing on oases skirting Tarim Basin, the Ili river valley, Turfan Basin, and grassland areas in north Tian Shan. Archaeologists began to categorize these archaeological finds into the northern, middle, and southern routes (see Figure 1 for all archaeological locations in Xinjiang mentioned in this article).³⁵ In 1972, members of the archaeology team from the Institute of Ethnology were reassigned to the Xinjiang Museum, and subsequently organized into the official Xinjiang Archaeology Team (Xinjiang kaogudui 新疆考古队). This team laid the groundwork for the founding of the Institute of Archaeology of the new Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in 1979.

The 1980s marked several publication milestones. An in-house journal dedicated to the archaeology of Xinjiang, *Xinjiang wenwu* 新疆文物, was launched in 1985.³⁶ A compendium commemorating 30 years of Xinjiang archaeology, *Xinjiang Kaogu sanshinian* 新疆考古三十年, was published two years prior, in 1983.³⁷ Still, SR only appeared in

³⁴Known colloquially as *dongjiang* 东疆, *nanjiang* 南疆, and *beijiang* 北疆. West Xinjiang (*xijiang* 西疆) is seldom used; instead, the area is referred to as west Tian Shan (*xi Tianshan* 西天山).

³⁵In Chinese literature, these routes are called *beidao* 北道, *zhongdao* 中道, and *nandao* 南道.

³⁶The journal ceased publication in 2019. In its place is a new publication titled *Xinjiang kaogu* 新疆考古, published by Sciences Press 科学出版社, with the inaugural issue published in 2021.

³⁷Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, Academy of Social Sciences (XIA), *Xinjiang kaogu sanshi nian* 新疆考古三十年 [Thirty Years of Xinjiang Archaeology] (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1983).

titles where *silk* was part of the discussion. The earliest example is *Sichou zhi lu—Han-Tang zhiwu* 絲綢之路—漢唐織物 (*The Silk Road: Textiles of Han and Tang*) in 1972.³⁸ Thus, in the formative period of Chinese archaeology between the 1950s and 1980s, the SR played a rather nominal—and practically non-existent—role in formulating research agendas and theoretical frameworks in China.³⁹

In the second half of the twentieth century, on the heels of the European ‘Silk Road’ craze, Japanese scholars took to the trend, advocating ‘more thematically and geographically expansive definitions of the Silk Road’⁴⁰ than what the initial designation had encompassed. This is evident in the volume of scholarship on the SR in Japan; books titled SR alone increased exponentially from the 1960s onwards, averaging around 30 publications per decade since 1970. The devotion of Japanese scholarship to SR studies resulted in a broadening of scientific scope,⁴¹ but also the further diffusion of SR to accommodate alternative hegemonies of knowledge production. Between 1979 and 1981, at the zenith of SR influence in Japan, Japan’s Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation)⁴² and China’s CCTV (China Central Television) jointly produced a docuseries titled *The Silk Road* 絲綢之路.⁴³ Shot in the form of a travelogue, the programme appealed to Japan’s increasing fascination with the SR, which symbolized *terra incognita* where exchange between Eastern and Western civilizations took place. As public interest in the SR spiked, Japanese East Asian historian Kazutoshi Nagasawa acknowledged how rapidly SR studies had proliferated, and cautioned researchers of SR studies to guard against the ‘vulgarization’ of the field.⁴⁴

The SR term continued to gain traction as the landscape of international scientific research evolved throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and as domestic investment in Xinjiang archaeology increased simultaneously. Two intercontinental cultural-political initiatives further transformed SR into a concept of enormous historical, geopolitical, and emotional potency, encompassing all inter-Asian, pan-Eurasian, and Afro-Eurasian material and ideological flows: UNESCO’s Silk Roads programme that began in 1988 and the Chinese BRI in 2013. Under these programmes, the scientific scope of the SR expanded in tandem with its contemporary geopolitical reach, effectively invoking nostalgia for a shared Eurasian past to foster new supranational systems of cooperation.⁴⁵

³⁸Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, *Sichou zhi lu: Han Tang zhiwu* 絲綢之路—漢唐織物 (*The Silk Road: Textiles of Han and Tang*) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1972); Liu, “‘Sichouzhilu’ gainian de xingcheng”, pp. 181–207.

³⁹XIA, *Xinjiang Kaogu sanshinian*.

⁴⁰Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 32.

⁴¹Whitfield, ‘The Expanding Silk Road’.

⁴²It was the first large-scale joint international programme produced by the NHK.

⁴³Reference from Liu, “‘Sichouzhilu’ gainian de xingcheng”. Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai Archives, ‘1980 (昭和55) 年度テレビが発掘したシルクロード文明’, <https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/articles/?id=C0010810>, [accessed 11 April 2024]. The docuseries has 12 episodes: ‘Glories of ancient Chang’an’, ‘Thousand kilometers beyond the Yellow River’, ‘The art gallery in the desert’, ‘The dark castle’, ‘In search of the kingdom of Lou-lan’, ‘Across the Taklamakhan desert’, ‘Khotan oasis of silk and jade’, ‘A heat wave called Turfan’, ‘Through the Tian Shan mountains by rail’, ‘Journey into music: through the Tian Shan Mountains’, ‘Where horses fly like the wind’, and ‘Two roads to the Pamirs’.

⁴⁴Nagasawa, ‘Silk Road Studies in Japan’.

⁴⁵Marie Thorsten, ‘Silk Road Nostalgia and Imagined Global Community’, *Comparative American Studies. An International Journal*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2005, pp. 301–317.

The UNESCO Silk Roads programme was instituted to better understand and promote the rich history and shared legacy of mutual exchange and dialogue along the routes of the historic Silk Roads.⁴⁶ The programme defines the 'Silk Roads' as,

an interconnected web of routes linking the ancient societies of Asia, the Subcontinent, Central Asia, Western Asia and the Near East, and contributed to the development of many of the world's great civilizations. They represent one of the world's preeminent long-distance communication networks stretching as the crow flies to around 7,500 km but extending to in excess of 35,000 km along specific routes. While some of these routes had been in use for millennia, by the 2nd century BC the volume of exchange had increased substantially, as had the long distance trade between east and west in high value goods, and the political, social and cultural impacts of these movements had far-reaching consequences upon all the societies that encountered them.⁴⁷

This depiction of a universal and timeless phenomenon encompassing all inter-cultural and inter-regional connections became a common narrative in both mainstream and scholarly texts, one that remains prevalent today.⁴⁸

Following the institution of the UNESCO programme, a period of increased international collaboration in Xinjiang ensued. Notable joint expeditions include the Sino-Japanese study of burials at the site of Jiaohe (Yarkhoto) (1994–1996) co-led by Waseda University;⁴⁹ a conservation project on the city ruins as part of the UNESCO Preservation of World Heritage Programme;⁵⁰ the Sino-Japanese expedition to Niya (1988; 1990–1997);⁵¹ and the Sino-French archaeological mission in the Keriya 克里雅 river basin (1993–1994; 1996).⁵² By then, the SR had become the standard rationale for exploring these ancient interregional connections through diplomacy and academic exchange. The archaeology of Xinjiang, through the lens of the SR, became crucial to

⁴⁶UNESCO, 'The UNESCO Silk Roads Programme', <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/unesco-silk-roads-programme-0>, [accessed 3 August 2023].

⁴⁷UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 'Silk Roads: The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1442/>, [accessed 3 August 2023].

⁴⁸Most recently, the British Museum's 'Silk Roads' exhibition (26 September 2024–23 February 2025) describes SR as being in use for millennia and 'made up of overlapping networks linking communities across Asia, Africa and Europe, from East Asia to Britain, and from Scandinavia to Madagascar'; it 'unravels how the journeys of people, objects and ideas that formed the Silk Roads shaped cultures and histories', <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/silk-roads>, [accessed 14 October 2024].

⁴⁹Zhang Guangda and Rong Xinjiang, 'A Concise History of the Turfan Oasis and Its Exploration', *Asia Major*, third series, vol. 11, no. 2, 1998, pp. 13–36; Okauchi Mitsuzane 岡内三眞, 'Chūgoku shinkyō kōgaku jō kōsei bochi no chōsa torufu アンボンチニサカエタシャシゼンコクフンボグンノŌgon Shutsudohin 中国・新疆交河故城溝西墓地の調査—トルファン盆地に栄えた車師前国墳墓群の黄金出土品', *Shirukurōdogaku kenkyū sōsho / shirukurōdogaku kenkyū sentāhen*, no. 2, 2000, pp. 17–34.

⁵⁰State Bureau of Cultural Relics, UNESCO and the Government of Japan, *The Ancient City of Jiaohe* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1993).

⁵¹Nicchuu kyoudou Niya iseki gakujuutsu chousatai 日中共同ニヤ遺跡学術調査隊, *Sino-Japanese Scientific Report on the Investigation of the Niya Site* 日中中日共同尼雅(ニヤ)遺跡学術調査報告書, three vols (Kyoto: Bukkyo University, 1996, 1999, 2007).

⁵²Corinne Debaine-Francfort and Abdouessul Idriss, *Keriya, mémoires d'un fleuve: archéologie et civilisation des oasis du Taklamakan* (Suilly-la-Tour: Editions Findakly Paris and Fondation EDF, 2001).

debates about the history of cultural exchange between East and West. In this period, research into ‘connectivity’ was in full swing. With a vast corpus of underexplored findings dating back to prehistory, the field of Xinjiang archaeology was primed for probing historical questions about the SR with the aim of evincing its antiquity and continuity.

