Mapping Chinese Diplomacy: Relational Contradictions and Spatial Tensions

Abstract

This paper maps out contemporary discourses of Chinese diplomacy that have proliferated under the aegis of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. We examine how these narratives are underpinned by webs of relationality that see China promoting equal and win-win partnerships with other state actors, yet are also defined by hierarchical premises for such diplomatic engagements. These relational contradictions are most clearly manifested when we interrogate the spatial dynamics of China's diplomatic endeavours through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By scrutinising the geopolitical imaginations, sites and scales associated with the BRI, we turn attention to three spatial tensions that are closely bounded up with the relational contradictions of Chinese diplomacy: 'win-win' diplomacy promoting a 'harmonious world' versus territorially-based diplomacy; periphery diplomacy versus the global ambitions of BRI; and the centralisation versus decentralisation dimensions of Chinese diplomacy. This allows us to make sense of the multiplicity of descriptors that have been affixed to Chinese diplomacy, in order to underscore the 'work' they perform to bequeath (at times, divergent and contested) meanings to China's new foreign policy approach. Hence, a relational and spatial understanding of Chinese diplomacy, we argue, can reveal a more nuanced picture of the promises, potential and disjunctures of China's rapidly expanding geopolitical and diplomatic actions on the international stage.

Keywords: Diplomacy; China; The Belt and Road Initiative; Chinese Geopolitics; Relational Space

Introduction: China's 'New Diplomacy'?

At the opening ceremony of the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised China's ambition to reshape global governance. Specifically, Xi claimed that the ultimate goal of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to help the world 'mov[e] closer towards a community of shared destiny for mankind' (Xinhuanet 2017). This was not the first time that Xi articulated the 'Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind' (CSDM) concept to foreground the 'inseparable' and 'highly mingled and inter-dependent' relationship between different states and peoples (Xi 2014), but it was at this event that he directly linked CSDM to the discourse of 'Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics' (Zhang 2018). CSDM and BRI have repeatedly been characterised as distinctly *Chinese* innovations in diplomatic theory and practice which can help to usher in 'new' scenarios of 'win-win cooperation', 'mutual respect' and 'inclusive globalization' in international politics (Sidaway and Woon 2017). According to Xi, as China becomes a major actor on the global stage, it cannot solely be fixated on maintaining internal economic progress and stability; it has to simultaneously contribute externally by presenting 'Chinese wisdom, Chinese solutions and Chinese strength to the world' (Xi 2017a). Diplomacy is thus at the core of China's ambition to redefine itself in what Xi has called a 'new era'.[1]

If the BRI Forum was meant to be a positive exercise of status-signalling for China, it was quickly mired by allegations regarding the initiative's contradictions between, on the one hand, discourses of equality, harmony, mutuality and symmetry through the fostering of CSDM and, on the other hand, distinctly hierarchical relationship between China and other states that is implied in the notion of 'major country diplomacy'. Using the discourse of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' as a starting point, we thus turn our attention to the relationality that is implied by and, we argue, underpins, contemporary

discursive and practical articulations of Chinese diplomacy. Drawing on theorisations of relational space, we map out the diverse and interconnected forms, foci and structures of China's changing articulations of diplomacy. In so doing, we focus on how China organises and presents its diplomatic relations in the contemporary era, rather than on the specific ways other states/actors engage with China. It is, however, not our intention to present a reductionist view of China as a singular and homogenous entity. Rather, we contend that an increasing number of Chinese actors (including governmental officials at different levels, scholars and popular media) are complicit in producing often contested and diverse ideas and practices of diplomacy. This, in turn, makes it important to provide clarity and specificity to China's 'new' approach to diplomacy especially given the proliferation of descriptors (including neighbourhood, peripheral, win-win, and infrastructural) that have been affixed to the term 'diplomacy' in the Chinese context.

Insofar as mapping involves establishing the 'relative positions, or the spatial relations or distribution, of (an object or its components)' (Oxford English Dictionary), we illustrate how the relational is intimately intertwined with spatial dynamics of place, scale and topology in our conceptualisation of diplomacy. We also demonstrate how a spatial lens brings to the fore the geopolitical imaginations and discourses underpinning Chinese diplomacy and the ways they impact upon the sites and scales of Beijing's diplomatic endeavours. A critical examination of these spatialities, we contend, enables the mapping out of three spatial tensions that are closely imbricated with the 'doing' of Chinese diplomacy: 'win-win' diplomacy promoting a 'harmonious world' versus territorially-based diplomacy; periphery diplomacy versus the global ambitions of BRI; and the centralisation versus decentralisation dimensions of Chinese diplomacy. Whilst these apparent tensions emerge out of China's positionality as a 'defender of its own territorial sovereignty, while also being engaged in various projects, particularly the BRI….that point in different directions' (Narins

and Agnew 2020, 809), it is only through Beijing's actual negotiations of the broader diplomatic terrain, relationships and processes that we are able to critically interrogate how China's idea(l)s of diplomacy 'play out' in different contexts. As such, we concur with extant literatures on diplomacy that it is important to interrogate different cultures of diplomacy (Dittmer and McConnell 2016), to underscore how diplomatic ideas are circulated and negotiated in an under-researched linguistic and cultural setting like China.

