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Bridging Time and Space: China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Echoes of Silk Road Migrations

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initiated in 2013, is currently unfolding its influence on Chinese migrations, prompting this essay to unravel its ongoing implications. This essay, by juxtaposing historical analogies with current trends and potential trajectories, draws connections between historical migrations along the Silk Road and the contemporary BRI led by China. It examines the impact of past migrations, as illustrated in works such as "The Journey of Xuanzang" and "The Travels of Marco Polo," highlighting the multifaceted exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures across expansive territories. Additionally, the essay explores the initiative's focus on attracting foreign talents, considering recent developments in national policies and legislation aimed at this objective. Further, the essay delves into the historical disruption of the Silk Road during the Ming dynasty, attributing its demise to the thriving sea trade route and climate change-induced events in the Dunhuang area. This serves as a cautionary reflection for China to proactively consider and address similar environmental and economic factors. Acknowledging prevalent criticisms and skepticism surrounding the BRI, the paper asserts that the initiative's infrastructure investments possess the potential to significantly enhance regional as well as global connectivity. This, in turn, is posited as a catalyst for fostering economic development while addressing issues of isolation, poverty, and marginalization. This essay endeavors to offer a holistic understanding of the BRI as a contemporary manifestation of migration serving as the 'motor of history'.

Keywords: Migration, Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative, Mobility.

I. INTRODUCTION

The once prosperous Silk Road, a historic network of trade routes linking the East and West, witnessed a decline in recent centuries.² However, in 2013, China introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a revival of the Ancient Silk Road. The initiative focuses on infrastructure

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² Man Hung Thomas Chan. "The Belt and Road Initiative – the New Silk Road: a research agenda." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* (2018), 7:2, 104-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1580407>.

investments, especially in connecting European and Central Asian cities.³ This exploration delves into the Silk Road's rejuvenation, scrutinizing how the BRI influences global migrations.⁴

Despite the BRI's promise, criticisms arise, especially questioning that while infrastructure development enhances local and regional connectivity, what will be its long-term implications on migrations? As we delve into the dynamics of this 'modern Silk Road', it is crucial to contextualize its historical significance. The ancient Silk Road, marked by waves of migrations, exchanges, and cross-continental trade, shaped the course of history. This exploration aims to understand the parallels between the historical Silk Road and its contemporary revival, shedding light on the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures.

In this analysis, we will initially explore how migration has historically served as the 'motor of history' along the Silk Road, followed by an examination of the extent to which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) embodies this historical phenomenon. It then scrutinizes the migratory dynamics facilitated by the BRI's policy changes through examples of Chinese migrants into ASEAN and African regions. Additionally, it draws insights from historical disruptions, such as those experienced during the Ming dynasty.⁵ The analysis concludes by underscoring the imperative for continual reflection and scrutiny in the study of mobility dynamics influenced by the BRI.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SILK ROAD MIGRATIONS

The Silk Road, an extensive system of interconnected trade routes, facilitated the interchange of goods, ideas, and cultures between the Eastern and Western regions. This historic artery of commerce facilitated the movement of people, fostering a rich tapestry of encounters and interactions. Migrations along the Silk Road were instrumental in shaping history, acting as a dynamic bridge between distant civilizations.⁶ To explore this phenomenon, we turn to works such as "The Journey to the West" by Anthony C. Yu, a monumental prose fiction narrating the seventh-century journey of Chinese monk Xuanzang to India⁷ and "The Travels of Marco Polo", a Venetian explorer, merchant, and writer, provide a vivid account of the diverse regions and

³ Belt and Road Forum, 2017. "Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road." Accessed December 7, 2023. <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0410/c22-45.html>.

⁴ Ibid (n 2).

⁵ Guanghui Dong, Leibin Wang, David Dian Zhang, Fengwen Liu, Yifu Cui, Guoqiang Li1, Zhilin Shi, Fahu Chen, "Climate-driven desertification and its implications for the ancient Silk Road trade", *Climate of the Past*, 17, 1395–1407, <https://doi.org/10.5194/cp-17-1395-2021>.

⁶ Ibid (n 2).