In the 1990s and 2000s, exhibitions, catalogues, conferences, and compendia of scientific essays became increasingly SR-themed. Many significant discoveries, primarily burials, helped frame the archaeological record of Xinjiang in broader Eurasian contexts. The first SR-bannered national cultural relics conservation project for Xinjiang was launched in 2006 by the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. This 420-million-yuan five-year scheme involved excavation and conservation work at 21 sites across four prefectures in Xinjiang.⁵³ As a result, excavation and survey activities intensified during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The ancient city of Gaochang 高昌, one of the named sites of the national conservation project, was excavated five times between 2006 and 2009. Large numbers of burials and Buddhist sites (including grottoes and monasteries) across the span of Tian Shan, in the counties of Kucha, Nileke, Shanshan, and Turfan region, were the focus of field studies during this time.

It is not unexpected that the tenets of the Chinese BRI, introduced a quarter-century after UNESCO’s programme—modelled on the SR concept—emulate the principle of internationalism⁵⁴ undergirding the UNESCO paradigm. Since SR was already a catch-all term that effectively amalgamates at least two millennia of human connectivity into a teleological narrative of linear east-west, local-global trajectories, it would aptly embody three key traits of Chinese civilization on which the BRI strategy is premised—*unity* and *continuity* on the basis of *inclusivity*. And furthering this perspective has been pinpointed as a core mission of Xinjiang archaeology.

It is prefaced in the inaugural issue of *Sichou zhi lu xue* 絲綢之路學 (Silk Road Studies), a new archaeology textbook series published by Northwest University that ‘constructing Silk Road of the new era’, that is, the BRI, ‘without the ancient Silk Roads is no different than building a castle in the sky’.⁵⁵ A very similar definition of the SR to that of the UNESCO’s is used, recounting the history of the SR from 1,600 years before Zhang Qian to the present day,⁵⁶ across ‘desert’, ‘steppe’, ‘maritime’, ‘the south-west’, and ‘highland’. The two-pronged research and pedagogical approach consists of, first, to ‘discuss the system, function, and value of the Silk Roads, and the results of exchanges between Eastern and Western civilizations’, and second, to ‘reconstruct the ancient Silk Roads, explore the patterns of exchange between Eastern and Western

⁵³ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Sichouzhi lu xinjiangduan zhongdian wenwu baohu xiangmu qidong 絲綢之路(新疆段)重點文物保護項目啟動’, https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/whyw/201112/t20111201_707257.htm, [accessed 12 December 2023].

⁵⁴ Although the BRI has been carried out on different, hegemonic terms.

⁵⁵ Author’s translation. The original text reads ‘脫離古代絲綢之路構建新時代的絲綢之路無異空中樓閣’. Zhao Congcang 趙叢蒼, Zhang Zhao 張朝 and Zhao Ge 趙戈, *Sichou zhi lu xue* 絲綢之路學 [Silk Roads Studies] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2021).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

civilizations, and service the future and development of human civilization'.⁵⁷ Not only is SR a narrative device in Xinjiang archaeology, it is the very target of scientific research, the goal of which is to uncover material evidence that illustrates the histories, routes, and cultures of the SR over time.

But the argument that archaeological findings prove the existence of a SR,⁵⁸ a concept 'invented'⁵⁹ long after the time periods to which said discoveries are dated, is untenable. This kind of historicist argumentation is circular reasoning, that is, 'begging the question'. This (il)logic accounts for the continual broadening of the extents of the SR espoused in both Chinese and Western archaeological literature since materials reflecting any kind of cultural exchange are *ipso facto* SR artefacts and their life histories are in turn used to substantiate the presence of a larger sphere of influence attributed to the SR.

However, the parallelism of the SR and BRI is not simply based on inference; it is rooted in ideology and rhetoric—the idea of the presence of an integrated native culture from time immemorial to which the formation of the modern national identity can be traced. Arguably, the BRI not only patterns itself after the SR but also constitutes a historical continuation of SR. That the past is rendered analogous to the present is the main line of SR arguments that are grounded in heritage science tinged with cultural politics.

For instance, the development of the SR in the period from Han to Tang is today's trending topic because it is particularly useful for tracing the effective management of the Western Regions (Xiyu 西域) by central governments through history. In the past two decades, Xinjiang archaeology has placed a significant emphasis on surveying and excavating beacon towers, fortresses, and entire cities dating from the Han to the Tang dynasties. This was showcased in a project titled the *Great Wall Conservation Project* (Changcheng baohu gongcheng 長城保護工程) (2005–2014) that started almost a decade before the BRI. Military infrastructure was described as an integral component of the central administration of the Western Regions during Han times.⁶⁰ The defence system was strategically aligned with SR routes to facilitate the safe and smooth flow of transportation and ensure social stability. There was large-scale fieldwork investigating structures of political administration and defence, such as the purported site of the Han Protectorate General of the Western Regions, Kuiyukexiehai'er 奎玉克協海爾,⁶¹

⁵⁷ Author's translation. The original text is from Zhao et al., *Sichou zhi lu xue*, pp. 23–24. The original texts reads '重在探討絲綢之路的機制、作用、價值及東西方文明交流之成果' and '復原古代絲綢之路的面貌, 探索東西方文明交流之規律, 服務人類文明未來之發展'.

⁵⁸ Articles making this argument abound. See, for example, Liu Qingzhu 劉慶柱, "'Sichouzhi lu" de kaogu renzhi "絲綢之路" 的考古認知, *Jingji shehuishi pinglun* 經濟社會史評論, no. 2, 2015, pp. 44–53, 127.

⁵⁹ Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877'.

⁶⁰ *Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu Changcheng ziyuan diaocha baogao (shang xia ce)* 新疆維吾爾自治區長城資源調查報告(上、下冊) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2014); Hu Xingjun 胡興軍, 'Xinjiang Yuli Keyakekuduke fengsui yizhi chutu tang henglingfeng zhuangshang tonghaizhen wei loulan lujie zongshi wenshu 新疆尉犁克亞克庫都克烽燧遺址出土唐橫嶺烽狀上通海鎮為樓蘭路截踪事文書', *Wenwu* 文物, no. 3, 2023, pp. 77–83.

⁶¹ Lin Meicun, 'Kaogu shiye xia de xiyu duhufu jinzhi yanjiu 考古視野下的西域都護府今址研究', *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, vol. 6, 2013, pp. 43–58.

the chains of beacon towers in central Tian Shan, and other early walled settlements along the northern rim of Tarim Basin.

This presentist narrative also shapes the discourse of the spread of religion. Specific examples can be drawn from the reports of two major medieval sites being excavated in Xinjiang at present, attributed to different time periods and political entities. The sites of the walled city Tangchaodun 唐朝墩 in Tingzhou 庭州 (Jimsar prefecture) of the Tang empire, where remains of a Nestorian monastery and Subashi 蘇巴什 Buddhist monastery of the Kucha (Kuche) 庫車 kingdom had been found, are both described as strategic hubs of the East-West crossroads, testament to the religions' eastward spread on the SR and the historicity of ethnic fusion, religious coexistence, and cultural harmony.⁶²

Even though SR has always been topologically problematic, the same geographical framework continues to be recycled today. Efforts to counter Eurocentric or hegemonic perspectives still depend on reconstructing past connections between the endpoints of Europe and East Asia, with Central Asia as a crossroads.⁶³ The SR has been a research trend imbued with presentism taken for—and romanticized as—historicity. Yet, scholars remain hopeful that, somehow, the purported scientific value of the current SR in tapping a transnational movement of 'critical localism' will transcend similar ambitions of nation-building. The equivocal legacies of the SR can be further argued by referencing what historian Arif Dirlik had postulated, even before the BRI was introduced. He wrote specifically about 'well-intentioned but misguided efforts in China scholarship to assert a "China-centred" view of history' as an example of how historicism, 'romantic nostalgia for communities past', or 'hegemonic nationalist yearnings of a new kind' would thwart critical localism and 'imprison the present in the past'.⁶⁴ What differs from Dirlik's prudent observation over two decades ago is that China seems no longer subject to the misleading 'Euro-American teleologies and concepts' and is asserting its own discourse power.⁶⁵

The be-all and end-all

The fallacy that the SR functions invariably as the *raison d'être* for every analysis is evident in three ways it contravenes scientific standards of examination: obfuscated scales,⁶⁶ dichotomous thinking, and sampling bias.

⁶²Renmin University Archaeological Institute for the Study of Northern Peoples (Renmin), Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, Academy of Social Sciences (XIA) and Beijing Normal University School of History, 'Xinjiang Qitai-xian Tangchaodun chengzhi 2018–2019 nian fajue jianbao 新疆奇台縣唐朝墩城址2018~2019年發掘簡報', *Kaogu* 考古, no. 5, 2020, pp. 64–38; Ran Wanli 冉萬里, 'Xinjiang Kuche Subashi fosi yizhi diaocha yu fajue de chubu shouhuo 新疆庫車蘇巴什佛寺遺址調查與發掘的初步收穫', *Xibu kaogu* 西部考古, vol. 18, 2019, pp. 250–308. See footnote 150 for further discussion of this model of ethnic and religious inclusivity in Chinese scholarship.

⁶³A well-known example is Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶⁴Arif Dirlik, 'Global in the Local', in *Global/Local. Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, (eds) R. Wilson and W. Dissanayake (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 21–45.

⁶⁵This is discussed in the section 'A new era of China-centric discourse for Chinese archaeology'.

⁶⁶Here I adopt the term used in Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 127.

Obfuscated scales

Today, the definition and geographical extent of SR continues to expand. The temporal range is likewise broad and fluid. It is generally agreed that the original SR began in 200 BCE and ended either in 900 CE or as late as 1600 CE but its variants, such as the steppe SR and the highland SR, could date to as early as the Bronze Age and as late as the most recent manifestations of the BRI. Terms homologous to the SR began to emerge in the 1990s; 'road' or 'route' were named after other geographical, biome, and material attributes. In addition to roads of the steppe, desert, oasis, maritime,⁶⁷ bronze, lithic, fur, incense, tea, horse, among others, there are those tracing intangible practices, technologies, and ideologies, such as music, religion, and food,⁶⁸ many of which traverse Xinjiang. This broadening of discourse encouraged an even wider, but more scattered array of viewpoints on the SR.