In what follows, we review key debates in diplomacy studies in order to highlight how Chinese diplomacy has thus far been conceptualised. Thereafter, we examine China's discourse of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics', to explicate its role in shaping Chinese external engagements. Specifically, we explicate the discursive and practical links between this 'new diplomacy' and the BRI. The fourth section teases out the three spatial tensions noted above that accompany the operationalisation of the idea of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. Finally, the conclusion section illuminates how a spatial and relational perspective on the study of diplomacy can extend our understandings of Chinese diplomacy and the BRI, especially in light of China's purported geopolitical and geoeconomic 'rise' on the international stage.

Applying Relational and Spatial Lenses to Chinese diplomacy

In essence all diplomacy is relational as it is a practice underpinned by the establishment and maintenance of cross-border and/or cross-community relations. However, specific engagement with relational framings by scholars of diplomacy have been somewhat limited. Direct employment of the notion of 'relational' has primarily been applied to the realm of public diplomacy where Huijgh (2014, 275) notes that it has become an 'en-vogue but vague topic'. Scholars in this field have drawn on relational frameworks developed in normative theories of communications and technology – such as theories of dialogue and symmetrical

theories of public relations (Brown 2013) – to identify and promote a shift in public diplomacy from one-way mass media driven campaigns to more relational strategies which involve a wider range of actors (Zaharna et al. 2013).

Applying a relational approach to diplomacy more generally is the focus of Sending and colleagues' edited volume *Diplomacy and the making of world politics* wherein they argue that, 'diplomacy is not merely a practice that deals in relations between pre-constituted political entities. Rather, these relations are seen as constitutive of, and ontologically prior to, these entities' (Sending et al. 2015, 7). Grounded in the social-constructionist school of thought in IR which has increasingly turned to relational and practice theory approaches developed in sociology, these scholars engage with Nexon's (2009) 'relational analytics', an approach which takes inspiration from social network analysis. However, rather than quantifying connections between actors, Sending and colleagues draw on detailed qualitative data to map relational diplomatic configurations. Whilst taking inspiration from this work, our approach also seeks to push a relational understanding of diplomacy in two novel directions: (1) by bringing relationalism as set out in the diplomacy studies literature into dialogue with geographers' work on relational space in order to develop a spatial understanding of diplomatic relationality, and (2) turning critical attention to how relational diplomacy is *discursively* constructed.

Diplomacy is underpinned by spatial dynamics: diplomatic encounters take place in particular sites, diplomats traditionally represent at a distance, the institution of diplomacy is constituted of networks of bilateral and multilateral relations, and increasingly important digital domains are transforming the speed and nature of diplomatic communications (McConnell 2019). Yet despite these key spatial dynamics of diplomacy, geographical approaches and questions have been largely overlooked both by political geographers and scholars of diplomacy. Existing work has focused primarily on topographical understandings

of diplomacy – including the shifting locations of diplomacy and its physical setting and material infrastructure (Neumann 2013) and tracing the spatial pattern of diplomatic networks (Neumayer 2008) – with theorisations of space, place and scale remaining underdeveloped.

In contrast, we draw on geographical theorisations of relational space to examine how relationships and processes at different scales play out in and through specific places/sites to (re)produce China's diplomatic discourses. The now burgeoning body of scholarship on 'thinking space relationally' (*Geografiska Annaler* 2004) eschews space as an a priori given or as a static container of activity and instead foregrounds dynamic notions of networked sociospatial relations and the role of interactions as driving space as a socially produced category of analysis (Bachmann 2016). Jessop et al's (2008, 396) formulation of a territory-places-scales-networks (TPSN) framework offering a 'polymorphic mode of sociospatial analysis' has gained significant traction in analysis of interconnected spatialities of social, political and economic processes of capitalist development. Indeed, Mayer and Zhang (2020) fruitfully draw on TPSN to understand the sociospatial dynamics of China's integration into the world through the BRI. Building on the TPSN framework, Jones' (2009, 487) notion of 'phase space' incorporates dynamics of mobility and positionality, but remains premised on a 'moderate relationalism', acknowledging relationality but insisting 'on the confined, sometimes inertial, and always context-specific nature of geography'. In this formulation, elements in space are always situated and rooted in particular settings yet are connected to other elements through interactions, thereby materialising the relational nature of space. Both the TPSN framing and the notion of phase space bequeath us with spatial lexicons to understand the condensation of social practices and actors associated with (Chinese) diplomacy—how diplomacy is organised in terms of everyday places, which connects to settings within geographical scales and is in turn joined together by networks of political and economic influence, bounded but decreasingly limited to the territories of

national states (c.f. Jones 2016). However, in seeking to move beyond outlining the spatial manifestations and implications of China's external engagements and offering geoeconomic readings of its 'new era' diplomacy, we find these approaches somewhat restrictive. Instead, we take inspiration from Bachmann's (2016) focus on the interactions through which sociospatial relationality is enacted, and Massey's (1994, 265; 2005) call for space be conceptualised as 'constructed out of inter-relations, as the simultaneous co-existence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales' in order to focus on the spatial contradictions inherent in China's multiple discourses and practices of diplomacy through interrogating scalar tensions, geocultural discourses and topological imaginaries.