⁷ Anthony C. Yu., *The Journey to the West, Revised Edition, Volume 4* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

cultures he encountered, during the 13th century.⁸

(A) *The Journey to the West (Travel account of Xuanzang)*

This pilgrimage, undertaken to worship the Buddha and bring back scriptures for the enlightenment of China, encapsulates the spirit of Silk Road migrations. The protagonist, Xuanzang, embodies the fervour of Chinese pilgrims who traversed perilous routes, both overland and maritime, to reach the cradle of Buddhism.⁹ The narrative unfolds as Xuanzang, supported by magical disciples including the iconic Monkey, embarks on a challenging quest, symbolizing broader Silk Road migrations.¹⁰

Xuanzang's encounters exemplify the multifaceted exchange characterizing the Silk Road, introducing readers to a diverse cast of characters, from celestial beings to earthly demons, each contributing to the allegorical richness of the tale.¹¹ This mirrors the complex interplay of cultures, religions, and philosophies along the historical trade routes. Symbols such as Monkey, embodying impulsiveness, and Pa-chieh, representing sensuality, serve as metaphors for the challenges faced by pilgrims striving for enlightenment.¹² These challenges reflect the trials experienced by Silk Road travellers seeking intellectual and spiritual treasures.

In essence, "The Journey to the West" encapsulates the spirit of Silk Road migrations, where the quest for knowledge, religious enlightenment, and cultural exchange transcended geographical boundaries. This historical overview sets the stage for understanding migration as a dynamic force shaping history, a theme that echoes through the corridors of time to find resonance in contemporary initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative.

(B) *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Polo's narrative details his family's initial travels, emphasizing the northern route of the Silk Road, while hinting at the possibility of a southern route.¹³ His encounter with Kublai Khan, the fifth Khagan of the Mongol Empire, is a focal point in the narrative, revealing diverse cultures from vibrant Central Asian cities to the opulence of Kublai Khan's court in China.¹⁴ Goods such as silk, spices, and precious metals traversed the Silk Road, enriching the economies of the regions along its path.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the intellectual and cultural exchange flourished,

⁸ Polo, Marco, 1254-1323, William Marsden and Manuel Komroff, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York, The Modern library, 1953).

⁹ Ibid (n 7).

¹⁰ Ibid (n 7).

¹¹ Ibid (n 7).

¹² Ibid (n 7).

¹³ Ibid (n 8).

¹⁴ Ibid (n 8).

¹⁵ Ibid (n 8).

laying the groundwork for the transmission of knowledge and innovation.

As we travel through these accounts, it becomes evident that migrations were the driving force behind the historical developments that shaped the contours of the medieval world. The Silk Road serves as proof of how civilizations are interconnected and illustrates the transformative influence of cross-cultural interactions.

III. CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

The inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 echoes the essence of the historical Silk Road, breathing new life into ancient trade routes through robust infrastructure investments, including China-funded railway investments in Eastern Europe and East Africa, along with economic corridor development agreements in Pakistan and Myanmar.¹⁶ In their similar mission to bridge East and West, the BRI and the Silk Road both symbolize transformative forces, fostering interconnectedness through trade, cultural exchange, and the enduring spirit of migration. The BRI's goals encompass economic development, connectivity, and cultural exchange, primarily through infrastructure investments, including railways, highways, air routes, ports, and telecommunications.¹⁷ An analysis of both the positive and contentious aspects, where infrastructure development enhances local and regional connectivity but may have severe long-term implications with respect to migrations, is required.

(A) Foreign Talent Attraction vis-a-vis Historical Silk Road Exchanges

Within the BRI framework, the movement of state employees, entrepreneurs, and their families takes centre stage due to the policy changes by the government agencies, showing that the BRI may witness a diverse mix of Chinese migrants. It is anticipated to generate significant migration flows, yet questions persist regarding the scale, demographics, and integration of Chinese migrants in BRI countries.

Despite the BRI being introduced by the Chinese government officially in 2013,¹⁸ historical trends in Africa and Asia provide insights into expectations for future Chinese migration. The initiation of China's 'Going Out' strategy, helped the trade ties between China and Africa exhibit a consistent upward trend.¹⁹ This has afforded African nations the opportunity to broaden their export horizons beyond reliance on advanced economies like the U.S. and the European Union.

