


# Introduction

## New Silk Road Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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In 2013, during a visit to Kazakhstan, China's president Xi Jinping announced a project that is designed to intensify the globalization of the 21st century and reshape the world order: the construction of transcontinental and transregional infrastructure that facilitates trade between China, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Now officially titled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the initiative focuses on cooperation and connectivity in order to provide infrastructural ties and investment to neighboring and strategically relevant countries (cf. Chang 2019). In 2021, its most important projects (for China) included majority shares in maritime infrastructures in Zeebrugge, Piraeus, and Dubai as well as other projects in Duisburg, Nairobi, and Hambantota, to name but a few. The BRI aims to embed China in economically promising neighboring countries by facilitating economic corridors across the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Although it began in 2013 as a rather vague, unilateral idea from President Xi Jinping, who wasn't known for facilitating global cooperation, the announcement of the BRI has since raised eyebrows. Over the past years, the initiative has developed into a politicized and contested meta-project<sup>2</sup> that has gained worldwide

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1 We would like to thank our peer reviewers Ágota Révész and Andreas Eckert for their inspiring and most helpful comments, criticism, and thoughts.

2 Literature on the BRI is vast. Studies characterize the initiative from three major perspectives (Clarke 2018): the BRI is firstly considered as a reaction to a perceived US encirclement and to constrain the rise of India (cf. p. 8); secondly, it is considered as domestic

attention, with scholars, politicians, business people and interested citizens eagerly trying to understand what the Chinese government is aiming to accomplish and how its plan is affecting not only the neighboring, participating countries but, ultimately, the present world order. Until now, the building and funding of the BRI infrastructure has been understood as an architecture that—at least for some countries—entails the possibility of providing economic benefits. What has become clear, however, is that “the initiative is more about ensuring domestic political stability and economic growth as well as China’s position as a major player in international affairs” (Chang 2019: 11).

The Chinese wording for the BRI is 一带一路 (*yī dài yī lù*), which translates as “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR). To circumvent the impression of an all too strategic project, Xi Jinping had the English name modified to the current “Belt and Road Initiative” which smoothens the earlier term “strategy” and has a more inclusive and approachable tone (cf. Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2017).<sup>3</sup>

In one of Xi’s political speeches, he introduced his project as the “New Silk Road,” thereby evoking the Ancient Silk Road as “our best teacher”<sup>4</sup> and, hence, historical guarantor to facilitate international trade and cooperation. The expression “New Silk Road” or even “New Chinese Silk Road”<sup>5</sup> is frequently used to capture the nature of the BRI. It reveals the political efforts to connect the present China-led projects to a period of early globalization that facilitated the economic,

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strategy to stabilize economic growth in China (cf. p. 8); and thirdly, it is considered as an attempt (with the use of soft power) to gain geopolitical and geocultural power, not only in the region but as a global hegemon that overshadows the US (Fukuyama 2016 in Clarke 2018: 18).

3 Bērziņa-Čerenkova of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs comments in a newspaper article on the renaming of One Belt One Road as the Belt and Road Initiative as follows: “As explained by the Chinese side, the first English translation, namely, ‘One Belt One Road’, has brought about numerous misinterpretations, as the partners tend to focus too much on the word ‘one’, assuming that there is to be only one maritime route and a single land belt, whereas, in reality, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative aims to connect Asia, Europe and Africa along five routes.’ Supposedly, the perception of a single road as a limited offer can drive the regional partners into competition mode. Therefore, the stressing of the numeral ‘one’ is to be avoided. Also, the word ‘initiative’ has been admitted into the official acronym in order to stress the openness of the strategy, and to avoid criticisms over ‘China-centered institution building,’ that have been gaining momentum as the project progresses.” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/01/beijing-to-the-world-please-stop-saying-obor/?sh=5a697a6017d4> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

4 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c\\_136282982.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm) (accessed 8 Oct. 2023).

5 We refrain from attributing the ethnic label “Chinese” to the Silk Road or BRI and prefer to use the expression “China-led” Silk Road (Amineh 2023) or BRI.

political, and social encounter of East and West: Due to successful, transregional trade and cooperation by land and sea, China, Europe, and Africa share a common past and memories of this period. The notion of the Ancient Silk Road not only draws on historic trade connections but emphasizes cultural connectivity and transculturalization as one of its most significant legacies. It is commonly referred to as a symbol of harmonious cultural cooperation and a catalyst of interconnectedness. Whereas cross-cultural interactions have been studied intensely in the context of the Ancient Silk Road (Liu 2010; Hansen 2012; Mishra 2020), the relevance of culture in analyzing the BRI as a “New China-led Silk Road” still seems understudied and neglected due to the prominence of investigating financial, economic, political, and social advantages and disadvantages related to BRI projects.

The scarcity of literature with a cultural focus is surprising, since not only is culture considered and proven to have a great impact and influence on trade, economic growth, and politics (Eberle et al. 2018), but Xi Jinping himself increasingly highlights the relevance of culture, cultural connectivity, and transcultural communication:

We will strengthen people-to-people and cultural exchanges with other countries, giving prominence to Chinese culture while also drawing on other cultures... [and we will improve] the capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China’s stories well; present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China; and enhance our country’s cultural soft power. (Xi Jinping, 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 2017)<sup>6</sup>

Against this reading, the aim of this book is to engage with culture and, more precisely, with cultural practices as a means to understand and analyze the BRI as a new geocultural and transcultural developer. What becomes visible when we look at the BRI, its actors, and its policies through the lens of culture and cultural practices? Which patterns of (dis)connectivities emerge when analyzing cultural practices as a form of BRI-related (re)actions? In sharpening the lens of culture, the book provides initial insights into local perspectives on BRI-related projects and politics after its ten-year jubilee. It not only emphasizes cultural embeddedness and dependency when implementing globalizing and transregionalizing political and economic BRI projects but also reveals the emerging power of culture and cultural practices in strategically and organically forming a new geopolitical and geocultural region.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm) (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

While local (re)actions on the BRI can be analyzed with respect to various subject and geographic areas, for this publication, we decided to focus on cultural practices and BRI-related (re)actions happening in the scope of Africa–China relations. As we will show, local (re)actions are particularly well suited to being explored at the level of culture and cultural practices. The geographic focus on China’s relation to Africa is based on the one hand on the intensity of China’s engagement on the African continent which evokes a multitude of (re)actions of diverse agents and on the other hand on the expertise of the contributing authors. This is reflected in the individual chapters dealing with African perspectives and (re)actions, China-centered or China-internal perspectives on the BRI, as well as contributions dealing directly with cultural–political negotiation processes between China and Africa and Chinese presence<sup>7</sup> on the African continent.

China and Africa have a long history of contact such as the exchange of goods via Chinese emperors and sailors “visiting” the African continent. Archeological findings date back to at least the Tang dynasty (618–907) (cf. e.g. Anshan 2022: 3), and there are indications that suggest there was (at least indirect) contact between China and Africa via exchange of goods in the times of Cleopatra’s reign, 51–30 BC (cf. e.g. Jinyuan 1984: 242). Certainly at least worth mentioning is seafarer Zheng He (1371–1433 or 1435), who landed on the African continent no fewer than three times between 1412 and 1433 (Federl 2018: 59).

The basis for modern Africa–China relations (especially regarding economic and political contact) was laid in the 1950s, when China signed the first bilateral trade agreements and established first direct diplomatic relations (cf. Obuah 2012: 75). In the 1960s, Chinese government officials around Premier Zhou Enlai visited ten African states and established a total of 13 principles for their relation with African states, announcing “that relations would be governed by ‘equality, mutual interest and non-interference’” (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 19). These principles still define the basis of the present-day relations of China and Africa as being “friendly relationships” without “political conditions or interference in the internal affairs of African countries” (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 19).