The second way in which we seek to enhance relational understandings of diplomacy is to focus on the discourses through which diplomacy is framed rather than diplomatic practices *per se* or the interpersonal relations of diplomats. This is in part a pragmatic decision as the opacity of China's political machinery and the dominance of the state vis-à-vis diplomacy means that accessing individual Chinese diplomats is challenging (Feng and He 2020). More importantly, as we discuss in the following section, the launch and promotion of this 'new era' of Chinese diplomacy has largely played out in the discursive arena. As such, we are interested in the bounding up of relationality with the discursive constructions of diplomacy- how China attaches meaning to particular relations and networks, and the ways this shapes wider encounters and outcomes of diplomacy. To this end, we draw on insights from critical geopolitics to examine the geographical imaginations, assumptions and claims that underpin contemporary Chinese diplomatic strategies, and therefore the geopolitical discourses that are being promoted through particular diplomatic practices. Notably, whilst scholars of critical geopolitics have been pioneering in deconstructing the discourses of foreign policy (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992), and examining the agency of

geopolitical elites (Kuus 2008), they have paid surprisingly scant attention to the subject of diplomacy, and have only recently turned attention to Chinese geopolitics (e.g. Woon 2018).

Before applying this spatially-informed relational approach to 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics', it is important to situate this perspective vis-à-vis existing scholarship on Chinese diplomacy. Extant work has primarily viewed Chinese diplomacy through a temporal lens, charting and analysing a series of shifts in diplomatic practices, mores and relations Many of these writings take the 1949 establishment of the PRC as the starting point to analyse Chinese diplomacy, although there exists a longer history of China's diplomatic engagements dating back to the Zhou Dynasty (1047-256 BCE) (see Jiang and Lang 2006; Chen 2016). Diplomacy during the Cultural Revolution, and more broadly during the Mao era, has been framed as 'revolutionary diplomacy', characterised by China's strategy of 'networking with groups who might either support that revolution or foment revolution in the host country' (Riordan 2003, 29) through what resemble practices of public diplomacy. Succeeding this was a period of 'development diplomacy' during Deng Xiaoping's era in which the focus was guaranteeing domestic reform and economic development so as to set the ground for China to become a major global player in the future. This mode of diplomacy is often referred to through Deng's phrase 'hide our capacities and bide our time' (韬光养晦). This strategy of keeping a low profile was a pragmatic approach to maintain a stable foreign policy environment and in essence led to diplomatic passivity. As we detail in the following section, many commentators perceive Xi Jinping's launch of assertive 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' as replacing the previous lower profile strategy with a commitment towards 'striving for achievement' (奋发有为) (Zhao and Gao 2015, 37). However, the extent to which the former is a break with the past is debated, with some scholars arguing that the general framework of Chinese diplomacy has not changed much (Xiao 2008).

A common point of reference across literature on Chinese diplomacy is a debate around the extent to which there exists Chinese exceptionalism. Literature on the earlier stages of Chinese diplomacy often position it as distinct from the 'West' given the polity's vastly different (geo)political structures, histories and trajectories. There is also a body of scholarship that argues that, over time, distinctive 'Chinese characteristics' of diplomacy are diminishing, with China having to integrate into the global system and abide by international diplomatic norms. Whilst elucidatory in terms of foregrounding diplomatic cultures beyond those with European roots, this rather polarised debate around the exceptionalism (or lack thereof) of Chinese diplomacy often fails to capture the complexities of how these different ways of conceptualising and doing diplomacy come into contact with one another and are negotiated in/through space. Moreover, the state-centric focus of most extant literature on Chinese diplomacy means that non-state Chinese diplomatic actors are often disregarded, and the temporal focus overlooks the spatial dynamics of China's wider engagements with the world that help to (re)produce Chinese diplomacy (a notable exception is Flint and Zhang's (2019) world systems analysis of Chinese diplomatic cycles from 1840 to 2039). It is in this context that our approach of emphasising the spaces of relational diplomacy opens up potentially productive lines of enquiry.

Relational Contradictions of 'Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics'

Although the derivation of the discourse of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' has been widely attributed to the Xi regime, the idea pre-dates his leadership. China's shift towards 'major country' self-perception was a gradual process that can be traced back to the earlier Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations (Ye 2000). Hu, in particular, publicly articulated 'the values needed for China to become a major country' (大国思维) and adopted policies to prepare for China's 'rise as a major country' (大国崛起)

(Chen J. 2012). However, as Wang J.W. (2018) notes, whilst the 'major country' (**大国**) lexicon has frequently been leveraged by the Chinese state to underscore China's important status in international politics, its diplomatic disposition and practices have not always been premised on the assumption that China is a 'major country'. The 'hide our capacities and bide our time' strategy under Deng Xiaoping was not based on China adopting a 'major country' persona. It is under Xi's leadership, however, that the discourse of 'major country' has been given substantial amplification in order to re-orientate China's foreign policy to one that 'takes *more* initiative and is *more* proactive' (更加积极，更加主动) (Xi 2017a; emphasis ours).