¹⁶ Ibid (n 3).

¹⁷ Ibid (n 3).

¹⁸ Ibid (n 3).

¹⁹ Muttarak, Raya. "Potential Implications of China's 'One Belt, One Road' Strategies on Chinese International Migration," *Vienna Institute of Demography Working Papers*, No. 05/2017, *Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) (2017)*, *Vienna Institute of Demography (VID)*, Vienna. <https://doi.org/10.1553/0x003cd00e>.

Concurrently, the 'Open up the West' or 'Going West' strategy, aimed to rectify regional imbalances and uneven development within China, particularly in the Western regions.²⁰ This approach is defined by explicit policies that encourage the movement of Chinese citizens., with a focus on Han Chinese, from other regions to the Western part of the country.²¹

An analysis of patterns of global migrations within the BRI encompasses culture, economy, and the exchange of ideas. The interplay between Chinese migrants and local populations will likely shape public attitudes towards immigrants, posing challenges and opportunities for social integration.

(B) Facilitating International Migration: Recent Reforms in Chinese Migration Policies

The "One Belt, One Road" (B&R) initiative emphasizes cultural exchange and cooperation. The new Exit-Entry Administration Law introduced R-visas for foreign talents, providing a five-year residence permit, and allowing for flexibility and ease of integration.²² Additionally, local initiatives in Shanghai introduced measures encouraging foreign students to work in China post-graduation.²³

The surge in Chinese migration to Southeast Asia over the past two decades has been intricately tied to the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As China rapidly integrated its economy with ASEAN nations, the movement of migrants surged, fueled by increased exports, investments, and infrastructure projects. Chinese migrants, numbering around two and a half million, sought opportunities in various economic sectors across Southeast Asia.²⁴

Chinese migrants, predominantly engaged in trade as hawkers and vendors, have capitalized on the flourishing bilateral trade, reaching \$507.9 billion in 2019 from a mere \$235.5 billion in 2010.²⁵ Simultaneously, Chinese investments and projects in Southeast Asia, have led to an estimated 2.3 to 2.65 million Chinese migrants in the region by 2016.²⁶ As the economic collaboration between China and Southeast Asia continues to deepen, the trend of Chinese migration to the region is poised to persist, contributing to the ongoing dynamics of globalization.

²⁰ Ibid (n 19).

²¹ Ibid (n 19).

²² Czoske, Pilar-Paz and Ahl, Björn, "Migration, the Law and 'One Belt, One Road' Lutz-Christian Wolff, Chao Xi, Legal Dimensions of China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Hong Kong, Wolters Kluwer* (2017), 393-416.

²³ Ibid (n 22).

²⁴ Zhuang G, Wangbo W. "Migration and Trade: The Role of Overseas Chinese in Economic Relations between China and Southeast Asia." *International Journal of China Studies* (2010), 1: 174-193.

²⁵ "Overview", ASEAN-China Economic Relation, accessed on December 24, 2023, <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/>.

²⁶ Ibid (n 22).

IV. AN ENVIRONMENTAL LESSON FROM THE MING DYNASTY

In order to learn the complexities of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its historical echoes, it is imperative to draw lessons from environmental disruptions that once impacted the Silk Road. This section examines the environmental challenges during the Ming dynasty, shedding light on the potentially beneficial adaptations for the sustainability of BRI's global trade routes. The mysterious downturn and cessation of the Ancient Silk Road during the Ming dynasty have long been the subject of various hypotheses, ranging from thriving sea trade routes, frontier wars, and climate change as possible causes, the study presents new evidence from the Dunhuang oasis area.²⁷ The sedimentary records from this region, along with historical archives, indicate that life-threatening droughts and desertification events occurred in the Dunhuang area around 1440-1460 AD. This period coincided with the downturn of the Silk Road, leading to its impassability in the region.²⁸