Given the vast research output on the SR, pinpointing the nature of the research question has become incredibly difficult. In the *Silk Roads World Heritage* database,⁶⁹ a principal source of SR heritage news managed by the Xi'an branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), research articles assembled on sites in Xinjiang alone number almost 250, archaeological reports on Xinjiang SR sites amount to over 330, while the number of miscellaneous articles under the categories of 'feature articles', 'press releases', and 'conference reports'⁷⁰ adds up to over 500. About one-fifth of the over 1,000 articles mention the SR in their title. These web articles showcase the geographical scopes encompassed by the SR—Chang'an to Tian Shan, Pamir Plateau, southwest China, maritime, etc.⁷¹ Book publishing has also taken up the SR trend. Twenty volumes published in a Silk Roads Research series (*Sichou zhi lu yanjiu congshu* 絲綢之路研究叢書) include a wide array of topics.⁷²

Interestingly, publications on Xinjiang archaeology from the late 1980s and 1990s, a peak period for archaeological field research, seldom used SR. Findings from the first region-wide survey,⁷³ which took place between 1988 and 1991, were published as separate reports by the prefecture or administrative district in *Xinjiang Wenwu* 新疆文物

⁶⁷For the invention of the maritime Silk Road, see Tansen Sen, 'Inventing the "Maritime Silk Road"', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2023, pp. 1059–1104.

⁶⁸For a quick summary, see Franklin, 'Archaeology of the Silk Road'.

⁶⁹ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) International Conservation Center -Xi'an, 'Silk Roads World Heritage 絲綢之路世界遺產', <http://www.silkroads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=list&catid=7>, [accessed 11 August 2023].

⁷⁰These are ICOMOS's own categories.

⁷¹Six archaeological sites in Xinjiang were ascribed World Cultural Heritage status as locations on the 'Silk Roads: The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor'. Sixteen other locations in other parts of China, and 11 others in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were also inscribed through the same scheme.

⁷²Published between 2009 and 2014 by Commercial Press and Xinjiang Renmin Publishing House. The 20-volume series comprises a wide range of subjects, including porcelains, petroglyphs, ancient ethnology, dance, music, military agrarian colonies, religion, etc.

⁷³A host of new sites were discovered during the survey, yielding large data sets for prospective proactive excavations (as opposed to salvage excavations, which remain the majority in China to this day). For a list of excavations, see Cong Dexin and Jia Weiming, 'Xinjiang diqu qingtong shidai kaogu faxian yu yanjiu 新疆地區青銅時代考古發現與研究', in *Zhongguo kaosu bainian shi*, Vol. 2, Part 3 中國考古學百年史第二卷下冊, (ed.) Wang Wei (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2021), pp. 1455–1479.

between 1988 and 2004.⁷⁴ Compendia of excavation and survey reports and research articles were published in two volumes of *Xinjiang kaogu xinshouhuo* 新疆考古新收穫 in 1995 for results in 1979–1989 and in 1997 for 1990–1996, respectively.⁷⁵ The term SR is rarely used in the titles of these publications and their content is also mostly devoid of the term. However, the term almost invariably shows up in discussions where cultural exchange is inferred from the archaeological record.

It is difficult to substantiate the idea that the numerous SR data points are all microcosms of the SR. Current archaeological evidence does not support a linear and cohesive SR landscape, especially on a transcontinental scale.⁷⁶ Instead, it indicates more varied and intermittent connections than those purported by the SR concept. Enquiries into prehistoric connections between Central China and the steppe zone to uphold the idea of a proto-SR,⁷⁷ for example, are implausible for scholars who adhere to a narrower, historiography-supported definition of the SR.⁷⁸ Proponents of more traditionalist views might consider the fact that the impetus for adopting the SR was partly influenced by developments in the field of history, which has been the guiding discipline for ancient studies in China. The SR was once a historical problem in need of archaeological input. Archaeologists working in Xinjiang, Gansu, and Shaanxi first caught on to the usage of the SR from historians working in the Gansu-Qinghai region studying Qin-Han and Tang histories. Therefore, in the 1980s, research expeditions dedicated to SR studies along historical routes between Xinjiang and Gansu flourished.⁷⁹

Conversely, arguments for a more liberal reading of the SR, such as the one proposed by David Christian in ‘Silk Roads or Steppe Roads’ to correct the underrepresentation of mobile pastoralists’ contributions to trans-ecological exchanges within and across the steppe are equally warranted—but for studying exchange, not the SR.⁸⁰ ‘Constructing

⁷⁴In the inaugural issue of *Xinjiang Wenwu*, a chronological scheme was presented for the evolution of 20 material cultures from the Paleolithic, Neolithic, to the Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages, showcasing the state of the art in Xinjiang archaeology.

⁷⁵*Xinjiang kaogu xin shouhuo 1979–1989* 新疆考古新收穫 1979–1989 (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1995); *Xinjiang kaogu xin shouhuo 1990–1996* 新疆考古新收穫 1990–1996 (Urumqi: Xinjiang meishu sheying chubanshe, 1997).

⁷⁶See arguments by Rezakhani, ‘The Road that Never Was’, pp. 420–433; Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Khazanov, ‘The Overland “Great Silk Road”’.

⁷⁷For example, Hermann Parzinger, ‘The “Silk Roads” Concept Reconsidered: About Transfers, Transportation and Transcontinental Interactions in Prehistory’, *The Silk Road*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2008, pp. 7–15; M. Frachetti, C. Smith and C. Traub et al., ‘Nomadic Ecology Shaped the Highland Geography of Asia’s Silk Roads’, *Nature*, no. 543, 2017, pp. 193–198; TL. Høisæter, ‘Politics and Nomads: The Emergence of the Silk Road Exchange in the Tarim Basin Region During Late Prehistory (2000–400 BCE)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 80, no. 2, 2017, pp. 339–363; Tan Liangcheng, Dong Guanghui, An Zhisheng, et al., ‘Megadrought and Cultural Exchange Along the Proto-Silk Road’, *Science Bulletin*, vol. 66, no. 6, 2021, pp. 603–611.

⁷⁸Li contended that Richthofen’s original definition of cross-continental trade is most explicit and therefore suitable for purposes of scholarly research. Li, ‘Sichou zhi lu de zhengming’, pp. 1–45.

⁷⁹Liu, ‘Sichouzhi lu’ gainian de xingcheng’, pp. 181–207.

⁸⁰David Christian, ‘Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History’, *Journal of World History*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–26.

a unified and coherent history of Afro-Eurasia',⁸¹ fortunately, need not hinge on how SR is defined and historicized, but only how the processes it seeks to encompass are studied.

It is not surprising that the definition of SR has rarely been debated⁸²—not because it is uncontested, but because it remains broad and indeterminate. Beyond descriptions in historical texts consistent with the SR, there is scant evidence to support the understanding of what the SR was in ancient times. Consequently, it is not surprising that studies on the SR avoid explicitly defining what the SR *is/was* within the context of their research.

Historian Li Bozhong asserted that the contemporary wholesale collation of data brought on by the “‘Silk Roads’-craze’ must be kept in check—by distinguishing between public and scholarly concepts of the SR.⁸³ But establishing this demarcation poses a significant challenge. It is difficult to square the aspirations of universalism espoused in the public sphere, that is, shared histories of progress and symbiotic exchange, with disparate perspectives stemming from various lines of investigation within SR studies.

The fragmentation of the field is a strong indicator that these varying approaches in SR studies have significant drawbacks. As Ma Lirong, professor at the Institute of Silk Road Strategy Studies of Shanghai International Studies University, explained, it has been difficult to integrate the studies’ macro and micro foci, which have their origins in distinct developmental stages within the field’s history.⁸⁴ According to Ma, the micro foci include, for example, Asian studies, Dunhuang studies, and Western Regions studies. Li Mingwei at the Department of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology and director of the Society for the History of Sino-Foreign Relations, also voiced the same concern about disintegration, listing geography, anthropology, ethnology, religion, Mongolian history, Central Asian history, Sino-Western transportation history, trade history, Dunhuang and Turpan studies, and Tibetan studies as the many subjects SR encompasses.⁸⁵ Authors of the inaugural *Sichou zhi lu xue* (*Silk Road Studies*) volume also observed that said studies have yet to gain a foothold because the field has still to assemble and integrate the smithereens of fine-grained histories.⁸⁶

Furthermore, data collection is often hindered by lack of granularity and presentist biases. Between her two critiques of the SR in 2007 and in 2020, Susan Whitfield, a leading historian of the SR, did not gain newfound confidence in the availability of ‘big data’-driven, detailed studies to consolidate SR scholarship. Xinjiang was her case in point. She explained, ‘[there] are few general histories of this region and barely a monograph on any of the Tarim kingdoms’;⁸⁷ the first history of Khotan was published only in 2006.⁸⁸

⁸¹Ibid., p. 25. The world-systems theory the author mentioned in the article is already one way in which these macro-regional dynamics can be studied.

⁸²This reinforces my point in footnote 1 about the futility of defining the SR.

⁸³Li, ‘Sichou zhi lu de zhengming’, pp. 1–45.

⁸⁴Ma, ‘Zhongguo de “yidaiyilu” yanjiu’, pp. 21–39.

⁸⁵Li Mingwei 李明偉, ‘Sichou zhi lu bainian lishi huigu 絲綢之路百年歷史回顧’, *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 西北民族研究, no. 2, 2005, pp. 90–106.

⁸⁶Zhao et al., *Sichou zhi lu xue*.

⁸⁷Whitfield, ‘The Expanding Silk Road’, p. 35.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 36.