Indeed, whilst previous Chinese leaders largely considered China to be at the (semi)periphery of a Western-dominated international system, Xi believes that China is 'closer than ever to the *centre of the global stage*' (cited in Yang 2017; emphasis ours). However, Xi asserts that assuming the role of a leader is not simply what China wants, but also what the international community has come to expect from China. Chinese officials have repeatedly insisted that that China cannot pursue self-interest to the neglect of issues of fairness, equality and justice. President Xi himself has injected moralistic and idealistic elements into his vision for Chinese diplomacy by reintroducing the concept of 'community of shared destiny for mankind' (CSDM) (人类命运共同体). The earlier rendition of this concept was translated as 'Community of Common Destiny' and used by Hu Jintao to denote the shared blood and lineage between peoples of mainland China and Taiwan (see Ruan 2016; Zhang D.H. 2018). However, in his 2012 report to the 18th National Congress, Hu broadened the expression by adding 'for all mankind' to emphasise that 'mankind has only one earth to live on, and that countries have only one world to share' (Hu 2012). Xi's repackaging of the concept as CSDM thus consolidates the premise of building a harmonious world of peace and prosperity through interdependence between states. In seeking to realise and promote a

CSDM, China has repeatedly maintained that a new type of international relations premised on 'win-win cooperation' (双赢合作) needs to be established. This is where the discourse of 'Chinese characteristics' finds its way into China's diplomatic vocabulary as the model of 'win-win cooperation' is typecast as uniquely 'Chinese' because it draws on classical Chinese philosophers like Laozi and Confucius who advocated the idea of Tianxia (天下) (translated as 'All under Heaven' which sees all peoples as equals regardless of their background) and values of non-interference and 'harmony amidst differences' (和而不同) (see Zhang and Zhang 2017).

From the above discussion, it can be seen that China's contemporary expositions on diplomacy are underpinned by different webs of relationality. On the surface, China's postulations of 'win-win cooperation' imply a condition of ethical relationalism (Brown 2013), with China and its diplomatic partners being bound together in a relationship that is defined by mutuality, symmetry, harmony and equality. However, China's self-professed positionality as a 'major country' that forms the 'centre/core' of international politics evokes a fundamentally hierarchical worldview where there exist 'minor' and 'peripheral' states that implicitly hold *less* influence and 'weight' in their diplomatic engagements and responsibilities. Indeed, scholars have articulated that even when China stresses that its 'win-win' paradigm of diplomacy promotes fairness, respect and equal opportunity, these values are refracted through its historical experience of neighbourly engagements via the imperial 'tribute system' (朝贡体系) of concentric circles. This system of interactions privileges the imperial capital (i.e. China) at the centre, flowing out to embrace the periphery (Zhao 2005). Moreover, paternalistic relations arguably underpin China's contemporary discourses of diplomacy: the initiatives that produce 'win-win' development at the international level are still largely Chinese-led. It is this dual, seemingly contradictory

relational meaning of Chinese diplomacy that we argue creates a series of tensions on the ground.

In what follows, we illustrate how these tensions are being played out in and through the scales, sites and spatial imaginations of China's diplomatic endeavours as conducted under the auspices of the BRI. The BRI has been championed by the CCP Government as an ideal platform to realise 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' insofar it has 'has developed into an open and inclusive platform of international cooperation and a widely welcomed public good for the global community' (Xi 2017a). Unsurprisingly, some scholars have touted the BRI to be a model of 'inclusive globalisation' which differs from the US-led realist world order which emphasises a 'zero-sum' game of international politics (e.g. Liu and Dunford 2016). A plethora of voices within China have woven cultural issues into their narratives, claiming that the BRI will not only join economies, but reconfigure 'civilizations' (Zheng Y.N. 2015). In these formulations, the BRI is, in Lin *et al*'s words (2019, 514), an 'emergent geopolitical culture' whereby China repeatedly uses the BRI to rework prior strategies 'to simultaneously develop China and integrate Eurasia into a Sinocentric community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility'. Rather than being solely about infrastructural and economic partnerships, the BRI has been mobilised to encapsulate every aspect of China's diplomacy, including those relating to political, cultural and social fields (Xi 2017b). Our contribution here is to demonstrate how these disparate dimensions of the BRI can be analysed through the lens of diplomacy. To do so, we map out how the idea's lesser-known juxtapositions and synergies work to represent and expand China's diplomatic spaces and pathways.