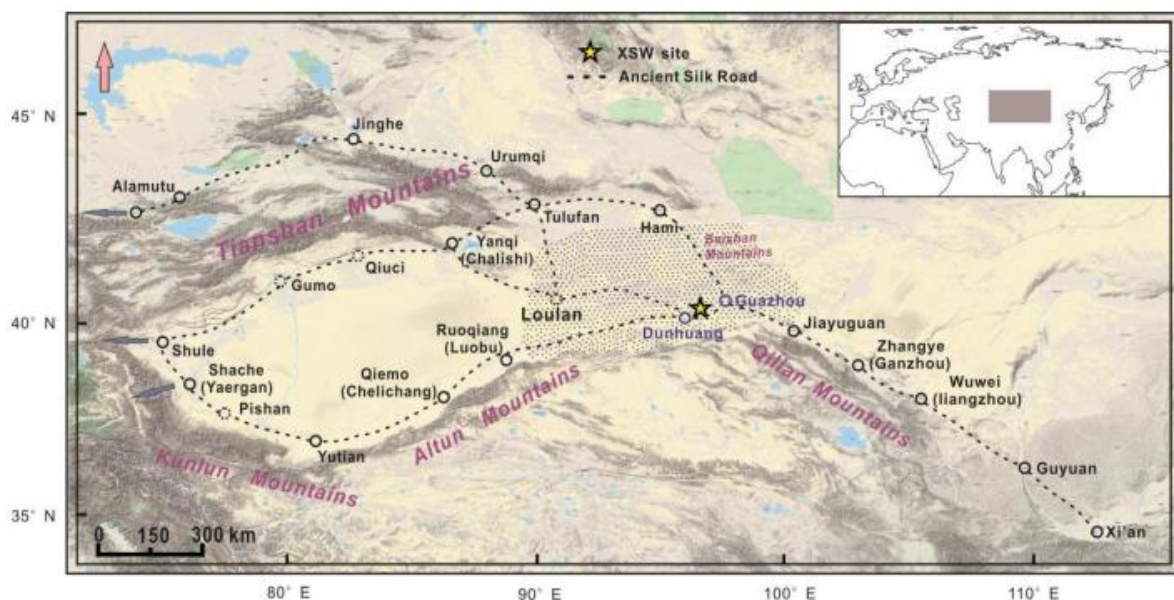


Figure 1.²⁹

The shutdown of the Jiayuguan Pass in 1539 AD and the desertion of Dunhuang City added to the disruption of the Silk Road's operations.³⁰ The intricate interaction of environmental conditions, geopolitical shifts, and societal responses emphasizes the need to anticipate and

²⁷ Ibid (n 5).

²⁸ Ibid (n 5).

²⁹ Figure 1 illustrates the geographical scope and cities situated along the Silk Road. Dotted circles represent oasis cities abandoned before the Ming dynasty, while solid circles denote oasis cities that persisted during the Ming dynasty. Cities in parentheses were under Ming governorship, and the dotted area indicates the Gobi Desert near Dunhuang and Guazhou. (The base map is sourced from ©Google Maps.)

³⁰ Ibid (n 5).

mitigate disruptions to ensure the sustainability of global trade routes.³¹ It offers a valuable lens through which China can inform contemporary approaches within the Belt and Road Initiative.

V. CONCLUSION

The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, seeks to revive historical trade routes, focusing on infrastructure investments that mirror the Silk Road's interconnected spirit. This paper critically analyzes the BRI, exploring both positive aspects and concerns, particularly its long-term impact on migrations. The historical context, exemplified by Silk Road migrations such as those chronicled in "The Journey to the West" and "The Travels of Marco Polo", underscores the dynamic force of migration as the 'motor of history'. These historical narratives set the stage for understanding migration as a driving force that transcends geographical boundaries, a theme echoed in the contemporary initiatives of China's BRI.

As we navigate the complexities of migration within the BRI, it is essential to draw insights from historical disruptions, such as those experienced during the Ming dynasty. The environmental challenges faced during that period, leading to the closure of the Ancient Silk Road, serve as a cautionary tale for anticipating potential disruptions in today's globalized world. The BRI represents a contemporary manifestation of migration shaping history, echoing the dynamics of the ancient Silk Road, through the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. Recognizing the potential challenges posed, the BRI must adapt and implement measures to ensure the sustainability of global trade routes in the 21st century.

³¹ Ibid (n 19).

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