The large-scale engagement of China on the African continent, however, only started in the late 1990s when China opened up its markets, spurring rapid

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7 We follow authors such as Bodomo (in this volume), Esteban (2010), and many more in using the term “Chinese presence” for China’s engagement, for example, on the African continent. The concept is not only more accurate but also more accessible even to local populations experiencing it. The term “Chinese presence” both includes engagement led by the Chinese state and covers physical, emotional, digital, etc. presence of the Chinese state, people of Chinese nationality or descent, as well as Chinese goods, culture etc.

economic growth. This engagement culminated in the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).<sup>8</sup>

As China started to reach out to African states in the 1950s and 1960s in order to form economic and political relations, it also felt the need to establish cultural relations with the African continent. Its external cultural policy and diplomacy was based on socialist values advocated by Mao Zedong, and cultural relations were first established with socialist countries (cf. Liu 2008). It was in the course of this, that China sent out cultural and arts delegations to African (but also Asian and Latin American) states in order to facilitate the establishment of cultural relations (aiming at an extension to trade and diplomatic relations), (cf. Liu 2008).<sup>9</sup> Premier Zhou’s China started to extend these cultural relations to non-socialist countries, advocating a “civil diplomacy (or people’s diplomacy), aiming to increase civil economic relations and cultural exchanges with those countries that had not yet established diplomatic ties” (Liu 2008: 15).

As Lui (2008: 16) explains, “equating cultural relations with civil (people-to-people) relations was obviously the logical extension of Mao Zedong’s domestic culture policy: Culture serves socialism, and culture serves people. The Chinese government’s foreign cultural policy was therefore intertwined with China’s domestic cultural policy, and the underlying assumptions to justify the two were the same, particularly those on the functions of culture and the role government was supposed to assume. To choose cultural diplomacy as the preferential course was a have-to choice for the Chinese leaders in combating China’s international isolation in 1950s”.

The Chinese Dream was announced as a political slogan by Xi Jinping in 2012 and has since then developed into a narrative that conveys the government’s vision for China’s future. As such, it is strategically communicated as a long-term perspective on a strong identity and prosperous future for the Chinese people (for detailed discussion concerning the Chinese Dream, see Section 3 of this introduction). Similar to the Chinese Dream, we consider the BRI as clearly China-led and as a strategic, top-down narrative that plays a significant role in the country’s fulfilment of the Chinese Dream (cf. Chang 2019: 11), since both the

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8 For a detailed description of the history of Africa–China relations, see Hanauer and Morris (2014) and Oqubay and Lin (2019), who provide a concise description and analysis of the implications of China’s economic rise for the African continent and its economic transformation.

9 Between 1952 and 1958, China sent out 1,700 cultural and arts delegations that involved more than 17,400 people. Cultural delegations accounted for 70% of all delegations sent out by the Chinese government during this period (Lui 2008: 15, referring to Ge 2000: 32).

narratives of the Chinese Dream and the China-led BRI follow a clear Sinocentric agenda. Once they hit local ground, however, they seem to transform into localized narratives: As they enter specific regions and their contexts, they are embedded into the actual realities on the ground and develop into large “projection screens” for those actors whose lives are deeply affected by the operationalization of BRI projects. Thus, we tackle the BRI as a decentralized network of physical, social, political, and cultural infrastructures—similar to what we outlined above in terms of a decentralized Ancient Silk Road infrastructure—entailing in-between spaces to renegotiate cultural, political, and economic positioning. We see a great benefit in concentrating on the localization of BRI narratives within and outside China and engage with the (re)actions of actors whose realities are changing due to their governments’ cooperation with the Chinese government.

The contributors of this book unpack and analyze these sets of local and regional emotions, views, ideas, risks, and opportunities connected to the BRI and the Chinese Dream. Through the analysis of poems, novels, fine art, or the cultural politics of cultural promotion organizations in relation to Chinese Dream or New Silk Road narratives, it is the intangible (that is, emotional) infrastructures of the BRI that come into sight. Here, in engaging with cultural practices, we observe the production of space, of *voids*, between the (dis)connecting elements of a new Silk Road. They allow for the projection of local, national, and regional dreams and positionings that may or may not connect to other dreams and positionings but that may help to recreate identities in a newly emerging geocultural and geopolitical region that spans China, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In order to provide a thematic and conceptual framework for this multidisciplinary publication, we firstly outline the concept of the narrative and how we use the narrative to tackle local and regional responses as a form of cultural connectivity in the context of the BRI. Secondly, we introduce our view on historic and contemporary Silk Road narratives to indicate how narratives can be regarded as geocultural developers. Thirdly, we describe our understanding of the Chinese Dream<sup>10</sup> as a specification of a narrative that we consider to have a significant role in the emotional architecture of the BRI. We end this section by introducing the individual sections and chapters of this book.

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10 In English-language academic literature, two terms, “China Dream” (cf. Callahan 2014, 2017) and “Chinese Dream” (cf. Loh 2019, Li 2022), are used to refer to the same concept. Since in Chinese there is no difference between the two terms (both are 中国梦), it seems to be subject to the personal preference of each author which term to use. In the chapters of this book, it is thus also the personal choice of the respective authors. In this introduction, we use “Chinese Dream.”

## 1 Narratives as the Stabilizer and Glue of Cultures: The China-led Silk Road

Cultural practices<sup>11</sup>—as understood in this context—refer to the production, dissemination, and reception of culture-related actions as well as to the context in which cultural artifacts and manifestations take place, be they performances, museum exhibitions, book publications, language teachings, studies, theater/film productions, sports, etc. In the context of this book, we engage with cultural practices on two levels: First, they can be regarded as strategy or agency<sup>12</sup> to raise acceptance for BRI-projects and to implement them into local contexts. Second, cultural practices can further be regarded as both regional and local reactions to BRI-related practices. Using the lens of cultural practices, we rethink the BRI as cultural infrastructure and suggest focusing on narratives as a broad and multimodal format of cultural practices that arise as translocal and transregional (re)actions to the BRI.

The anthropological concept of narrative is a fruitful analytical tool to categorize a significant element of cultural practices as defined above: As narratives are highly effective meaning-makers of realities (for more details, see 1.1), they are a crucial form of cultural practices as both an action and a reaction. As Casas-Klett and Li (2022: 858) explain, narratives “derive their power from the ability to engage the human mind and heart and therefore affect behavior and decision-making.” They discuss the concept of narrative in relation to the BRI as “driver of institutional change in favor of globalization” (2022: 857) from an economic perspective, traceable to the narrative’s explanatory power (Casas-Klett and Li 2022 after Shiller 2017: 968). The explanatory power of narratives, their meaning-making ability, and their emotional effects on humans are decisive mechanisms that both connect and disconnect the actors and projects along the BRI, thereby forming an emotional infrastructure running in parallel to the physical manifestation of the project.

Narrowing our analysis of the BRI to the emotional and transcultural infrastructure, we consider narratives as drivers of transformation and as transregional

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11 We see “culture” in line with the definition of UNESCO as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs” (UNESCO 2001: 3). For a detailed overview of definitions of culture, see Jahoda (2012).

12 Agency refers to the capacity, the condition, or the state of affairs that enables an actor to act and prevail.

developers. We are specifically interested in how localized and regionalized narratives emerge and how they are (dis)connected from/with the BRI. Hence, by looking at narratives about the BRI, we are further able to pinpoint and reveal ruptures and voids in the cultural infrastructure of emerging, BRI-related local and regional realities as well as in the narrative infrastructure itself.

When engaging with the BRI's infrastructure, we not only come across railways, highways, and ports, we also encounter patterns of thought and practices that engage with the BRI as reality-forming infrastructure. Narratives, as a form of strategic meaning-making, belong to such patterns of thought and practices and are significant in either connecting or disconnecting projects, people, and cultures. In the following, we will introduce our understanding of narratives as cultural practice in relation to the BRI.

### 1.1 The BRI as China-led Metanarrative on Connectivity

The BRI as a strategy and its impact on practices of connectivity has been neglected so far (Loh 2019: 171). In order to grasp local (re)actions related to the BRI, we focus on narratives that exist and arise in the context of the BRI, as they embody both "world making" and "communicating worlds." Narratives transmit at rapid speed from one context and region to another, heralding a possible future for a specific location or region, or an upcoming new transregional relationship. As narratives not only contain content but carry values, perceptions, emotions, and cultural practices, we consider it an apt concept and method to study the dimension of culture within the context of the BRI in order to describe and analyze local responses to a large transregional infrastructure project.