Spatial Tensions Underpinning China's 'New' Diplomacy

In mapping out China's 'new' diplomacy and its relational premises, we bring geographers' assertions that space gathers together multiple, open-ended and interconnected relations to produce often unexpected trajectories and outcomes (Massey 1994) into dialogue with relationship framings employed by scholars of diplomacy (Sending et al. 2015). As relationships and processes associated with China's contemporary thinking on diplomacy come together and 'play out' in specific sites at different geographical scales, it is our contention that certain spatial tensions can be revealed. We elucidate three such tensions in our analysis of the spatial logic, reasoning and manifestations of China's approach to diplomacy through the BRI: disjunctures between discourses of 'win-win' diplomacy that promote a 'harmonious' world order and practices of coercive territorially-based diplomacy; tensions between regional and global articulations of BRI diplomacy, and; simultaneous centralisation and decentralisation of diplomatic roles and practices involving a multitude of diplomatic actors.

Hierarchies of Diplomacy: 'Win-Win' Diplomacy for a 'Harmonious World' Versus Extractive and Coercive Territorially-Based Diplomacy

Framed by Chinese political elites as constituting a set of infrastructural projects open to any interested party, the BRI's 'contemporary connectivity projects….have generated heated discussion about their potential to transform the global geopolitical landscape' (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 223). The prolific cartographic representations of the BRI attest to this observation. Even though the CCP government has eschewed producing formal maps on the BRI to retain a 'useful fuzziness' with regard to its scope (Mayer and Zhang 2020; Narins and Agnew 2020), the official Xinhua News Agency has nevertheless produced a compelling visualisation of the geographically expansive nature of the programme (see **Figure 1**).

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Using spatial metaphors such as gateways and corridors to characterise the constituents of the BRI, the map conjures up imageries of flows, connectivity, linkages and mobilities, which connote the cooperative spirit that the BRI seeks to engender (Liu W.D. 2014) and this purportedly differ from classical geopolitical theories that emphasise more static notions of pivot areas and territories. However, as Mayer and Zhang (2020) argue, it is perhaps more accurate to see the BRI as a 'corridorization' spatial strategy which promotes interconnectivities at different geographical scales whilst not fundamentally challenging national sovereignty.

China's reliance on roads, railways, ports and pipelines to facilitate economic partnerships with state and non-state actors has led to some scholars to theorise this process as initiating 'infrastructure diplomacy' (Jia and Bennett 2019) or a mode of trade diplomacy (Heath 2016). However, Chinese authorities insist that the BRI should be seen as distinct from existing modes of infrastructure/trade diplomacy as its mechanisms for financing infrastructure investments provides a positive alternative to dominant 'Western'-directed modes of economic globalisation (Callahan 2016). Specifically, a binary is established between the BRI's objective of making 'Third World' countries more self-reliant and the OECD's Development Assistance Committee's tendency to promote strategies that predominantly reflect and enhance donor goals (Dunford 2020). As such, the BRI embodies China's effort to change the rules of the diplomatic game, by promoting the cultivation of relationships amongst states that are mutually beneficial and do not infringe on national sovereignty (Zhou and Esteban 2018). In turn, the initiative's emphasis on forging 'flat', non-hierarchical networked connections with equal and consensual partners produces topological conceptions of space and relations.

The BRI's principles and objectives are perhaps most clearly realised in China's diplomatic engagements in Africa. Over the past few years, China has ramped up its credit lines for infrastructure in resource-rich African countries. These loans have been portrayed by Beijing as a win-win economic statecraft instrument, through which China offers much-needed infrastructure in exchange for access to natural resources that it lacks domestically (Alves 2013). In seeking to legitimise its presence in Africa (and elsewhere), China has developed a range of rhetorical devices, including the idea of South-South cooperation (Flint and Waddoups 2021). Embedded within these discourses is a critique of Western development practices that have often been associated with predatory, neo-colonial actions with the primary concern of extracting maximum resource value. Whilst earlier renditions of China's engagement in Africa saw China being criticised for precisely neglecting the undesirable impacts that its actions have on the ground, South-South cooperation 3.0, as Mawdsley (2019) calls it, has instead witnessed China's attempts to perform 'people-centred development' and encourage 'joint thinking' of sectors for intervention. This landscape of Chinese diplomacy, then, reveals the slant towards ethical relationalism whereby Chinese and African elites adopt the role of equal and committed stakeholders in operationalising the 'win-win' ethos of the BRI.

However, interpretations of the BRI should not be reduced solely to geoeconomic/geopolitical domains. As Winter (2020, 2) notes, the project has enabled China to accumulate 'geocultural power' with the revival of the 'ancient Silk Road spirit' into the present providing a 'unique platform for China to exercise its geocultural advantage as a civilisational state as it seeks to accumulate power and influence by building connectivities and entanglements across multiple sectors'. Winter (2020) turns attention to issues of religion, language, diaspora, as well as landscapes of antiquity that have been mobilised or even contrived into particular forms by China to exert territorial influence. Selective histories and

geographies of the Silk Road are thus being shored up by various Chinese actors to advance their respective diplomatic interests and agendas via the BRI. Indeed, as Sidaway and Woon (2017) have shown, the colonial and imperialist origins of the term 'Silk Road' have frequently been downplayed in Chinese narratives about the BRI in order to facilitate the construction of the BRI as a seamless, networked space of international cooperation (see also Chin 2013).