Dichotomous thinking

Not only is an empirical basis lacking for the ubiquity and perpetuity of the SR, the idea of a demarcated network coterminous with Eurasia conveniently bolsters what Whitfield dubbed the dichotomy of 'East' and 'West', promoted by popular science, with the 'Silk Road' representing a pre-modern meeting of the respective opposing cultures.⁸⁹ Li Bozhong also disproved the tendency to portray SR as an invariable East-West communication route that continues from time immemorial to the present.⁹⁰ In early archaeological studies in Xinjiang, the SR framework was largely eschewed, as it was geographically aligned with the extent of the infrastructural ambitions of Western powers. Contextualizing any local history within the framework of SR entails *a priori* assumptions that, no matter how geographically limited, it must inevitably pertain to the longue durée of East-West exchange.⁹¹

Sampling bias

The current understanding of Xinjiang archaeology in popular science—and arguably academic science as well—is still largely shaped by distinctive finds. This epicurean bias⁹² was present as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when expeditions into remote areas of East Turkestan fuelled the exoticism that brought prominence to Xinjiang as a 'crossroads' in the cultural-political dichotomy that is East-West.⁹³ The strong focus on funerary archaeology in Xinjiang that developed thereafter also helped cement a tradition of an object-centric approach in field archaeology in China, resulting in a preponderance of burial objects in research for most of the past century.

In the 1990s, museums became a rising forum for marrying heritage politics and public archaeology. Local 'spectacle[s] of material culture' came to invoke 'an aura of romance and mysticism around a story of mobility, transmission, and carriage'.⁹⁴ And it was partly in the realm of museology, Tim Winter argued, that the time—and the geographical scales associated with the 'Silk Road imaginary'—first became obfuscated, since for a time, the trending museological SR narrative was built around dazzling collections of singular objects. At the same time, UNESCO was espousing broadened and shared timelines and geographies to support its post-war vision of a single world history and its mission of peacekeeping through 'cultural internationalism'.⁹⁵

During this time, there was a surge in state investment and interest in the archaeology of Xinjiang, coinciding with a rise in the discovery of ancient remains in Central Asia, which revealed connections in material traits harkening back to 'cosmopolitan' times in antiquity. The SR became the perfect emblem of these scientific trends. The

⁸⁹Susan Whitfield, 'Was There a Silk Road?', *Asian Medicine*, no. 3, 2007, p. 205.

⁹⁰Li, 'Sichou zhi lu de zhengming', pp. 1–45.

⁹¹This issue is further elaborated in the 'A corrective' section below using the theory of global localism.

⁹²On the politics of curatorial bias, see Claire L. Lyons and John K. Papadopoulos, 'Archaeology and Colonialism', in *Archaeology of Colonialism*, (eds) C. L. Lyons and J. K. Papadopoulos (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), pp. 1–26.

⁹³Whitfield, 'Was There a Silk Road?', pp. 201–213.

⁹⁴Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 127.

⁹⁵*Ibid.* See also Paul Betts, 'Humanity's New Heritage: UNESCO and the Rewriting of World History', *Past and Present*, no. 228, 2015, pp. 249–285.

mummies of Lop Nur;⁹⁶ the gold hoard of Boma; manuscripts, silk, and clay sculptures and figurines of Shanshan; the wooden slips and woven textiles of Niya; the Buddhist monastery, murals and sculptures of Dandan Oilik and Keriya Basin; and the grottoes of Kucha are, unsurprisingly, symbols of the SR and spotlighted in exhibits. The classic SR inventory also comprises stereotypical luxury objects traded in from afar. The exhibit curated by the National Museum of China for the public exhibition ‘Sharing a Common Future: Exhibition of Treasures from National Museums along the Silk Road’ includes objects as distant as ‘European forms of dress, Omani pottery, and dinnerware from Eastern Europe’.⁹⁷

However, assuming that the presence of shared material traits between these select nodes (of sites)—ergo SR-esque connections—can be extrapolated to the entirety of the region is a fallacy of composition. One might also argue that the trade and communication routes indicated by these distinct objects may not have been the only or most important pathways for cultural exchange. Interactions of different people groups are also the result of diaspora, migration, war, exile, intermarriage, pilgrimage, etc., events that do not allude to symbiotic relations or yield trade benefits.⁹⁸

Consistently framing these past connections and exchanges in a positive light also deters critical thinking and paradigmatic breakthroughs. This kind of idealist narrative appears to share the markings of UNESCO’s early mission of writing a global, universal history of peace and progress.⁹⁹ Not all SR histories were favourable, yet the SR is rarely used to indicate ‘unfavourable’ histories of severed connections and ethnocentrism. Aligning research with present-day goals of universalism¹⁰⁰ increases the risk of ahistorical and anachronistic interpretations, thereby introducing biases into research.

A new era of China-centric discourse for Chinese archaeology

The institution of the BRI in 2013 appears to be an apex of the rising SR trend but also a shift in how Xinjiang archaeology relates to the SR—now with the BRI in tandem. This has led to structured developments of the SR as a distinct academic field. The acronym

⁹⁶The politics surrounding the mummies of the Tarim Basin is famously contentious. The genetics of the individuals buried in the cemetery of Xiaohe have been a source of geopolitical controversies, leading to scholarly debates concerning the ancestry of these individuals inhabiting the Tarim Basin, an area beset by political tension surrounding the sovereignty of Turkic-speaking groups, as well as restrictions on displaying the mummies during the ‘Secrets of the Silk Road’ exhibit at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, United States. This subject garnered media attention again recently with the publication of new genomic results from 13 individuals from the Tarim Basin in F Zhang, C. Ning and A. Scott et al., ‘The Genomic Origins of the Bronze Age Tarim Basin Mummies’, *Nature*, no. 599, 2021, pp. 256–261. The Xiaohe mummies are a prime example of the unfounded and unwarranted presentist implications tied to prominent SR finds, further highlighting the need to apply frameworks steeped in geopolitics, such as the SR, judiciously.

⁹⁷Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 127.

⁹⁸Li, ‘Sichou zhi lu de zhengming’, pp. 1–45.

⁹⁹The subject of ‘good history’ versus ‘bad history’ is discussed in Paul Bett’s analysis of UNESCO’s ‘History of Mankind’ project. He noted, ‘UNESCO’s world history was driven by the link it assumed between education and peace, whose guiding faith was that good history unites, while bad history divides.’ Betts, ‘Humanity’s New Heritage’, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰Thorsten, ‘Silk Road Nostalgia’, pp. 301–317.

BRI stands for Belt and Road Initiative, a combination of the 'economic belt of the Silk Road' and the 'twenty-first century maritime Silk Road'. It offers an expanded framework for integrating regional histories, particularly those of Xinjiang, into a unified narrative encompassing west China and all border regions within the BRI's ambit.

As an epithet for a reimagined Sinicized multi-ethnic discourse and a long-standing emblem of Chinese multiculturalism in China, the SR has proven useful for constructing a more cohesive and unassailable account of national history within China. It has also been an effective conduit for building international scientific collaborations. The state's push towards unifying and promoting Chinese SR studies has had resounding implications for funding priorities and publication trends, which is perceptible in Xinjiang archaeology where the number of SR-titled books skyrocketed after the turn of the century.¹⁰¹ The call for a better understanding of inter-regional cultural flows in the past is well-embedded in state-building and cultural management agendas, a matter that has been thoroughly analysed in many articles.¹⁰² But a notable, recent shift in the ethos of archaeological practice within China suggests the potency of SR may be subsiding. Specifically, it is assuming a progressively subsidiary role to the broader goal of nation-building and in efforts to reclaim 'discourse power' (*huayuquan*) in geocultural politics.

As introduced at the beginning of the article, the term '*huayuquan*' does not have its beginnings in the BRI, but the initiative is largely responsible for its popularization in scientific discourse. Prior to the BRI's institution in 2013, and as early as 2000, the geopolitical implications of discourse power was already being discussed in scientific publications, in the context of post-colonial processes of globalization. The narrative espoused was centred on the reclamation and assertion of national (*zhonghua minzu* 中華民族)¹⁰³ discourse power, not all that different from the epistemologies undergirding the current BRI.¹⁰⁴ At the time, China was growing increasingly concerned about Western dominance over newly emerged cultural markets through a globalized finance system. Discourse power was a means to safeguard both China's economic

¹⁰¹ Among others, Wang Binghua, *Sichou zhi lu kaogu yanjiu* 絲綢之路新疆段考古研究 (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 2009); Qi Xiaoshan 祁小山 and Wang Bo 王博 (eds), *Sichou zhilu* 絲綢之路 catalog, three vols (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 2006) are best known.

¹⁰² For example, Liu Weidong 劉衛東, "'Yidaiyilu" zhanlue de kexue neihan yu kexue wenti "一帶一路"戰略的科學內涵與科學問題', *Dili kexue jinzhan* 地理科學進展, no. 5, 2015, pp. 538–544; Xu, 'Kaogu xue shang suo jian Zhongguo jingnei de Sichouzhilu', pp. 239–290; Michael J. Storzum and Li Yuqi, 'Chinese Archaeology Goes Abroad', *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2020, pp. 282–309; Whitfield, 'The Expanding Silk Road'.

¹⁰³ China's 'nation' concept is anchored to a broad interpretation of 'ethnicity'. It comprises *zhonghua*, which means 'Chinese' in the cultural sense of all customs and traditions that are Chinese in the *longue durée*, and *minzu*, which means 'people' or 'ethnic group', both as a monolithic and a pluralistic entity. Both terms serve to highlight the ethnological breadth and fluidity 'China' connotes.