We suggest working with the concept of narratives from an anthropological perspective, regarding narratives as both research topic and method (Loseke 2022). The term "narrative" is increasingly used in all kinds of fields, genres, and circumstances. As early as 2007, Ryan (2007: 22) observed that "in the past fifteen years, as the 'narrative turn in the humanities' gave way to the narrative turn everywhere (politics, science studies, law, medicine, and last, but not least, cognitive science), few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as narrative and its partial synonym, story." With the rise of anthropology and the need to include oral history and narrations, the literary concept of narrative was rethought and extended. Ryan (2017: 517) describes this process as follows: "The ubiquity and multiple manifestations of stories in human societies mean that the relevance of the theoretical concept of narrative extends to all the disciplines concerned with human experience, including cultural studies." In cultural studies, the narrative thus also includes "oral narratives spontaneously told in conversation,



or produced in response to questions by an interviewer.” Such narratives are also referred to as “natural narratives” (Ryan 2017: 522). In the course of the narrative turn (Goodsoon and Gill 2011: 18), the concept of narrative as a transdisciplinary method for investigating and (de)constructing realities has achieved a broad form of application and popularity.

Narratives are a tool to attribute meaning to a series of events, to be assertive and persuasive on present and future action, and to shape practices. Narratives construct and navigate realities and are, therefore, constitutive of practices (Loh 2021: 175). Narratives and practices form a reciprocal relationship. As Loh points out, practices rely on the interpretative context of narratives, as narratives connotate practices with “meaning *ad actum* and *post factum*” (2021: 175). Therefore, narratives have the power to (re)configure practices and vice versa (see Loh 2021: 177). Narratives are a powerful tool to both facilitating and impeding political, social, and cultural agency, as they “function as the social bond, or ‘glue’, that gives practices stability over time and space” (Bueger and Gadinger 2018). This also results in the ability to destabilize such practices (Loh 2021).

Here, the aspect of power becomes relevant. Narratives function as brokers for dominant ideologies and instruments of power (Peters 2017: 1303), as they not only structure information in order to make sense of it but also position and link real or imagined events, issues, objects, or matters in a strategic and coherent way. In this manner, they have the ability to make sense of new and old phenomena—to connect the past, present, and future. Narratives not only entail strategic action to “construct a shared meaning of the past, the present and the future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors,” (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 6) they are also tools of strategic communication. Loh (2021:168) has categorized the functions of narratives: they “(i) serve as signposts for actors in clarifying what are relevant / irrelevant and appropriate / inappropriate practices; (ii) provide ‘background’ stock of information where actors draw to legitimize their practices; and (iii) create conditions for both the creation of new practices and contestation of existing ones.”

Another feature of narratives is their cultural sensitivity. Narratives are created in a specific cultural context and addressed to a cultural audience. De Fina (2016: 329), for example, notes that, by analyzing narratives, we “try to establish how storytelling or stories shape and are shaped by practices and beliefs that are characteristic of communities sharing the same culture.” Cultural contexts shape the construction of narratives; hence, when analyzing them, we need to account for “how story topics and story content are related to ideologies and cultural practices associated with a particular community” (De Fina 2016: 329).

Narratives are sense-making practices that not only legitimize various practices between various actors but also serve as culture-sensitive and context-sensitive

access to local reactions on translocal and global practices and strategies. Hence, tackling local reactions to the BRI from a top-down or bottom-up level seems most insightful from the perspective of communicating and addressing BRI-related narratives. In doing so, we expect to gain access to and understanding of otherwise hidden transcultural local knowledge production and practices. As a topic and method of research, narratives thus become increasingly relevant for the necessary and critical realignment of the discipline of area studies. When we analyze narratives and use them as a lens to access and investigate underlying topics and structures, they serve as an apt tool to highlight and strengthen local knowledge (local sources in local languages). When used as both research topic and method, they are able to contribute to creating local theory as a multicentric interaction, and thereby to the necessity of creating a multicentric epistemology (Rehbein 2020).

## 1.2 People-to-people Connectivity as Geocultural Developer

In Chinese media, aims and benefits of the BRI are often delivered orally in political speeches or in mediatized PR campaigns. Official documents that define the BRI are rare. The first edition of these official documents was issued March 28, 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, with State Council authorization, and was titled “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.” From China’s perspective, the BRI represents a new approach to foreign policy, driven by the idea of “opening up China”<sup>13</sup> to the world. The Communist Party communicates the BRI as a facilitator serving state and non-state actors in the negotiation of economics, politics, finances, etc. on an unprecedented scale.

The BRI contains five official pillars or major goals: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people connectivity.<sup>14</sup> The BRI strategy predominantly focuses on countries in Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Africa, and Eastern Europe. With its maritime roads, the BRI “will be a major opportunity for consumer and industrial firms as it accounts for 63% of the global population and 44% of its GDP, excluding China” (Baker

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13 The “opening up of China” refers to the economic reforms conducted under Deng Xiaoping in 1978. By engaging with international markets, the Chinese economy experienced accelerated economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s.

14 See, for example, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/1084.html> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

McKenzie 2017: 2). With its land roads, also known as belts, the BRI connects China and Europe as two of the world's largest economies, while excluding the USA.

In his speeches, President Xi Jinping highlights transregional and transnational collaboration as key practices to connect trade, economies, and culture on an unprecedented global scale (cf. Gallelli 2019). The roads and belts are both actual routes and metaphors that build an infrastructure of economics, finance, health, and culture in order to collaborate beyond nation states and to form a new region of common interests. According to official Chinese announcements, approximately two thirds of the world's population, or 149 countries (as of July 2022), are taking part in the BRI (Statista 2023).

Connectivity has emerged as a key term and essential practice in achieving common wealth and future progress. Connectivity refers to physical connections by building transregional infrastructures; to economic connections by establishing transnational trade projects; to financial connectivity by encouraging cross-border currency settlements; to digital connectivity by developing transregional digital infrastructure in telecommunication and information technology; and to geopolitical connectivity by expanding diplomatic ties globally.

In its official documents (or at least in its political statement on the BRI), the Chinese government introduces people-to-people connectivity to foster and expand cultural and educational exchange between China and BRI-related countries. Tourism, academic cooperation and mutual understanding between different cultures are being promoted in order to integrate China into a newly emerging geocultural region. People-to-people connectivity (*mínxīn xiāngtōng*) is thus considered as the bedrock of the BRI and, hence, serves as its main implementation asset. It is not only the official fifth pillar of the BRI, but the prerequisite and basis for interlinking projects, roads, regions, finances, ideas, etc. (Kidd 2022). Against this background, we argue that the relevance of people-to-people connectivity—which essentially comes down to culture and cultural practices—has been underestimated and rather neglected in research and needs to be furnished with more academic awareness and studies.<sup>15</sup>

What circulates and anchors along the BRI is not only goods, financial capital, or technologies but, first and foremost, people—it transports their realities, perceptions, and practices. From a praxeological perspective, people-to-people

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15 The BMBF-funded research consortium De:link//Re:link: Local Perspectives on Transregional (Dis)entanglements analyzes local and regional responses to large infrastructure projects like the BRI from a decidedly cultural perspective. It includes researchers at HU Berlin, ZOiS Berlin, BICC Bonn, and ZMO Berlin (funding period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2024).

connectivity is the core and basis of all that weaves the BRI's projects into a large infrastructure of roads that, in turn, facilitates the circulation of finances, ideas, goods, and values. Tim Winter has been one of the first scholars to analyze the BRI through the lens of culture. In his book *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (2019), Winter describes how cultural politics are being amended and used as a strategy to elevate China's cultural positioning to the next level: In focusing on contemporary narratives of Ancient Silk Roads, the Chinese government uses heritage and history as powerful means to support the geopolitical and economic aims of the BRI (Winter 2019). He introduces the China-led BRI as a geocultural configuration that evokes and mobilizes cultural and historical narratives of the Silk Roads (Lin and Yang 2020). Mapping New Silk Road regions through the lens of cultural agency and practices, a new geocultural region comes into sight. Consequently, questions of who owns, protects, and negotiates cultural sites, spaces, and production have become more and more pressing, especially since national borders and national "survival and maintenance strategies" have been reinforced and reenacted due to the global COVID-19 crisis. One of the most prominent examples is provided by the field of cultural heritage, which is increasingly renegotiated through cultural diplomacy (Winter 2020).