Understanding the BRI as a form of geocultural power is useful in explaining the CCP government's resolve to expand its repertories of diplomacy by focusing on people-to-people connections. To encourage acceptance of the BRI and its 'major country' status, the government has engaged in public diplomacy by devolving some diplomatic efforts to the everyday realm and instructing agencies and elites to forge networks in order to present a 'true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view [of the BRI]' (Chen 2020). Heritage diplomacy is one of the most high-profile variants of people-to-people diplomacy that the Chinese state has pursued and it has been taken in a number of different directions. Uniting these efforts is emphasis on international partnerships formed under the BRI to preserve historical narratives of the 'ancient Silk Road'. For instance, in Southeast Asia, the Maritime Silk Road has become a recurring theme for public and private museums, art shows, travelling exhibitions, heritage cities, and cruise-ship companies to depict histories of trade and exchange between cultures. Diaspora diplomacy is intertwined and implicated in these accounts given the frequent inclusion of stories that connect the migratory routes of overseas Chinese with the Maritime Silk Road voyages of the Chinese general, Zheng He (Bernards 2016). In sum, whilst the strategy of people-to-people diplomacy has early precursors (i.e. the so-called 'ping-pong diplomacy' in the 1970s), the BRI does not simply leverage this diplomatic approach to nourish everyday spaces of convivial encounters. Rather, it valorises (Chinese-

directed) culture as the foundation to diplomatic interactions and relations such that peoples (and states) can find common ground to work towards purportedly shared futures.

The discussion thus far has contextualised Chinese discourses and policy initiatives of BRI diplomacy at different scalar geographies. However, a closer scrutiny of the grounded spatial dynamics of the BRI illuminates tensions around the purported ethical relations and outcomes that undergird China's 'win-win' diplomacy. One major criticism of the BRI pertains to its close associations with debt-trap diplomacy. Critics argue that China seeks to deliberately entrap African countries in webs of debt in order to secure strategic and/or material advantages (Gopaldas 2018). This, in turn, raises the question of whether Chinese diplomacy is merely reproducing (as opposed to unmaking) hierarchical and unequal relations in international politics. Whilst some voices contest this negative view of Chinese diplomacy in Africa, highlighting instead the contingencies and variability in the geographical impacts of the BRI (see Brautigam 2020), there are reservations towards the excessive borrowing of Chinese funds by some African states, especially when crony capitalism and corruption complicate the possibility of timely debt repayments (Carmody 2020).

Additionally, China's emphasis on constructing a worldview based on Chinese visions and ideas can create suspicions about its true intent, thereby overshadowing the supposed benefits of its 'major power' diplomatic endeavours. The promulgation of this Chinese world vision falls into the trap of what Callahan (2012) terms as 'Sino-speak', an emerging dialect for articulating the interface between a new Orientalism and Chinese exceptionalism, whereby the uniqueness of Chinese values is celebrated as the moral panacea to a purportedly decadent and chaotic U.S.-centred geopolitical world. Consequently, in a bid to foreground Chinese exceptionalism for the ushering in of a distinct, non-hierarchical model of international relations, China has manufactured its own discursive legitimacy for

Sinocentric hegemony in the twenty-first century. This has the possible dire effect of (re)producing antagonistic geopolitical relations whereby hard-core activists in Beijing and Washington are mobilised to lead a 'tug of war' between two fundamentally different diplomatic outlooks (Deng and Shang 2018).

Finally, it has been argued that although China's policy directives pertaining to 'win-win cooperation' may be feasible on the economic front, it is much more difficult to realise them in security domains given that issues such as territorial/maritime disputes tend to be zero-sum in nature (e.g. Zhao S.S. 2016). Indeed, Xi has turned out to be more assertive in defending perceived core national interests due to his understanding of China's significantly enhanced geopolitical power. This has been referred to as the 'principle bottom line' of Xi's new diplomatic approach where China is purported to never relinquish its legitimate security and developmental rights (Mazarr et al. 2018). More often than not, China's aggressive military actions to defend what it sees as its sovereign rights in the South China Sea are cast as contradictory to its projected goal of harnessing a harmonious world through its 'major country diplomacy' campaigns (Li Y.K. 2017). This induces tensions given that China is constantly trying to negotiate between 'a bordered notion of state that stresses national territorial integrity' and a civilizational state that accentuates cultural and infrastructural connections (Grant 2018, 378). These tensions raise the broader question about whether the notion of the civilizational state is merely a rhetorical tool promulgated by the CCP government and whether contemporary Chinese diplomacy is driven primarily by maintaining territorial integrity and consolidating state power. Indeed, if China as a 'major country' gets to set rules of the diplomatic game and engage in (realist) calculations to convey the hierarchical aspects of its global leadership, this would once again cast doubts on the distinctiveness of Chinese diplomatic visions and culture.