¹⁰⁴ The first time 'cultural soft power' was mentioned at the National People's Congress was in 2007. See Zhao Lei 趙磊, 'Zengqiang Zhongguo guoji huayuquan de xianshi tiaozhan yu yingdui zengqiang Zhongguo guoji huayuquan de xianshi tiaozhan yu yingdui', *The Scholarly View* 學術視野, no. 3, 2024, pp. 76–84. See also the discussion in Александров Дмитрий Александрович, 'Особенности развития современных киргизско-китайских отношений в гуманитарной и культурно-образовательной сферах (Peculiarities of the Development of Modern Kyrgyz-Chinese Relations in the Humanitarian and Cultural-Educational Spheres)', *Проблемы национальной стратегии* (Problems of National Strategy), vol. 6, no. 69, 2021, pp. 1–14.

interests internationally and to ensure the autonomous, continual development of its national culture.¹⁰⁵ It was also a way to correct the imbalance in academic discursive authority between China and the West.¹⁰⁶

The BRI was a continuation and expansion of this very narrative. The only change was the introduction of a specific goal for enhancing discourse power, which was the realization of the BRI stratagem. As Wu Xianjun explained, effective discourse politics—rendered by rigorous academic standards and research findings—is essential for making an impact on international systems, as it serves to counter criticism and opposition of ideas from the West.¹⁰⁷ Under the BRI, SR was a lens through which China's relation with the world is evinced and interpreted; it serves to amplify China's discourse authority on the international stage.¹⁰⁸

However, due to the broadening of the SR scope to accommodate political and diplomatic objectives, over the past decade the connection between Xinjiang archaeology and SR has become less pronounced. The current portrayal of Xinjiang archaeology in scientific and pedagogical materials, museums, and other arenas of public engagement appears to be veering away from SR-centred narratives, and highlighting instead how cultural relics projects in Xinjiang can contribute to reconstructing national history and bolstering scientific capabilities both domestically and abroad—with the SR as a potential conduit. Against a backdrop of intensifying BRI activity, the scientific purpose of the SR becomes increasingly derivative.

Exhibitions in Xinjiang are orienting towards themes that accentuate the particularities of the archaeological record and Chinese methods of research, and not clinging to the 'Silk Road(s) imaginary'.¹⁰⁹ Only four out of the 32 special exhibits at Xinjiang Regional Museum since 2011 were SR-themed; they were about horse culture, Tian Shan and the five northwestern provinces, Buddhist grottoes, and lives of women in the Tang dynasty. None of the new permanent exhibits installed in the new wings following the completion of the museum's second phase of construction in 2022 is titled or revolves around the SR.

The themes of the special exhibit of '100 years of Xinjiang Archaeology', entitled *Zaizhan zaizhi* 載瞻載止, which call for pause and observation, also attest to this change. The exhibit opened on 18 November 2023 at Xinjiang Art Gallery. This

¹⁰⁵Yang Junlei 楊俊蕾, 'Wenhua quanqiu zhong de minzu huayuquan 文化全球中的民族話語權', *Wenhua yanjiu* 文化研究, no. 3, 2002, pp. 102–117; Zhao, 'Zengqiang Zhongguo guoji huayuquan', pp. 76–84.

¹⁰⁶Zheng Hangsheng 鄭杭生, 'Xueshu huayuquan yu Zhongguo shehuixue fazhan 增強中國國際話語權的現實挑戰與應對', *Social Sciences in China* 中國社會科學, no. 2, 2011, pp. 27–34. Zheng explained that the correction is two-fold: building cultural self-awareness while developing global perspectives on the basis of Chinese style of studying social sciences, as opposed to a Chinese version of Western social science theories; and refraining from using 'border thinking' (*bianchui siwei* 邊陲思維), common among academic returnees, to impose Western theories onto Chinese social reality.

¹⁰⁷Wu, 'Guoji huayuquan shiyu', pp. 97–103.

¹⁰⁸Ma Lirong 馬麗蓉, 'Jiyu siluxue shijiao de "yidai yilu" xueshu huayu yanjiu 基於絲路學視角的“一帶一路”學術話語研究', *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2021, 62–78. Ma also argued that the BRI serves to counteract rhetorics from Europe's Eurocentrism and the United States' geopolitical game theory.

¹⁰⁹Cf. the discussion of museums' role in promulgating the 'Silk Road(s) imaginary' in Winter, *The Silk Road*.

two-month exhibit was intended to take place alongside other centennial exhibits of Chinese archaeology.¹¹⁰ The year 2023 was also a significant one for China's cultural diplomacy, being the tenth anniversary of the BRI.¹¹¹

The exhibit followed how field archaeology evolved in Xinjiang over the past century in the face of foreign influences—from subservience to Western powers' expeditionary goals to the building of a China-centric discourse of Xinjiang archaeology.¹¹² The narrative arc dovetails nicely with the key message of the opening ceremony, which was to equip and empower a Chinese way of archaeology, through 'review' and 'reflection', on the landmark occasion of Chinese archaeology's centennial. Instead of advocating the SR as a quintessence of Xinjiang archaeology, which was prevalent in museums across the region pre-pandemic, the exhibit embraced a more holistic view of the SR: it is a topic correlated with the objectives of Xinjiang archaeology, but by proxy of the broader goals and visions of Chinese archaeology.

The exhibit's opening ceremony was well attended by scholars and heads of institutes and cultural bureaus across the country. The welcome addresses¹¹³ were consistent in advocating: first, the archaeology of Xinjiang is practised in Chinese style and Chinese ways, that is, it keeps to the trajectory and idiosyncrasies of the field's development within the context of national history. It is a microcosm of the century-old development of Chinese archaeology, and also a powerful testament to Chinese culture progressing towards self-confidence and self-improvement. Second, the archaeology of Xinjiang has always been used to address ethnic and religious issues because Xinjiang has always been a place where multiple cultures and religions coexist. The fact that Xinjiang is a hub of the ancient SR bears witness to the inclusiveness (*baorongxing* 包容性) of Chinese civilization; the other three traits are 'continuity' (*lianxuxing* 連續性), 'unity' (*tongyixing* 統一性), and 'innovativeness' (*chuangxinxing* 創新性).¹¹⁴ Unity and continuity are achieved on the basis of inclusivity, just as innovativeness, that is, keeping pace with social needs and the development of the state,

¹¹⁰For example, '100 discoveries in 100 years of Chinese archaeology' opened at Zhengzhou Museum in May 2022.

¹¹¹Beijing hosted a large-scale meeting in late October to mark this milestone. I thank Julia Lovell for sharing this information.

¹¹²The exhibit is divided into four themed sections that chronicle developments in Xinjiang archaeology from the early twentieth century to the present—from loss and hardship to recovery to expansion and revitalization. The chronological sections are titled '心傷暗夜盡劫灰' for 1902 to 1948, '藍縷筌路啟閭華' for 1949 to circa 1979, '規模漸具開閭闔' for circa 1980 to the end of the 2000s, and '前行砥礪致高遠' for the beginning of the 2010s to the present. The over 180 unearthed cultural relics displayed, alongside archival material, photos, videos, and installations, showcase the major archaeological discoveries and scientific breakthroughs in the context of the broader century-old discourse of modern Chinese archaeology.

¹¹³Transcribed from author's recording of the opening ceremony. Speeches were delivered by the head of the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, a professor of the School of Archaeology and Museology of Peking University, the former director of the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the deputy director of the Archaeology Department of the National Administration of Cultural Heritage, a member of the Party's Standing Committee of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, and the director of the Publicity Department.

¹¹⁴These four traits clearly reflect BRI's connectivity goals and the generation of new discourse landscapes.

contributes to continuity. Third, advancing archaeological work in Xinjiang is a principal matter of national concern. A key objective is to develop this core area of the BRI to better leverage archaeological and cultural relics resources.

A statement by a group of leading Chinese historians and archaeologists in a 2021 special issue of *Social Sciences in China* pronounced the shift in archaeology's role in advocating national interests:

Through the unremitting efforts of several generations of archaeologists, archaeology, initially a Western 'import', has gradually adapted to China's historical and cultural traditions and practical needs ... which has laid a solid foundation for the construction of an archaeological disciplinary system, academic system and discourse system with Chinese characteristics.

The last meeting of the Congress of Chinese Archaeology, hosted annually by the Archaeological Society of China (Zhongguo Kaogu Xuehui 中國考古學會) and the largest national gathering of archaeologists,¹¹⁵ took place in Xi'an in October 2023 with the theme 'Formation and Development of a Unified Multi-ethnic Country', boasting an attendance of over a thousand people. The previous three conferences dealt with topics concerned with the history and future of the discipline, with the 2022 meeting conferring about Chinese style (*Zhongguo tese*, *Zhongguo fengge*, *Zhongguo qipai* 中國特色, 中國風格, 中國氣派)¹¹⁶ archaeological study. SR has never been the theme of the Society's conference.

In structuring their steering committees, the Archaeological Society places 'Silk Road archaeology' in the same category as 'border archaeology' (*bianjiang kaogu* 邊疆考古), 'cultural heritage conservation' (*wenwu yichan baohu* 文化遺產保護), 'archaeology of ancient cities' (*gudai chengshi* 古代城市考古), and 'architectural archaeology' (*jianzhu kaogu* 建築考古).¹¹⁷ In terms of geographical scope, 'Silk Road archaeology' may even be subsidiary to 'border archaeology', which encompasses research in all peripheral regions, including Northeast China, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Xizang, Huanan, and Xinjiang.

The latest international product of the SR-BRI symbiosis is the establishment of a new Silk Road Archaeological Cooperation Research Center at Northwest University, Xi'an, as part of a new Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia (Yazhou yizhi baohu lianmeng 亞洲遺產保護聯盟), chaired by China.¹¹⁸ The Center was

¹¹⁵Annual meetings were held, with the exception of 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2020. The Society was founded in 1979.