Whereas Winter has focused on bilateral or multilateral top-down people-to-people practices in the field of cultural politics that embody the relationship between state actors, Kidd (2022), in her book "Culture Paves the Way," takes the example of contemporary art practices in southwest China to focus on bottom-up practices to understand and investigate the cultural dimension of China's BRI and its local responses. In the context of people-to-people connectivity, studies on the agency of non-state actors have been rare (Loh 2021, Kidd 2022). Nevertheless, they are essential in tackling people-to-people connectivity as transcultural practice, which unfolds only in dialogic cooperation, mutual understanding, and culturally respectful negotiation: It is language and the communication of ideas and perception that constitutes people-to-people connectivity. In introducing the Chinese term *mínxīn xiāngtōng*, Kidd lays emphasis on its literal translation to the flow of communication between peoples' hearts and minds:

"Put together, *Mínxīn xiāngtōng* signifies in much the same way as does Joseph Nye's soft power, as a mechanism by which to win hearts and minds, bringing the aspirations, thoughts and feelings of foreign peoples into alignment with one another" (Kidd 2022: 41).

The analogy with Nye's soft power is insightful, especially as it is attributed with an actor-centric, reciprocal relation: People-to-people connectivity is exerted between states and, thus, government actors as well as non-state actors (Kidd 2022: 44–48) in the fields of "cultural programming, including health and humanitarian

assistance, as well as academic, cultural and professional exchange, both domestic and international. This cultural programming can be either top-down or bottom-up. The former is both conceived and implemented by government actors. The latter consists in grassroots conceived cultural programming implemented through private-sector channels” (Kidd 2022: 44).

In this light, the fifth pillar of the BRI turns out to be a highly relevant asset of the infrastructure project. People-to-people connectivity is a transculturalizing, transregionalizing, and strategic practice—or, better, an agenda—that shapes a new geocultural region. Analyzing people-to-people connectivity within and between both state and non-state level actors provides new insights into the (de)construction of realities that are embedded in New Silk Road regions—regions which increasingly position themselves as important players within a geocultural and geopolitical arena in the process of formation. Here, the role of culture is to evoke a new notion and imagination of the BRI as an emotional architecture and new infrastructure of belongings in transregionalizing realities. Such emotional architectures frequently express and reflect themselves in narratives that accompany the BRI. (Local) languages and cultural spaces opening up or closing due to the act of (cultural) translation enable us to engage with and analyze both historic and present communication.

As we have claimed, people-to-people connectivity is the prerequisite and basis for transregional and transcultural practices. Communication is one such practice and emerges as a key tool in implementing the BRI in the specific local and regional contexts of the participating BRI partners. As connectivity starts with communication, we are posing the following questions: How do people communicate and connect as a reaction to BRI projects and Chinese presence? How do cultural practices construct and deconstruct narratives, and who are the agents? What is the role of cultural practice in relation to (de)constructing BRI-related narratives?

We tackle these questions from the perspective of practice and agency, as both are forms of human behavior that shape realities and exert power. In short, practice and agency are means of configuring lived and perceived contexts. Such an approach reveals the transformative potential of actor-centric practices, especially in asymmetrical power contexts.

The relationship of practices and structure is a reciprocal one: On the one hand, practices presuppose structures; on the other hand, practices produce and change structures (cf. Giddens 1979: 53). We follow Reckwitz in his theory of practice, where he describes practice as a “typified form of behaving” (Reckwitz 2010: 189), “which contains a specific knowledge” (Reckwitz 2006: 36–37), and argues that practices are “practical knowledge that makes bodies capable of acting, that makes them ‘actors’” (Reckwitz 2004: 44).

Agency is the ability of the individual to influence structure. More precisely, it describes the ability of actors to implement their will to act within and shape their context (cf. Giddens 1979: 55). Hence, agency is the exercise of power to enable transformation (cf. Giddens 1979: 55), and therefore it constitutes or changes structures. Agency does not stop at national borders; instead, agency and, hence, the power to construct and transform structures, transgresses various demarcation lines and is wielded in different localities, regions, and cultures. Here lies the transculturalizing and transregionalizing potential of agency: It is the grounding and promise of people-to-people connectivity in the context of the BRI.

## **2 Historic and Contemporary Silk Road Narratives**

Narratives on Silk Roads hold a dominant part in the communication of BRI projects to local publics. Two types of Silk Road narratives occur when we engage with the BRI as a narrative architecture: Silk Roads as (1) historical narratives, and (2) contemporary narratives. Looking at them from these approaches helps us to understand the strategic implementation of cultural content into the BRI communication that aims to generate acceptance and participation in the context of the BRI. Both approaches will be introduced in the following.

### **2.1 Romanticizing the Cultural Legacies of the Past**

The historical narrative of the Silk Road is frequently used to refer to ancient trade routes that facilitated interaction between cultures, religions, economies, and politics of the Eurasian region between the second century BCE and the middle of the 15th century.<sup>16</sup> For more than 1,500 years, the Ancient Silk Road ran between the Mediterranean through Central Asia to East Asia, its main route being about 6,400 km long. Nowadays, the term “Silk Road” has advanced into a well-known trope for trade with silk, wool, and gold. It evokes the notion of early transregional mobility via land and sea and the notion of harmonious exchange of cultural practices and ideas through merchants and goods, its most prominent example being the expansion of Buddhism from India to China. As a popular and highly nostalgic figure of thought, the notion of Silk Roads stands for transcultural belonging, cultural connectivity and exchange, and an early

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16 The term Silk Road was coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, a term that Deepak Nayyar reveals as an entirely “colonial construct” (Nayyar 2017).

global trade network. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that Xi Jinping frequently refers to notions of the Ancient Silk Road when communicating the BRI domestically and to other countries, as it seems like a familiar, connectable story to tell about the harmony of cultural encounters. Winter's latest research (2019), for example, highlights how the Chinese government engages heritage and history in its mission to develop the BRI's geopolitical and economical dimension: the Chinese government draws on suitable if rather simplified notions of the Ancient Silk Roads, like long-distance relations and linear and harmonious infrastructure, and implements them strategically in its intentionally vague discourse (Winter 2019: 190–191). Since Xi Jinping announced and introduced his vision of the BRI, the aforementioned imageries connected to the Ancient Silk Road have been reawakened, reinforced, and reimagined as a figure of thought in the broader national publics and in recent academic research (see Sarwar 2017, Frankopan 2021, Winter 2022).

Using the expression “Ancient Silk Roads,” the romance of “common humanity, a form of universalism where difference can be celebrated without forgetting or exoticizing” (Thorsten 2005: 302) is both reawakened and firmly inscribed in transcultural histories. Since the proclamation of the BRI, various Chinese actors have used the Ancient Silk Road and its harmonious, interconnecting, and peaceful connotations as a communicative tool for its BRI PR. As a network, the Ancient Silk Road had no leading actor but was a decentralized and organically growing network of trading and mobility (Ahmad 2021) facilitating cultural exchange. This romantic notion of the Ancient Silk Road, however, disappears and turns porous from a non-Chinese view: The idea of transcultural harmony and belonging is being doubted. Instead, political, economic, and cultural overtaking and hegemony by the Chinese government is suspected from various sides.

## 2.2 A China-led Silk Road as the Dawn of a New World Order?

The contemporary narrative of the New Silk Road or the “Chinese” Silk Road, on the other hand, is not as positively connotated as the historical one, with its “nostalgic longing for the past as a model for the future” (Callahan 2017: 248). The BRI is considered to mainly serve Chinese interests. Hence, the reference to a so-called New Chinese Silk Road is not surprising. In this light, the BRI seems like a strategic, purpose-oriented, and centralized infrastructure across Eurasia and Africa under Chinese directorship. Furthermore, it can be regarded as operationalizing the Sinocentric vision of a China-led Silk Road as a tool to implement the ambitions of the Chinese government to “resurrect the great nation” and thus

regain global power in world politics and economics. Instead of reconstructing the romance around cross-cultural fertilization, the contemporary narrative of the New Chinese Silk Road has triggered suspicion, caution, and critique towards an assumed new Sinocentric world order in both mainstream media and academia (Moritz 2015, Mayer 2018, Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020, Silvius 2021).