Multi-Scalar Diplomacies: Periphery Diplomacy Versus Global Ambitions of the BRI

As we alluded to above, the geographical imaginaries of the BRI are both omnipresent and elusive (Mayer and Zhang 2020). This is evidenced not only by the numerous variations of maps to represent the BRI and the different geographical metaphors used to describe it – a road, belt, corridors, silk road, 'march West' etc. – but also the conflicting number of states that are now 'part of' the BRI (Summers 2016). Understanding the BRI as a discursive strategy of engagement that changes depending on the international environment helps explain how the Beijing-led reinvention of a classic Silk Road today encapsulates more than 110 states, most of which have never had any connection to the ancient trade route. Put simply, the BRI is no longer tied to a particular topography or geographical imagination. Indeed, with promotion of Polar, Pacific, digital and health 'Silk Roads', Chinese rhetoric around BRI has increasingly been about the global reach and vision of Chinese diplomacy. The ambition underpinning the BRI is not to be underestimated, and it is one that is powerfully articulated through this series of geographical monikers whereby all roads lead back to Beijing. There is now a growing body of scholarship interrogating how the BRI produces, reimagines and reconfigures space at a range of scales. For example, Lin et al (2019, 508) describe it as China's determination to 'respace' the world, while Wang (2019, 28) posits BRI as 'an unlimited and boundless global campaign' through which China seeks to position itself as actively shaping international affairs from a position at the centre of the world stage.

However, this *global* framing of both BRI and 'new era' Chinese diplomacy is a relatively recent development. What is often lost in the geographical obfuscation of the BRI is the role of China's neighbours in how the initiative was initially framed and conceived: it was formulated as a regional integration project with very particular geographies. Sharing land borders with fourteen states and maritime borders with an additional eight means that

China has long had complex regional relations.[2] Zhang (2016, 835) goes as far as to argue that there is 'no escape from the tyranny of geography for China in conducting its diplomacy towards its neighbours'. In adjusting its diplomatic relations with neighbouring powers in line with its domestic and foreign policy objectives China has shifted from robustly defending its interests against ostensibly hostile neighbours in the run up to the reform-era, to more conciliatory and constructive relations since the early 1990s.

A transition to a more proactive approach to regional relations was formally prioritised with a high-level Party-state work forum dedicated to 'periphery diplomacy' (周边外交) chaired by Xi Jinping in 2013. Periphery diplomacy was explicitly framed as facilitating the establishment of the then named 'Silk Road economic belt and a maritime silk road' (Summers 2016) and enhancing 'public diplomacy, people-to people exchange, and cultural diplomacy' (Zhao and Gao 2015, 50). Underpinning this diplomatic focus on neighbouring states, and particularly those to China's west through reviving classic Silk Road trade routes, has been the promotion of discourses not only of proximity but also of familiality. For example, at the unveiling of the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013, Xi Jinping cited the Chinese proverb 'A near neighbour is better than a distant cousin' and emphasised more than two millennia of exchanges between China and the Central Asian states (Wu and Zhang 2013). Meanwhile at the opening ceremony of a BRI forum in 2017, Xi reiterated China's intentions to create 'a big family of harmonious co-existence' (Xinhua 2017). These familial ties are depicted as having age-old historic roots and are framed in ways that map historic diplomatic connections onto contemporary relations. In speeches delivered in Central Asia and to ASEAN, China's leaders have invoked the legacy of imperial era ambassadors – the Han dynasty envoy Zhang Qian (d. 113 BCE) and the Ming Dynasty navigator Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) respectively – in discursively framing China's long-standing intertwined histories with its neighbours (Karrar 2019). As Karrar (2019, 80) notes, 'this is a

projection of connected history that is predicated on fraternity and mutual benefit' with a central – though purportedly non-hegemonic – role for China. The guiding principles set out for periphery diplomacy – 'amity, security, mutual benefit and inclusiveness' – are 'informed by traditional Chinese philosophy and are a thoroughly Chinese formulation, difficult to translate or interpret in other linguistic and cultural contexts' (Zhao H.S. 2016, 895).

Two relational tensions underlying this discursive framing of periphery diplomacy are worth exploring in more depth. The first is the contradiction between the notion of a community of common destiny which implies equality of status across all entities deemed to be community members, and the tendency of Chinese policy-makers 'to categorise their engagement with external powers according to the relative importance of foreign governments' (Pieper 2018, 222). The relational ranking of states vis-à-vis diplomatic relations was summarised by Xi Jinping (2016) as: 'Great power relations are crucial, the relationship with neighbouring countries is primary, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateralism is the main stage', albeit with the promotion of periphery diplomacy great power relations and neighbourhood relations have arguably 'swapped places in terms of their priority and importance in Chinese foreign policy considerations' (Zhao H.S. 2016, 893). This prioritisation of periphery diplomacy is hardly surprising given that it builds on and extends a longer diplomatic tradition within China (especially under the Hu Jintao regime) that seeks to cultivate 'friendly, peaceful and wealthy neighbours' (睦邻，安邻，富邻) (Zhong 2019).