¹¹⁶The use of these three terms—*tese* 特色, *fengge* 風格, *qipai* 氣派—which have similar meanings, can be understood as parallelism, a rhetorical device used, in this context, for emphasis and evocation. *Tese* means features, generally physical attributes. *Fengge* is style attributed to an established set of features, techniques, and philosophies that coalesce over time into a system of creation. *Qipai* is the most abstract of the three, denoting manner and air. It is used to describe a subject that evokes admiration in others and exerts a positive influence. Together, these three terms convey an amalgamated meaning of positive 'style'.

¹¹⁷The other two categories are chronology and methods of archaeological science.

¹¹⁸The Alliance (ACHA) was established in 2021 by China, with nine other member states, to promote regional cooperation and connectivity through collaborative efforts in cultural heritage conservation. The Alliance's connection to BRI is analogous to that of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a

inaugurated on 25 April 2023, with the mission to create ‘an open, collaborative, shared, and inheritable international platform’¹¹⁹ to foster the archaeological study of the SR and the ancient East and West, and to promote cultural exchange and collaboration with countries along the SR. It has already forged partnerships with eight countries—Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—and 13 academic institutions.¹²⁰ Perhaps more important than affording Chinese researchers opportunities to participate in discourses at the international level,¹²¹ the SR called for a broadening of scientific perspectives beyond China. These international programmes provided China with the platform to reclaim ‘*huayuquan*’ by rectifying Eurocentric approaches to Asian history,¹²² and asserting Chinese ones. They also serve to showcase Chinese archaeology’s advancements in fieldwork method and scientific technique internationally.

Interestingly, while three areas of BRI-oriented developments are named for Xinjiang—national unity and ethnic integration; bolstering academic disciplinary developments and research management systems; and implementing ‘urban development’ archaeology—notably, as early as 2017, ‘international scholarly exchange’ has largely been dropped from associated narratives.¹²³ Foreign participation in domestic archaeology appears to be curtailed compared to the growing investment in launching archaeology projects abroad. There are currently active joint excavations and collections study in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Russia. These projects serve to assert China’s historical and cultural links with these neighbouring countries, particularly those in Central Asia bordering its western frontiers, which occupy a high-stakes arena of ‘peripheral diplomacy’.¹²⁴ China’s ‘*huayuquan*’ is wielded

multilateral development bank, which supports the region’s economic growth through infrastructure investments. Compared to the Nara Convention, a cultural heritage initiative organized in 1994 by Japan involving 28 member states with an explicit objective to advocate for cultural diversity in evaluating the authenticity of cultural heritage, the ACHA functions within a more integrated framework, targeting the broader goals of heritage protection that extend to geopolitical and economic interests. Its goal is also to strengthen discourse power through scientific initiatives.

¹¹⁹Cited from the Center’s pamphlet that the author obtained on her visit in 2023 to Northwest University, Xi’an, where the Center is headquartered.

¹²⁰Zhang Denglan 張鄧瀾, “‘Sichouzhilu kaogu hezuo yanjiu zhongxin’ zai Yazhou wenhua yichanbaohu lianmeng dahui shang jiepai” “絲綢之路考古合作研究中心”在亞洲文化遺產保護聯盟大會上揭牌, published online on 20 April 2023, available at <https://www.nwu.edu.cn/info/1192/31035.htm>, [accessed 28 June 2023].

¹²¹Ma Lirong 馬麗蓉, ‘Bainian lai guoji siluxue yanjiu de mailuo ji zhongguo siluxue zhenxing 百年來國際絲路學研究的脈絡及中國絲路學振興’, *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 新疆師範大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), no. 2, 2018, pp. 60–77.

¹²²Eurocentric perspectives in the past entailed discovering ‘the possible “reach” of Western civilization’. See discussion in Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 33.

¹²³Based on the address by the National Cultural Heritage Administration (*Guojia wenwuju* 國家文物局) at the inaugural conference on the Undertakings of Xinjiang Archaeology held in Urumqi. *Zhongguo Wenwubao* 中國文物報 (Cultural Relics News), ‘Shouci Xinjiang kaogu gongzuo-hui zai Wulumuqi zhao kai 首次‘新疆考古工作會’在烏魯木齊召開 (The Inaugural Conference on the Undertakings of Xinjiang Archaeology was Held in Urumqi)’, published on 17 October 2017.

¹²⁴Diana B. Abukakirova, ‘Интересы Китая в Центральной Азии в рамках инициативы “Один пояс-один путь”’ (China’s Interest in Central Asia in the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative), *Постсоветские исследования* (Post-Soviet Studies), no. 4, 2021, pp. 285–295. I thank Sergei S. Ivanov for suggesting this resource and references in the next two footnotes.

through heritage politics¹²⁵ in the interests of maintaining security and stability in Xinjiang and strengthening China's influence over international systems to counter pressure from the West. The intensification of China's all-around involvement in Central Asia's economic and infrastructural growth—from technology and trade, to energy, transportation, agriculture, and tourism—has been met with mixed reactions from these countries, with concerns over uneven economic benefits and the risks of over-reliance on China's investment and over-connectivity.¹²⁶ The impact on scientific developments, however, has yet to be systematically studied.

A corrective

Scholars who have warned about the perils of using SR indiscriminately have proposed divergent solutions: apply a 'broad and inclusive definition'¹²⁷ or '[do] away with the whole concept'.¹²⁸ It is evident that the first is no longer effective because broad definitions have given rise to blanket statements. The second suggestion is, unfortunately, impractical as the term's widespread use in popular and academic sciences indicates its continued relevance. Although it is media-exploited, the term cannot be dismissed outright. As Susan Whitfield argued, 'we [cannot] confidently say that there was *not* a Silk Road',¹²⁹ and it would also not be worth the risk of substituting SR with 'other misleading terms'¹³⁰ seeing that 'silk' is still widely recognized as a symbol and catalyst for trade and communication between East and West.¹³¹

Although there is now an implicit recognition of the need to reflect critically on the SR as a productive space of knowledge production and intellectual enquiry as well as the analytical leverage it provides, how it *can* be achieved remains equivocal.¹³² The upward trend in Google Books Ngram viewer indicates that the SR term will continue to be prolific in publications. How do we then ensure empirical research is not biased by SR constructs? As I stated at the beginning of the article, nomenclature is not the crux of the SR problem. In the following, I propose three analytical approaches to counteract the fallacies surrounding the SR.

¹²⁵By organizing joint exhibitions and study abroad programmes, building China centres and Confucius institutes, and bolstering the media presence of Chinese culture and history. For details of these initiatives in Kyrgyzstan, see Александрович, 'Особенности развития современных киргизско-китайских отношений'.

¹²⁶Abukakirova, 'China's Interest in Central Asia'; Sarah Lain, 'The Potential and Pitfalls of Connectivity Along the Silk Road Economic Belt', in *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*, (ed.) Marlene Laruelle (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Central Asia Program), pp. 1–10.

¹²⁷Whitfield, 'Was There a Silk Road?'.

¹²⁸Rezakhani, 'The Road That Never Was', p. 420.

¹²⁹Whitfield, 'Was There a Silk Road?', p. 212.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*

¹³¹Liu, "'Sichouzhilu" gainian de xingcheng'. On silk being the main symbol of exchange, scholars have argued that in certain regions, the respective 'roads' should be named after other most traded or exchanged commodities, such as bronze.

¹³²See, for example, discussions in Franklin, 'Archaeology of the Silk Road'; Levi, 'Silk Roads, Real and Imagined', pp. 201–208; Mishra, 'The "Silk Road"', pp. 21–39; Winter, *The Silk Road*.

Calibrate representations of the SR

It is now commonly understood that the Silk Road does not refer to a measurable physical path of travel that can be uncovered through excavation.¹³³ The two words are token representations of large networks of exchange and connections between distant parts of Eurasia based on scattered data points of archaeological remains. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the increasing amount of data amassed under the SR umbrella has become unwieldy due to the pitfalls of fallacy of composition, circular reasoning, and presentism.

These issues can be rectified by calibrating the types of archaeological record the SR represents. The metrics may include: first, use only with explicit reference to its attested histories, avoid reinventing the 'reinvented Silk Road';¹³⁴ second, scale and periodize in accordance with the scope of investigation, for example, descriptions of westward itineraries from Classical Chinese texts cannot be used to corroborate pre-historic SR remains; third, identify what the empirical basis of the SR is in any given study or which discourse it labels; omit when the significance of the representation is tangential to the discourse or research question at hand.

This is an approach akin to Li Bozhong's appeal for *zhengming* 正名 (rectification of names), an ancient nomenclatural practice of ensuring that the name or concept is consistent with its implementation.¹³⁵ To render SR studies more in-depth and scientific, *zhengming* is necessary; as Li argued, a contextual framework is no substitute for actual research. Not considering corresponding contexts of local histories when studying archaeological materials will bring about empty grand narratives that make for SR hyperboles. The SR cannot serve as an all-inclusive 'be-all-end-all' narrative; its homogenizing effect would obscure the diverse processes of archaeological record formation at play.

One can create analytical separation between the archaeology of Xinjiang and the SR concept, while maintaining the scientific weight and comparative scope of the research. One way is to design questions that examine only the narrow definitions of the SR, which pertain mostly to diplomatic and commercial activities in the early imperial period in the Western Regions.¹³⁶ Another way to calibrate representations of the SR in archaeology is to revert to the origins of the concept. For a long time after the SR term appeared in the Western discourse, as historian Liu Jinbao noted, Chinese scholars were merely using the terms 'history of Sino-Western transport' (*zhongxi jiaotong shi* 中西交通史) and 'history of China's foreign relations' (*zhongwai*

¹³³ Although the phrase 'travelling on the Silk Roads' is often used literally in scientific literature.

¹³⁴ The concept of the 'reinvented' Silk Road was proposed by Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877'.