The depiction of the BRI as the New Chinese Silk Road prompted mixed political, social, and emotional reactions from different regional actors within the so-called New Silk Road regions, as the following headlines indicate: “The Economic Recolonialization of Africa: China’s One Belt and Road Initiative;”<sup>17</sup> “India to Skip China’s New Silk Road Forum;”<sup>18</sup> “Wie Europa und die USA Chinas neue Seidenstraße kontern wollen;”<sup>19</sup> “BRI as Chance for Regional Cooperation: Iran–Armenia Economic Relations;”<sup>20</sup> “The New Silk Road: How a Rising Arab World Is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China.”<sup>21</sup>

Political, mainly state-level actors from the West fear or foresee the BRI as the dawn of Sinocentrism.<sup>22</sup> In opposition to this, political and regional actors<sup>23</sup> from the so-called Global South as well as individual actors on the ground often have a more welcoming and assertive approach to participating in the BRI, as they consider it a facilitator for transregional partnerships on an equal footing.

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17 <https://medium.com/world-outlook/the-economic-recolonisation-of-africa-chinas-one-belt-and-road-initiative-bfe93281f05d> (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

18 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-skip-chinas-new-silk-road-forum/articleshow/58656088.cms> (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

19 <https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/wie-europa-und-die-usa-chinas-neue-seidenstrasse-kontern-wollen-ld.1629494> (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

20 <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/266448> (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

21 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230302075>.

22 Sinocentrism refers to China’s once-prominent position in the world. Promoted by Confucianism, Sinocentrism revealed itself most visibly during the time of the Ancient Silk Roads. Until the war with Western forces in the 19th and 20th centuries, China’s self-image and representation was that of a harmonious society and one superior to other cultures.

23 This book comprises analyses not only of bilateral state actor practices and communication but also of non-state actors. Therefore, with regional actors, we include a variety of differing people, institutions, and organizations that are engaging in the BRI. Regional actors may hence embody non-state actors, communal politicians, NGOs, collectives, and individuals whose realities are involved with or influenced by BRI-related projects. When referring to such a broad perspective of regional actors, we stress and prevent a top-down analysis of BRI projects and diversify academic analysis on a grounded, local level.



For example, whereas political leaders in Germany remained rather cautious and suspicious, those in Pakistan,<sup>24</sup> Tanzania,<sup>25</sup> and Kazakhstan<sup>26</sup> welcomed the initiative and anticipated more benefits than drawbacks to their societies. Reactions also came from those who were either involuntarily or voluntarily “excluded” from a BRI network, namely, from the political leaders of India<sup>27</sup> and the United States of America.<sup>28</sup> Such a mix of differing reactions seems to culminate in one question: What does the Chinese government want to achieve with its New Silk Road, and what is in it for us?

Academic research on the BRI has formed a broad new research line that is referred to as “New Silk Road studies.”<sup>29</sup> In China, studies on the Belt and Road Initiative have evolved into an academic discipline (新丝路学). Elsewhere, especially in the Global North, publications on Silk Road studies that analyze the Belt and Road Initiative and its implications have dramatically increased, especially in the social sciences: In order to grasp the enormous dimension of the BRI and its impact on societies, foreign politics, security, national and regional economics, or new connectivities between China, Eurasia, and Africa, multidisciplinary volumes investigate the BRI as a large, China-led infrastructure project (*The China-led Belt and Road Initiative and its Reflections: The Crisis of Hegemony and Changing Global Orders*, Amineh 2023; *Global Perspectives on China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Assertive Agency Through Regional Connectivity*, Schneider 2021; *The Belt and Road Initiative: What’s In It for China?*, Johnston 2019). Most overview literature focuses on aspects of financial investment and risk and their impact on international trade. In Silk Road studies, “trade” refers not only to tangible goods but also to intangible goods and connective practices. Overall, studies seem divided “between those who think of it as a tool serving China’s geopolitical interests and rise at the world

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24 Jadoon, Arshad, Muhammad Imran Khan, Muhammad Khan, and Yechi Ma. “Socio-Economic Impacts of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Pakistan and China Economy.” *European Academic Research*, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 4140–4157.

25 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46364342> (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

26 <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-and-kazakhstan-roads-belts-paths-and-steps/> (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

27 [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C07\\_wgn\\_Tripathi.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C07_wgn_Tripathi.pdf) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

28 <https://time.com/4992103/china-silk-road-belt-xi-jinping-khorgos-kazakhstan-infrastucture/>, [https://www.voanews.com/a/usa\\_us-offer-alternative-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/6206928.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_us-offer-alternative-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/6206928.html) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

29 Outlining all the findings of New Silk Road studies would expand the format of this introduction.

stage, and those who see it as a more nebulous and fragmented undertaking driven by domestic economic and political pressures” (Alves and Lee 2022).

New Silk Road studies are differentiating into an increasing number of subtopics and tackle the BRI with a more regionalized and thematically nuanced approach to disentangle its multilayered nature. Emerging topics include sustainability or Green Silk Road (Thees 2020), Digital Silk Road (Chan 2022), Health Silk Road (Ngeow 2020), Polar Silk Road (Woon 2020), Academic Silk Road (Marginson et al. 2020), and Heritage Silk Road (Winter 2018), to name but a few. Such differentiation in subtopics reveals not only the areas that are touched by the BRI infrastructure project but the nature of the goods which are traded along the New Silk Roads.

What have been under-researched so far are phenomena of culture in the context of the BRI. Tim Winter’s latest research is one of the most relevant publications to highlight here. In *Geocultural Power* (2019), Winter emphasizes culture and heritage as key instruments for China’s foreign policy and its aim to create win–win situations and sovereignty in a Eurasian and African region through the reconstitution of a shared past and heritage. He analyzes a deliberate use of the past to smooth the path for a Sinocentric BRI for political and economic reasons (in Chinese foreign policy) as well as for internal reasons (in Chinese domestic policy) (Winter 2019: 190). This practice is nothing new but an age-old strategy prevalent in domestic Chinese politics (Mao referred to it as 故为今用). What *is* new here is the recurrence of the past and its strategic application in the international arena.<sup>30</sup> It is a rhetorical device that has been aptly termed “historical statecraft” (Mayer 2018). Tackling the BRI from a decidedly cultural and emotional perspective is developing into an emerging research line. The Chinese government emphasizes people-to-people connectivity as one of the five constitutive pillars of the BRI but seems to have no clear implementation guidelines so far (Kidd 2022).

### 3 The Chinese Dream: A Polysemic Narrative

Upon a closer look, especially when we engage with inner-Chinese concerns, contemporary Silk Road Narratives contain another narrative that has developed into an important tool to foster people-to-people connectivity and to legitimize political, economic, and cultural practices: the so-called Chinese Dream (中国梦).

The Chinese Dream was officially announced by Xi Jinping in 2012 as a sociocultural and sociopolitical goal for China, only one year before the official announcement of the BRI. It basically refers to the “rejuvenation of the Chinese

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30 We would like to thank Ágota Révész for this input.

nation,” achieved by the centenary of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2049 (cf. Loh 2019: 169).

The Chinese Dream has been tackled and defined from a variety of perspectives (Callahan 2013, Callahan 2016a, Callahan 2016b, Fasulo 2016, Loh 2019, Casas-Klett and Li 2021, Peters et al. 2022), and its focus has been attributed to various areas, for example, higher education, patriotism, philosophy, spirituality, or social sciences (Loh 2019: 170).

In the context of our book, we focus on the Chinese Dream as one of the above-mentioned Silk Road narratives—if not its most prominent one. Although it remains relatively vague, seems amendable, and has not been clearly defined as a concept (Wang 2014: 2), the Chinese Dream can be seen as a stable but polysemic narrative (Loh 2019: 170) within the PRC’s infrastructure projects offered to the world and developed into “the signature ideology for Xi’s term” (Wang 2014: 1).

The idea to “rejuvenate” (*fùxīng*) or modernize (Loh 2019: 169) the nation has been mentioned before Xi (cf. Gallelli 2019: 7–8). As a key element of the concept, the (national) rejuvenation has been used by Chinese leaders before him. According to Wang (2014: 3), the term “rejuvenation” has a long tradition in the history of China and its national experience. The historical trauma underlying the concept of rejuvenation in this narrative refers to the century of national humiliation beginning with the first Opium War in 1839, continuing with the Boxer Wars around 1900, and ending in the middle of the 20th century with the Second Sino-Japanese War. Such “chosen traumas” (as well as “chosen glories”) function well in defining a group identity (Wang 2014: 3, referring to Johan Galtung’s work). The narrative of the century of humiliation, in turn, would not function without an even deeper layer, which is the narrative of the glorious ancient Chinese civilization. Wang (2014: 3–4) describes this chain of legitimizing narratives as follows: “As citizens of the ‘Central Kingdom,’ the Chinese feel a strong sense of chosenness and pride at their ancient civilization and achievements. Chinese refer to the humiliating experience in the face of Western and Japanese incursion as national trauma. After suffering a great decline of national strength and status, this group has strong determination to revive its past glory and strength. That is the Chinese Dream.”