¹³⁵ Li, 'Sichou zhi lu de zhengming'. Li referenced here the well-known aphorism by Confucius from the *Zilu* 子路 chapter of *Lunyu* 論語 (*The Analects*): '名不正則言不順, 言不順則事不成' (If the name is not rectified, then the speech cannot be reasoned. If the speech is not reasonable, then nothing can be accomplished; present author's translation). It is important to note, however, that '*zhengming*' is a polyvalent concept in Chinese scholarship. For example, it has also been used in Wu Xianjun's 'Yidaiyilu zhanlüe' to argue that careful management of discourse is integral to the correction of Eurocentrism in a way that is 'rectified' and 'reasoned'.

¹³⁶ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, 'A Eurasia Perspective on the Silk Road Between Han and Tang Dynasties', in *Studies on the History and Culture Along the Continental Silk Road*, (ed.) Li Xiao (Singapore: Springer and SDX Joint Publishing Co. Ltd, 2020), pp. 1–19.

guanxi shi 中外關係史) to discuss SR topics.¹³⁷ Back then, the term SR specifically referred to the silk trade routes, and did not encompass the broader meaning it holds today. Reapplying these literal and geographically explicit meanings that underlie the SR concept can enable researchers to discern the myriad historical and geographical dimensions of the SR. It would also aid in addressing a critical gap in theorizing SR landscapes: what constitutes a SR network? What are its topological and geographical characteristics?

Another is to reorient the questions to methodological approaches of enquiry that circumvent potential pitfalls of the SR framework. As the field of Xinjiang archaeology moves towards large-scale settlement studies, from single-site fieldwork that centres on burials, significant progress has been made by Chinese archaeologists in studies of local environmental history,¹³⁸ the development of technologies of production,¹³⁹ ritual behaviour in architecture, and history of defence in the Xiyu (Western Regions).¹⁴⁰ Research has also advanced beyond establishing typologies based on type sites to uncovering patterns of material culture on transregional scales.¹⁴¹ However, even though a large number of primary archaeological reports have been published and are accessible, integrative studies remain lacking. Nevertheless, numerous examples can be drawn from an extensive body of Central Asian archaeological scholarship, from prehistory to the medieval period, that are no less effective in unveiling SR-esque connections without an elusive SR premise. The edited volumes of *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750* and *Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies*, for example, are harbingers of this more empirical approach.¹⁴²

Mitigate the SR ‘imperative’: Alternative, non-SR horizons

The questions above dovetail with the one being asked here: where in the landscape is the SR *not* present? A negative response would render the SR problem unscientific; a positive one would compel the field to establish more robust SR criteria for the scientific use of the term. How important is the SR for scientific analysis?

¹³⁷Liu, “‘Sichouzhilu” gainian de xingcheng’.

¹³⁸For example, Luan Fuming 樂福明, Wang Fang 王芳 and Xiong Heigang 熊黑鋼, ‘Yili hegu wenhua yizhi shikong fenbu ji dili beijing yanjiu 伊犁河谷文化遺址時空分布及地理背景研究’, *Ganhanqu dili 乾旱區地理*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2017, pp. 211–221.

¹³⁹For example, Shao Huiqiu 邵會秋, ‘Shilun Xinjiang Aletai diqu de lianglei qingtong wenhua 試論新疆阿勒泰地區的兩類青銅文化’, *Xiyu yanjiu 西域研究*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 59–65; Wang Lu et al., ‘2019 Copper metallurgy in prehistoric Upper Ili Valley, Xinjiang, China’, *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, no. 11, 2019, pp. 2407–2417.

¹⁴⁰For example, Ren Guan 任冠 and Rong Tianyou 戎天佑, ‘Xinjiang Qitai xian Tangchaodun gucheng yizhi kaogu shouhuo yu chubu renshi 新疆奇台縣唐朝墩古城遺址考古收穫與初步認識’, *Xiyu yanjiu 西域研究*, no. 1, 2019, pp. 142–145; Hu, ‘Xinjiang Yuli Keyakekudouke fengsui yizhi’, pp. 77–83.

¹⁴¹This process gained traction in the 1990s, when the focus of archaeological discourse shifted towards periodization and typology, particularly concerning ceramic, bronze, and iron technologies. A major breakthrough in Palaeolithic chronology occurred during in this decade when surveys of terraces around the city site of Jiahe yielded stratified lithic finds that enabled archaeologists to develop a preliminary Palaeolithic chronology in comparison with surface finds gathered in the 1980s.

¹⁴²Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Mass (eds), *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sitta von Reden (ed.), *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies*, three vols (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020, 2022, 2023).

'Road' is arguably the word carrying more weight in the term SR. But, given the significance attributed to it, there are disproportionately few analyses delving into the nature of this physical or metaphorical 'road' and how the connection it represents manifested. Most SR enquiries are, instead, about the 'silk', that is, objects and sites that are the nodes on SR maps. This emphasis on 'silk' over 'road' seems incongruent with the primary objective of SR studies, which is to uncover the cultural interactions between different regions. Furthermore, there are seldom characterizations of said 'road' or 'network' other than implicit assumptions about connections that were present between the nodes, all presumably attributable to the SR. Material networks in human history clearly formed before the SR existed, but what distinguishes the SR type of network from other kinds in history? Do local SR networks that are distant from one another belong to the same overarching SR network?¹⁴³

Syntheses on the SR often cite a collage of sites that are seemingly connected by a single (category of) material trait(s) as evidence. And these sites are linked to the SR because the latter is *a priori* a condition for the emergence of these sites. The argument follows that while the 'roads' are no longer visible to us today,¹⁴⁴ their existence is evinced by the archaeological remains. But the correlation is hard to prove, even in the case of Xinjiang. Although the sites around the Tarim seem to cluster along three axes (the northern, the middle, and the southern routes)¹⁴⁵—largely due to the topography heavily influencing accessibility in this area—there is limited evidence indicating that these routes were consistently and continuously used over time. Valerie Hansen's analysis of Turfan manuscripts shows that the trade of the SR up to Tang was in fact localized in many places,¹⁴⁶ which is to say, there are purported SR sites that may well not have been part of the SR network.

Khazanov's recent study shows the value of sidestepping SR-premised histories to review 'networks of many different itineraries'¹⁴⁷—short and long haul, maritime and overland, steppe routes from the Han to the Mongols, and north-south as well. What determines the directionality, longevity, and accessibility of these routes are not only the objects that travelled on them, but also the people, places, and the systems that governed them. As many of these 'roads' were in fact segmented, staggered, and short-lived itineraries,¹⁴⁸ it stands to reason that they might not have played a part in establishing East-West exchange on a continental scale. Instead, they may have constituted the 'negative spaces' surrounding the purported connections that the SR subsumes. Given the topology of routes and networks and the relative demographic immobility in the past, it is reasonable to infer that there were more areas devoid of SR influence—'negative spaces'—than those connected by the SR.

The presence of non-SR horizons warrants attention, because they also often consist of objects that do not fit the stereotypical SR profile. The analysis requires us to

¹⁴³ Addressing this question requires quantitative analysis through modelling and statistics, which is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁴⁴ Liu, "'Yidaiyilu' zhanlue".

¹⁴⁵ Qi and Wang Bo (eds), *Sichou zhilu: Xinjiang gudai wenhua; Xinjiang fojiao yishu; and Sichou zhilu: Xinjiang gudai wenhua xu*.

¹⁴⁶ Hansen, *The Silk Road*.

¹⁴⁷ Khazanov, 'The Overland "Great Silk Road"', p. 126.

¹⁴⁸ Hansen, *The Silk Road*.

set aside the SR paradigm and reason inductively. It can be achieved by, for example, shifting the question to processes of record formation from assessment of stereotypical cultural traits, which often reveal the pasts of niche demographics. This could prove valuable for revealing undercurrents of cultural transmission that may not be less significant than what the SR totalizes. Such an approach can in turn reduce the need to invoke SR as a mere cosmetic framework, thereby rendering the term less totalizing, to borrow Henry Giroux (1992)'s treatment of 'politics of difference'.¹⁴⁹ The research questions that therefore become centred on the local—despite the global—may be far more interesting and amenable to critical thinking. The 'imperative' to invoke the SR concept, premised on the presence of allochthonous influence, can prejudice the evaluation of the impact of local cultures on the material record.

For example, studies of the spread of Buddhism in China are heavily focused on iconography, excavated manuscripts, and records in historical texts. The connection between the propagation of a foreign religion and local economy, demographic flows, etc., is still poorly understood. Furthermore, the role of Buddhist monasteries and religious establishments at various sites across the area of Xinjiang is seldom placed in comparative contexts, archaeologically, with corresponding developments at other centres of Buddhist architecture within the Sinosphere, for example, Luoyang and Dunhuang, and beyond.¹⁵⁰ The idiosyncrasies of these local histories have important implications for understanding the spatial patterns of cultural flows over time. Without the encompassing veil of the SR, the so-called Han SR and the Tang SR, the proto-SR, or even the journeys between different known trade stops along the SR may reveal themselves to be drastically different undertakings.¹⁵¹

Shifting the focus to non-SR horizons also serves to upend conventional east-west/East-West dichotomous thinking. Framing enquiries into the Central Asia's past indiscriminately in terms of East-West exchange is not only unfounded, it betrays hegemonic thinking that exoticizes local histories in the interest of building globalized narratives.

Counteract the SR-BRI lockstep

A publication tally shows there is growing desynchronization in the SR-BRI lockstep. The number of Chinese journal articles on the BRI rose from <10,000 in 2015 to <30,000

¹⁴⁹Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Works and the Politics of Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). Also discussed in Dirlik, 'Global in the Local', which is referenced in the section 'From colonial legacies to avatar of the BRI'.