Despite its historical antecedents, the Chinese Dream was not introduced as a political concept of the PRC until 2012, when Xi was elected the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, therefore, the leader of the PRC. Since then, the Chinese Dream has been regularly and increasingly mentioned in Xi Jinping’s domestic and international speeches<sup>31</sup> (Wang 2014) and has become

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31 For an overview of a selection of speeches, see article on People’s Daily Online ([people.cn](http://people.cn)) “General Secretary Xi Jinping’s 15 speeches systematically elaborated the ‘Chinese Dream,’”

quite visible in the public urban and medial spaces of Chinese cities: Posters, slogans, billboards, exhibitions, and video documentaries—often with English translations—emerge on screens in metro stations, on public streets, or at state museums or are broadcast on Chinese television channels.<sup>32</sup>

In a recorded speech on the occasion of the public congress day depicted in an ARTE documentary of 2021, Xi Jinping announced: “We sons and daughters of the Chinese nation will work together to make our dream of national rebirth a reality. China will occupy a central position in the world and make a great contribution to the welfare of the people.”<sup>33</sup>

Xi regularly introduces the Chinese Dream as the “Chinese dream of (achieving) the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (People’s Daily Online 2013) or, as Wang puts it, “to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history” (Wang 2014: 1). It expresses the aim to regain the power and influence of the former Chinese empire by 2049, when the People’s Republic of China turns 100 years old, as his keynote speech at the Fifth Meeting of BRICS Leaders “Working Together for Joint Development” on March 27, 2013 demonstrates:

大家都很关心中国的未来发展。面向未来，中国将相继朝着两个宏伟目标前进：一是到2020年国内生产总值和城乡居民人均收入比2010年翻一番，全面建成惠及十几亿人口的小康社会。二是到2049年新中国成立100年时建成富强民主文明和谐的社会主义现代化国家。

Everyone is concerned about the future development of China. Looking to the future, China will move towards two ambitious goals in succession: first, to double its gross domestic product and per capita income of urban and rural residents by 2020 compared to 2010, and to build a moderately prosperous society benefiting more than one billion people in all aspects. The second is to build a rich, strong, democratic, civilized, and harmonious socialist modern state by 2049, the 100th year since the founding of New China.<sup>34</sup> (Example 1)

The excerpt of Xi’s speech of 2013 in Example 1 demonstrates the two important steps to achieve the goal of the Chinese Dream: firstly, the development into

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publishing excerpts of Xi Jinping’s speeches from the years 2012–13 in which the Chinese Dream occurs.

32 Adeli 2023, field memo 3.

33 Quote by Xi Jinping in “Die Neue Welt des Xi Jinping” (France, 2021), art documentary by Sophie Lepault and Romain Franklin.

34 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787.html> (accessed 28 Mar. 2023). All Chinese excerpts translated using DeepL ([deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com)).

a moderately prosperous society and, secondly, the modernization of the PRC. The development into a moderately prosperous society clearly links Xi's Chinese Dream back to the political goals and narratives of his predecessors—above all, Hu Jintao, who used the narrative of the “well-off society” (*xiǎokāng shèhuì*). “The Party promised that China's per capita GDP would be up to the level of moderately developed countries by 2021, the CCP's centennial” (Wang 2014: 7).

In Xi's words, the narrative of the moderately prosperous society sounds as follows:

我们已经确定了今后的奋斗目标，这就是到中国共产党成立100年时全面建成小康社会 [...]

We have set the goal of our future struggle, which is to build a moderately prosperous society in all aspects by the 100th year of the founding of the Communist Party of China [...] (Xi Jinping, Speech at the Seminar with Representatives of National Model Workers, 28 April 2013)<sup>35</sup> (Example 2)

According to Xi Jinping, the first step to achieve the goal of the Chinese Dream has, indeed, already been achieved. At the celebration ceremony of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP on July 1st 2021, he announced that “China has realized the first centenary goal of ‘building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.’”<sup>36</sup>

The formation of a strong, homogeneous, and collective Chinese national identity is another goal of the Chinese Dream. It is certainly subtler, but increasingly notable. Such collective national identity is supposed to function as the foundation of the envisioned Chinese socialist society and serves as a conscious opposition to Western values. Many passages of Xi's various speeches on this topic point to this formation of identity and talk about how Chinese citizens are supposed to behave and society ought to function, as the following examples show:

中华民族是具有非凡创造力的民族，我们创造了伟大的中华文明，我们也能够继续拓展和走好适合中国国情的发展道路。全国各族人民一定要增强对中国特色社会主义的理论自信、道路自信、制度自信，坚定不移沿着正确的中国道路奋勇前进。

The Chinese nation is a nation of extraordinary creativity; we have created a great Chinese civilization, and we are able to continue to expand and follow a development path that suits China's national conditions. The people of all

35 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html> (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

36 <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202107/6ff93d39da7548fbae37cbcd01184c34.shtml> (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

nationalities must enhance their confidence in the theory, road, and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and move forward unswervingly along the correct Chinese path. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the First Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress, 17 March 2013)<sup>37</sup> (Example 3)

尽管前进道路并不平坦,改革发展稳定任务仍很艰巨而繁重,但面对未来,我们充满信心。我国工人阶级一定要在坚持中国道路、弘扬中国精神、凝聚中国力量上发挥模范带头作用,万众一心、众志成城,为实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦而不懈奋斗。

Although the road ahead is not smooth and the task of reform, development, and stability is still arduous and heavy, we are confident of victory in the face of the future. Our working class must play an exemplary and leading role in upholding the Chinese Way, carrying forward the Chinese spirit and uniting Chinese forces, so that all people can work with one heart and one mind to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the Seminar with Representatives of National Model Workers, 28 April 2013)<sup>38</sup> (Example 4)

Examples 3 and 4 clearly demonstrate China's aspirations for power in establishing socialism with Chinese characteristics as its political foundation. On the basis of these communication examples, together with empirical observations regarding the visual representation of Chinese Dream slogans on screens and billboards in the public, the concept of the Chinese Dream embodies the (re)formation of a homogenous, collective, national Chinese identity, one seemingly characterized by the practice of social and political "Othering" (Shaw 2015). Observing the communication patterns of the Chinese Dream as demonstrated in the examples above, the Chinese Dream can be regarded as a political tool of defining the "Chinese Self" against the "global Other." Needless to say, this identity construction is not exclusively found in the context of China but also elsewhere, where an "imagined national self" needs to be projected against a "national Other."<sup>39</sup>

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37 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html> (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

38 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html> (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

39 The concept of identity as a figure of thought and analysis has been questioned and critiqued (Moran 2014, Brubaker and Cooper 2000) due to its narrowing focus on difference; its neglect of class, structure, politics, and social relations; and its distortion of senses of belonging in societies. Despite that, identity provides valuable insights to various disciplines

Example 5 further underlines another notable feature of the Chinese Dream: its merging with the person and politics of Xi Jinping.

The Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era makes the following things clear: [...] It makes clear that major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the 19th National Congress of the CCP 18 October 2017)<sup>40</sup> (Example 5)

Over time, the person Xi Jinping and his role as leader of the CCP have coalesced to such an extent that Chinese media have coined the term *Xiplomacy*.<sup>41</sup> The term has evolved into a flexible figurehead to which both domestic and foreign policy issues can be assigned. It has thus been used by Chinese media to report on the World Environment Day, with the title “Xiplomacy: Xi’s vision of a prosperous, clean, beautiful world,”<sup>42</sup> as well as on Xi’s proposals for a global security plan, “Xiplomacy: China-proposed initiatives focus on global development, security.”<sup>43</sup> It has, furthermore, been adopted by scholars and used in connection with analyses of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy (see, e.g., Tomé 2021). The focus on Xi Jinping’s persona, which could almost be described as a personality cult, and the accompanying personification of Chinese politics as Xiplomacy show a clear departure from Deng Xiaoping’s policies: “There is a widespread agreement among scholars in deeming this new definition of PRC on the international scene as an official departure from Deng Xiaoping’s taoguangyanghui 韬光养晦 “hiding one’s capacities and bide one’s time” towards a more proactive and assertive role, what has been recaptured in the four-character phrase fenfa you wei 奋发有为 “strive for achievements” (Gallelli 2019: 101).

Similar to the concept of the BRI, the Chinese Dream has been communicated in synchronization with the changing political and economic status of the PRC (The

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and research topics, and it continues to serve as a relevant category and reality when critically engaging with processes of regionalization and localization of cultures.

40 [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

41 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/08/c\\_139795116.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/08/c_139795116.htm); <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/laos-and-xiplomacy/> (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

42 [https://english.mee.gov.cn/News\\_service/media\\_news/202106/t20210605\\_836425.shtml](https://english.mee.gov.cn/News_service/media_news/202106/t20210605_836425.shtml) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

43 <https://english.news.cn/20220913/f161157611ad4eadba563d273c601ec4/c.html> (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

Economist 2022).<sup>44</sup> Despite that, its core intention was to regain a collective Chinese national identity after the century of humiliation at the hands of former Western empires like Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. At this point, it is interesting to note that it is not coincidental that the term Chinese Dream resembles the expression “American Dream.” Xi Jinping defines China as a “great power” (*dàguó* 大国),<sup>45</sup> implying that China has risen to the status of the US, further indicating that China used to be and shall be a powerful political player in the global arena and acts in a harmonious way (in opposition to former Western powers, which humiliated China in the past) (cf. Gallelli 2019: 104–105). However, in alluding to the notion of the American Dream, the Chinese Dream can be regarded as the result of Othering: the juxtaposition of the Chinese Dream with the American interpretation reveals Xi’s aim to rise to an American “status level” by nourishing the Chinese Dream’s “Chineseness.”

The metaphor of the “dream” has evolved into a significant buzzword in Xi Jinping’s political communication—not only in reference to the US but also in building up connectivity in the framework of the BRI. On one of his tours promoting the BRI, for example, Xi Jinping strived to bridge the sociocultural and socio-economic gap between the African continent and China by trying to transfer the Chinese Dream into an “African context.” During his visit to Tanzania in March 2013, for example, Xi Jinping compared the Chinese Dream to the “African Dream,” talking about “the dream of over 1.3 billion Chinese people for great national renewal and the dream of over 1 billion African people for gaining strength from unity and achieving development and rejuvenation. The Chinese and African people should enhance solidarity, cooperation, mutual support, and assistance to realize the dreams,” he said, adding, “We should also work with the rest of the world to realize the dream of a world of enduring peace and common prosperity.”<sup>46</sup> The

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44 <https://www.economist.com/china/2022/11/10/xi-jinping-amends-the-chinese-dream> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

45 The practice of Xi Jinping defining China as “great power” and the recent shift of Chinese foreign policy that is directed towards interaction with other “great powers” can be subsumed under “great power politics” (大国政治) or “great power diplomacy.” It basically describes Xi Jinping’s new, assertive foreign policy approach that envisions a more hegemonic position on the world stage and differs from the previous president Deng Xiaoping’s approach of “hiding one’s capacities and biding one’s time” (taoguangyanghui 韬光养晦) (Gallelli 2019: 101) or, in other words, keeping a low profile when interacting with other political powers (cf. Smith 2021). See Gallelli (2019: 100–101) for a discussion of great power politics from a linguistic perspective and Smith (2021) and Noesselt et al. (2021) for a discussion of Chinese great power diplomacy from a political science perspective.

46 [http://tz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgbx/201308/t20130822\\_6095730.htm](http://tz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgbx/201308/t20130822_6095730.htm) (accessed 4 Apr. 2023).



example above of the “African Dream”<sup>47</sup> that Xi Jinping connects to the Chinese Dream not only demonstrates the relevance of both the BRI and the Chinese Dream as narratives but also stresses how the Chinese Dream (or other “national dreams”) and the BRI are interrelated and how the meaning-making practices of a narrative unfold: The BRI is the overarching architecture that connects local, regional, and transnational infrastructures at hubs that form a BRI-related project. Here, at the various intersections of the hub, the Chinese Dream encounters other “dreams,” which leads to bilateral negotiations concerning the fields of economics, finance, culture, and politics. Thus, the BRI is a powerful tool to implement the Chinese Dream and to connect the dreams of selected nations. Against that background, the Chinese Dream can be defined as a narrative-communicating-strategy emphasizing *how* China will become a “great power” or, more precisely, the greatest military and economic power in the world by 2049.

Narratives give practices the stability and endurance to link events and ideas and to legitimize strategies. It is therefore not surprising that political state actors use narratives to realize domestic and international goals. Such practice has been given the label of historical statecraft: the “systematic application of representations of the past (real or imagined) in order to frame and legitimize foreign policy, naturalize a certain image or role of a country, and stabilize collective identities on national, regional and global levels (‘communalization’)” (Mayer 2018: 1222). In the case of both the historic and contemporary Silk Road narratives (see Section 2) and the narrative of the Chinese Dream, it becomes apparent that these specific narratives are social practices, communicated from the state level. Indeed, although it was mentioned before that Xi Jinping has a fluid, adaptive nature, the Chinese Dream as a socio-political concept “remains under solid control from the Party” (Loh 2019: 173), one which, together with the BRI narrative, constitutes the “signature program of Xi Jinping” (Loh 2019: 168). The aim of these narratives is to configure practices and messages that reach either other states (foreign policy) or Chinese citizens (domestic policy). As Loh suggests, Xi further uses them for social control (Loh 2019: 192) and assumes this narrative strategy to streamline and control the state is even more successful than Mao’s use of “violence and upheaval” and Deng’s use of “economic growth to buy loyalty” (Loh 2019: 192).

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47 It should be noted that there does not seem to be a notion of a unified “African Dream” in the sense that Xi Jinping uses it in his speech here (if at all, the term is usually used in the plural as “African Dreams” to show that the people on the continent have assuredly different versions of this dream). It can thus be considered to be a rhetorical figure that Xi uses in order to create a feeling of belonging in his audience.

In this light, the BRI can be regarded as the operationalization of the Chinese Dream; a tool to implement China's goal for its future position in forming a new geocultural region and its position as a new global power. Whereas the Chinese Dream is considered a Chinese narrative with a domestic focus, addressed to domestic audiences to tune China into becoming the world's major military and economic power by 2049, the China-led BRI with its Silk Road narratives can be regarded as the strategic implementation of a large-scale transregional infrastructure that helps to translate China's ambition to "rejuvenate the nation" and, hence, to regain global power in politics and economics. As we have shown, Xi Jinping uses the past and ideas of the past to create a new present and future. In that present and future, culture plays an increasingly decisive role: In one variation of the Chinese Dream, it is an explicit goal to build up China's cultural strength to achieve national rejuvenation and a collective identity (Loh 2019: 170).

The reference to a shared past also plays a major role in the relationship between China and Africa and, therefore, also in the realization of BRI projects. A central figure here (as already mentioned above) is the navigator Zheng He, who not only established contact between China and the African continent at an early stage in history but also left behind descendants through his crew and, thus, a legacy. Large (2008: 47) comments on this as follows: "However, the way in which history plays in the present is revealing. The symbolic and more instrumental uses of a shared, interpreted past is one salient facet of China's officially mobilized version of its historical connections with Africa today, the flipside of which often comes in the form of virtuous commitments against any future hegemonic role."

#### **4 Structure of the Book**

In this book, we juxtapose texts that engage with the notion of a China-led BRI from the perspective of narratives as cultural practices. Culture and cultural practices are understood as an analytical category and key research subject for approaching and analyzing different regional reactions to the BRI. Considering cultural practices as critical regional and local knowledge production, we want to understand how people-to-people connectivity (a frequently communicated, constitutive pillar in China-led BRI projects) and disconnectivity evolve along both the tangible and intangible infrastructures of the BRI. Since we are interested in understanding patterns of thought and practices, we decided to take an actor-centric approach to regional and local BRI responses, aiming to tackle the production of knowledge spaces from a local and regional viewpoint that spans Sino-African relations.