¹⁵⁰Interestingly, with regard to the development of religion in ancient Xinjiang, 'allochthonous influence' can be a point of contention—foreign material culture is viewed as part of an integrated whole, rather than a cultural demarcation, within the Chinese framework of inclusivity and religious harmony. See debates on Mo'er Temple's architectural style in Tian Feilong, 'Mo'er Temple Reflects Dominant Role of Chinese culture', *China Daily*, published online on 1 September 2024, available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202409/01/WS66d3da82a3108f29c1fc96c7.html>, [accessed 1 December 2024]. I thank Johan Elverskog for pointing out this important discourse.

¹⁵¹See the study of seven oasis cities—Niya, Kucha, Turfan, Samarkhand, Chang'an, Dunhuang, and Khotan—in Hansen, *The Silk Road*; and Levi, 'Silk Roads, Real and Imagined' for review of Hansen's analysis. The differences between the Han SR and the Tang SR in Xinjiang is an emerging topic in archaeological discourse in China as more sites have been excavated in the past decade and evidence of patterns of regional connectivity is coming to light.

in 2017 but dropped to below the 2015 level in 2021. Ma Lirong at the Institute of Silk Road Strategy Studies attributed the latest drop to the desynchronization of SR studies and the academic goals of the BRI, among other contemporary geopolitical factors.¹⁵² She contended that Chinese academia has yet to fully transpose the research focus of SR studies to the study of core ideas of BRI, which rendered the BRI an ill-defined research discipline, and that the fragmentation of the former was obfuscating the research aims of the latter.¹⁵³

Interestingly, this echoes Tim Winter's observations on the conundrum of SR geopolitics. While he found possible resolution in the discourse of internationalism as a means of moving 'between the past and future in ways that develop a critical disposition toward the Silk Roads as a productive space of inquiry', he also recognized that the very same internationalism 'cohabiting cultural and heritage diplomacy' and advancing pillars of the BRI has rendered the SR 'highly malleable and amenable to metaphorical invocation',¹⁵⁴ leaving the state of future SR studies unpredictable.

The fragmentation of discourse could also be explained using the theory of 'global localism'. Global localism is brought on by the transnationalization of capital, which saw '[p]roduction and economic activity (hence, 'economic development') become localized in regions below the nation, while its management requires supranational supervision and coordination'.¹⁵⁵ In recompensing for Eurocentric narratives of history, the SR became, effectively, the supranational 'global thinking' that captures this newly fragmented cultural-economic space, harnessing and domesticating the local into imperatives of a non-European postmodern.¹⁵⁶

Kate Franklin's treatment of 'globalization' is an example of this fallacy at work in applied SR studies. It sought to reconcile views that SR has the potential to 'challenge modernist understandings of globality, globalization, and deterritorialization' with arguments asserting that it enables an 'archaeology of globality and globalization' and can serve as 'a framework for thinking about world-scale systems, human and material mobility, and processes and experiences of globalization at different scales', but in the same breath acknowledged that the 'designation of Silk Road routes as universal cultural heritage is fraught with contradictions'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵²Ma, 'Zhongguo de "yidaiyilu" yanjiu'.

¹⁵³Ma attributed the fragmentation of Chinese SR studies specifically to several historical geopolitical developments: nationalistic sentiments induced by the love-hate feeling among Chinese elites towards Western SR scholars stemming from their disagreement over von Richthofen's controversial SR heritage; attempts by Chinese scholars to salvage the discourse; and historical study of the SR that were 'robbed' by early twentieth-century expeditionists such as Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot and subsequently interrupted by Japan's invasion of China in 1937. It is not known if Ma's observations are widely shared.

¹⁵⁴Winter, *The Silk Road*, p. 168.

¹⁵⁵Dirlik, 'Global in the Local', p. 31.

¹⁵⁶Cf. the earlier discussion of Richthofen's 'cartographic imperative' in the section 'From colonial legacies to the avatar of BRI'. For discussion on the domestication of the local, see Dirlik, 'Global in the Local' and Gwen P. Bennett, 'National History and Identity Narratives in the People's Republic of China: Cultural Heritage Interpretation in Xinjiang', in *The Archaeology of Power and Politics in Eurasia: Regimes and Revolutions*, (eds) Charles W. Hartley, G. Bike Yazicioğlu and Adam T. Smith (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 37–56.

¹⁵⁷Franklin, 'Archaeology of the Silk Road'.

A methodological antidote to the local/global dualistic hold on Asian histories may be found in Engsang Ho's 'interAsian concepts'. Specifically, this entails interrogating partial notions of society, transregional axes of history, plasticity of space-time, and asymmetrical and undulating connections that may be incongruent with modules of either the local or the global.¹⁵⁸ For it is seemingly at this intermediate scale that SR becomes most entangled in heritage politics and unamenable to scientific enquiry as it struggles to reconcile contemporary geopolitical ideals with processes of the past.

Regardless of the potential fruits and pitfalls of SR-based BRI diplomacy, a presentist approach would only scientifically render obsolete the phenomena represented by the ancient SR by placing them in lockstep with contemporary developments. Instead, to preserve its external validity, critical thinking of the SR should venture in directions that offset the pull of totalizing and internalist narratives.

Assessing the current placement of SR research within Chinese archaeological discourse can yield valuable insights for finding a congruent approach. A good barometer is the 12-volume centenary history of Chinese archaeology (*Zhongguo kaogu bainian-shi* 中國考古學百年史 [Chinese Archaeology's Centenary History]) published in 2021. In it, the SR is classified as a distinct topic of interest, along with 11 others.¹⁵⁹ In various chapters of the compendium, the SR is taken as synonymous with East-West exchange or general modes of cultural exchange. But its development is most extensively discussed in the context of archaeological fieldwork in Xinjiang, where European explorers first pursued their interests in the name of the SR, with the BRI representing its most recent evolution.¹⁶⁰ All related accounts in the volumes demonstrate that rather than offering empirical methods for research, the SR has primarily functioned as a framework for conceptualizing aspects of Chinese archaeology's evolution in the twentieth century and envisioning the discipline's future trajectory. The Bronze Age Xinjiang chapter, for example, mentions the SR only in a postscript on future research directions.¹⁶¹ The SR is also scarcely mentioned in other chapters (Neolithic, Six Dynasties period, and Sui-Tang period) on Xinjiang in the four-volume compendium on Chinese archaeology. Considering the influence of the BRI on science and education, the coverage of the SR is relatively parsimonious. This seems oddly inconsistent with its widespread use in other contexts, but it also signals the clarity that can be

¹⁵⁸Engsang Ho, 'Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2017, pp. 907–928.

¹⁵⁹The archaeology of the SR is featured in the last volume of *Bainianshi* alongside 11 other research topics: the archaeological research of grottoes, of Buddhist monastery, Daoist archaeology, of the three yi 夷 religions (Nestorianism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism), archaeology of the Maritime Silk Road, cultural exchange in east and southeast Asia, ethnological archaeology, archaeology of music, archaeology of the Great Wall, internationalization of Chinese archaeology, and archaeology of ancient building materials.

¹⁶⁰Lin and Li, 'Sichouzhilu kaogu faxian yu yanjiu', pp. 7615–7631.

¹⁶¹Cong and Jia, 'Xinjiang diqu qingtong shidai', pp. 1455–1479. The topics of utmost research concern in Bronze Age archaeology have been the periodization and classification of archaeological cultures. The guiding questions are the chronology of Neolithic to Bronze Age, and Bronze to Iron Age transitions; the classification of microliths, ground stone tools, and ceramics as the initial basis for archaeological typology; and the investigation of numerous burial types and cultures over three nationwide surveys of cultural relics (*wenwu pucha* 文物普查).

gained in scientific enquiry when the SR trajectory is separated out from discourses of empirical research.

Conclusion

In light of the growing recognition of the pitfalls of SR orientations in archaeological research, this article aims to provide grounds for questioning the logic of leveraging the SR, whether empirically, conceptually, or rhetorically, in scientific studies. I examine the history of the field of Xinjiang archaeology, arguably the first locus of SR studies, to illustrate three common fallacies associated with the SR. First, to engage with the concept of SR in research today is to have to disentangle the palimpsest of connotations layered on the term over the past 150 years. The SR has continuously shape-shifted—from a cause for Western explorers' expeditionary ambitions in East Turkestan to a catchword for UNESCO's ideals of marshalling scientific resources to promote a shared understanding of humanity's past, and later an avatar for the geopolitical goals of the BRI. Second, close examination of the archaeological evidence attributed to the SR rarely reveals discernible linear and directional patterns of cultural exchange characteristic of the SR. The SR is a conception best observed from a panned-out, largely presentist perspective. In the near future, the amorphousness of the concept will become increasingly at odds with the specificity required of fine-grained analysis as well as big data analytics. Third, in most of the archaeological literature, the meaning of the SR is indistinguishable from cross-cultural and East-West exchange. To indiscriminately characterize findings as evidence of the SR would be to make a blanket argument for external influence. With China's reorientation of the SR towards building a China-centric archaeological discourse aimed at augmenting international discourse power, the implications of asking SR-framed scientific questions will only grow more complex.

These arguments are not presented to diminish the progress made by SR studies, which is indisputably significant. There is now a sizeable repository of data at our disposal, and many questions that can be asked—without engaging the concept. Research can be conducted at greater international scales through cross-institutional schemes and infrastructure that have been put in place to support collaboration. The questions raised by new archaeological findings, however, do not necessitate new renditions of the SR concept, which is still a prevalent practice. Instead, they demand a more critical engagement with the material it encompasses, independent of the SR construct. I propose that this entails exploring alternative, non-SR horizons, deploying calibrated SR frameworks only where necessary, and deconstructing or relinquishing narratives that inherited and beget hegemonic world views. Studies of the material record cannot be tethered to ahistorical political constructs if they are to keep pace with scientific progress. While the SR remains an important theme in Xinjiang archaeology, the field's progression demands empirical frameworks that challenge its indiscriminate applications.

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