The following chapters introduce and describe (trans)regional actors and their agencies in relation to notions of old and new Silk Roads, the Chinese Dream, and BRI-related projects, thereby vivifying what Schneider (2021) emphasizes as a helpful approach to investigate agency in the context of the BRI: Instead of reducing nation states to single actors, the contributors of this book differentiate and analyze agencies related to specific local and regional actors. Hence, a top-down perspective, which often concentrates on the assumed “dangers” or risks of the China-led BRI for participating countries (for example, debt-trap [e.g., Were 2018], environmental pollution [e.g., Ascensão et al. 2018],<sup>48</sup> or neocolonialism [e.g., Deych 2019, Murray 2022]) is being sidelined.<sup>49</sup> In this publication, we highlight a bottom-up perspective by describing and analyzing (re)actions and practices of local and regional actors that are experiencing an altered reality due to the China-led BRI project. Our observations and results are both embedded in and projected against the narratives we perceived as drivers of a newly forming geocultural and geopolitical region.

As already mentioned in Section 1, we focus on narratives and cultural practices that can be observed in the relation between China and the African continent. In view of China’s continuing, unrelenting engagement combined with a considerable amount of “success stories” and drawbacks on the one hand and diverse (re)actions across the continent on the other, we consider it a fruitful and promising approach to dedicate our attention to the interaction between China and the African continent.

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48 See also <https://blogs.worldbank.org/trade/three-opportunities-and-three-risks-belt-and-road-initiative>, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/environmental-damage-from-belt-and-road-initiative-projects-on-rise/articleshow/101715401.cms?from=mdr> (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

49 It has to be noted here that, on the state level, the BRI has provoked several reactions in the form of alternative initiatives that aim to compete with it: In 2021, the EU launched its Global Gateway project, and in 2022, Joe Biden launched the US-led “Build Back Better World (B3W)” plan (cf. Masina 2022). India and Turkey also launched their own national initiatives. Turkey has the Middle Corridor (MC), a railway network connecting Turkey and Central Asia also referred to as the Turkish version of the Silk Road initiative (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-question-compatibility> [accessed 9 Oct. 2023]) and is currently competing more and more with China in building infrastructure in Africa (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-africa-turkeys-third-way-chinas-shadow>, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkey-jockeys-with-China-for-influence-in-Africa>) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023). Finally, India also established an alternative to the BRI with its India–West Asia–Europe corridor (see, e.g., [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-west-asia-europe-corridor-deal-offers-an-alternative-to-chinas-bri/articleshow/103540710.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-west-asia-europe-corridor-deal-offers-an-alternative-to-chinas-bri/articleshow/103540710.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst) [accessed 9 Oct. 2023]).

Here, we analyze cultural practices referring to contemporary fine art, video art, novels, and poetry. We further look at cultural politics in the format of cultural institutions like art organizations and cultural promotion organizations (in particular, the Confucius Institute). Perceptions of Tanzanian Chinese language students and the practice of learning Chinese in Tanzania are analyzed in order to understand cultural policies as local and regional responses to the various narratives along the New Silk Road.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–3) deals with the functions of art and cultural heritage within the context of the Chinese Dream and BRI-related narratives.

In Chapter 1, Sophia Kidd engages with an inner-Chinese perspective and the present political economy of culture as an approach to challenge “Western notions” of the BRI. She underlines the potential of the development of a political economy of culture carried out by Chinese actors at various levels (state, sub-state, and grassroot). Kidd emphasizes the perspective of China’s aspiration to act as a cultural hegemon in New Silk Road Regions, thereby focussing on the role of culture to (re)engage as “developer” of cultural hubs along the New Silk Roads.

Chapter 2 investigates the role of art and cultural heritage in relation to cultural politics within New Silk Road Regions. Jamila Adeli uses the lens of art and exhibition making to shed light on a new relation between the Chinese state and its cultural policy that emerges due to China’s geostrategic and geocultural aspirations. By engaging with various exhibition practices at Chinese museums, the author demonstrates the role of art as local and regional developer that aims to construct and strengthen a Chinese cultural identity that fits into narratives on the Chinese Dream and the New Silk Roads. She further analyzes artworks as the producers of critical (counter)narratives on current cultural politics that reveal a future of asymmetrical power relations within New Silk Road Regions.

Chapter 3 is a conversation between Jamila Adeli and art historian and art journalist Minh An Szabó de Bucs on the infrastructural shift in China that transforms the Chinese art scene, both locally and internationally. The recent rise of China as an aspiring cultural hegemon is demonstrated by examples of the Chinese state agency wielded in a new relation to the power of art and cultural heritage in the context of the BRI and the Chinese Dream.

Part II (Chapters 4–5) looks at the narrative of the Chinese Dream and the BRI from an African literary perspective.

Chapter 4, by Susanne Gehrmann, is a literary analysis of the poem “There Is a New Train Coursing through Our Lands (Mandarin song)” by Nigerian poet Remi Raji. Before starting the analysis of Raji’s poem, however, Gehrmann gives a concise overview of dreaming with respect to Africa–China relations (also prior to the start of the BRI) in other literary works by authors from the African

continent. In doing so, Gehrman raises important concepts that are also relevant for the understanding of Raji's poem, such as (un)equal opportunities and projections into the future (African utopia vs. dystopia). In her analysis of Raji's poem, Gehrman skillfully carves out its complexity, revealing its references to the current political and economic relationship between the African continent and China. Gehrman gives us an understanding of all the hidden references and shows us Raji's rather dark and pessimistic view of Chinese presence and neocolonial behavior on the African continent.

Chapter 5 then deals with the critical reflection of the Chinese Dream in the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by the Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor<sup>50</sup>. In this paper, Daniel Kossmann starts off with a historical derivation of the Chinese Dream. Unlike the approach taken in this introductory chapter, Kossmann describes the Chinese Dream from a political perspective and then links it with the BRI. He then turns to the narrative of and about the Chinese Dream and the BRI and describes how, in foreign policy, these narratives are used in order to integrate other nations' (or even continents') dreams, like the so-called "African Dream." Against this background, Kossmann then analyzes passages of *The Dragonfly Sea* in which Owuor indirectly (i.e. without mentioning the term) but clearly talks about a Kenyan perspective on the Chinese Dream.

Part III (Chapters 6–8) engages with Chinese and African cultural and language policy (particularly at the Confucius Institutes) and analyzes how the narratives of the Chinese Dream and the BRI are reflected upon by local agents in Tanzania and Ghana.

Chapter 6 is an empirical study of Tanzanian students learning Chinese at the university level in Tanzania. The authors, Daud Samwel Masanilo and Linda Ammann, are particularly interested in the motivation of Tanzanians to learn Chinese and the effects of learning Chinese (and potentially joining other cultural activities) on their attitude towards Chinese speakers. Teaching Chinese and Chinese culture is an explicit cultural–political means of and tool for ensuring the success of China's BRI project. Thus, the aim of the study is to get a first impression of how students participating in Chinese classes perceive the Chinese presence and their interaction with Chinese citizens in Tanzania. Furthermore, through the large number of comments and statements by the study participants, the authors are able to reflect on the awareness of China's cultural policy and diplomacy in Tanzania.

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50 A De:link//Re:link podcast interview with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor hosted by Daniel Kossmann in collaboration with Linda Ammann Gerlach and John Njenga Karugia can be listened to at <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidicon/23847848>.

In Chapter 7, Adams Bodomo, Cliff Mboya, and Bright Nkrumah tackle the positioning and politics of the Confucius Institute (CI) at the University of Ghana, in Accra. The aim of the case study is to investigate the real impact that the CI has on Ghanaian society. Based on literature reviewed on the CI in Africa as well as on participatory observation of a day-long activity at the CI in Ghana, the authors propose that the activities of the CIs in Ghana are a representative example that clearly show the asymmetry in power relations between China and the African continent.

Chapter 8 is an interview with Ghanaian academic and professor for African linguistics and literature Adams Bodomo, led by Linda Ammann in collaboration with Daniel Kossmann and John Njenga Karugia. In the interview, he discusses local reactions to the BRI in Ghana, cultural politics and diplomacy around the Confucius Institutes on the African continent, asymmetrical cultural policy between China and Africa, and power structures. He also touches upon issues such as the so-called debt trap, cultural identity, and neo- and decolonization.

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