The second perceived tension is that between a community of common destiny and China's pursuit of its own great power status. From the Chinese perspective, there simply is no contradiction. Rather, the discursive framing of a community of common destiny is presented as a mechanism whereby great power status can be achieved and maintained and, relatedly, periphery diplomacy is perceived as a core element of how China is positioning

itself internationally. As Zhang (2016, 839) puts it, the neighbourhood region is 'indispensable in supporting China's rise to Great Power status'. Again, there are deliberate resonances with China's historic geopolitical interactions as premised on the classical 'tribute system' of hierarchical but interdependent relations between a dominant China at the centre and its peripheral neighbours. The discursive framing of this regional order as a 'community of common destiny' and a 'new Asian security concept' (MoFA, 21 May 2014) is one that is both a source of rather than threat to China's security, and is a key component of a shift to a multipolar world order where China spearheads the Asian pole (MoFA, 22 October 2019). The former is an attempt to 'forestall the creation of a regional coalition of states working together to balance Chinese power' and instead encourage neighbouring states to support Beijing's enhanced role within and beyond the region (Stokes 2020, 7). The latter was initially a reaction to the US's then 'rebalance' to Asia through its promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and more generally is key to China's positioning of itself as a major player in international diplomacy.

However, from the perspective of many of China's neighbours the notion of a community of common destiny sits uncomfortably alongside China's projection of itself as a major power, and the implication that peripheral diplomacy has a centre – Beijing – from which neighbouring states are on the margins. As Wenwen Shen (2012, n.p.) notes, 'Whether China can regain the respect of its neighbours that it had during the era of the "Middle Kingdom" remains to be seen. It will be a difficult balancing act for China – on the one hand demonstrating that it is back as a major power after the century of humiliation; and on the other wishing to be regarded as an important but peaceful neighbour'. With China deploying tools of economic integration and, at times, coercion in its periphery diplomacy strategy, this approach has been read as serving 'classic geopolitical goals such as countering major power competitors, preventing the emergence of balancing coalitions, and cowing smaller states into

submission' (Stokes 2020, 17). Indeed, senior Chinese government officials have openly articulated their hierarchical relations with neighbouring states with, for example, then Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi telling Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo at the ASEAN Ministers Conference in 2010 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact' (Lowsen 2018).

Not unsurprisingly, China's contemporary relations with its neighbours are far from uniform**.** In general terms, its diplomatic ties with Asia-Pacific states have, in recent years, been strained, with China stressing the need to safeguard its national interests and defend its rights, especially with regard to territorial sovereignty and maritime resources in the South China Sea. In contrast China has forged more amicable and stable relations with states along the overland Silk Road. A careful balancing act has been struck in Central Asia in particular, with China both fostering diplomatic ties since the emergence of the independent republics in 1991, and promoting multilateral diplomacy through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Yet even here the road has not been smooth, with resurgence in Sinophobia in the region, facilitated in part by increasing Chinese presence on the ground and a more general concern about China's hegemonic ambitions (Peyrouse 2016).

Just as China's new diplomacy is shaped by tensions with its neighbouring states, so it is also shaped by domestic frictions. Similarly, just as there is slippage between regional and global scales of diplomatic rhetoric and practice, the national scale is intertwined with the international when it comes to forging and framing China's foreign policy. The BRI has its roots in maintaining the 'internal stability' of China through tightening state control in the western peripheries of Xinjiang and Tibet (Yeh and Wharton 2016). Indeed, Summers (2016, 1628) argues that the BRI reflects the elevation of sub-national ideas and practices to the national level, 'more than the creation of substantially new policy content'. With regard to diplomacy, whilst the interconnections between the domestic and the foreign is well

established within diplomatic studies, the articulation of this connection by Chinese elites has been framed as dual 'grave issues' for China's diplomacy. As Xi asserts, 'our nation faces double pressure. Internationally, there are sovereignty issues, security issues and development interests to protect. Domestically, there is political security and social stability to preserve' (cited in Zhao and Gao 2015, 52), and diplomacy is emphasised as serving the long-term stability of the nation. It is to the nature of domestic relations informing diplomacy and the diplomatic role of actors beyond the CCP that we now turn.

Fragmented Landscapes of Diplomacy: Centralisation Versus Decentralisation of Diplomatic Roles

Descriptions of the BRI, from both Chinese and foreign policy-makers and commentators, herald both its global reach and its geopolitical ambition and potential. Depending on the authors' perspective, these 'grand strategy' discourses include claims that the BRI aims at nothing less than rewriting the current geopolitical landscape (Arase 2015), that it will result in either Chinese neo-imperialism, or the restoration of China's 'rightful' great power status. However, Jones and Zeng (2019, 1415) make the convincing case that these framings 'overestimate Chinese leaders' capacity to create the BRI as a coherent geopolitical initiative'. Instead they argue that Chinese foreign policy is shaped by fragmented and decentralised relations between domestic actors. However, before examining these relations and multiple actors, it is important to contextualise why there is such a strong assumption that Chinese diplomacy is highly centralised.

In many ways, China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries conducts diplomacy according to now established international norms with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), embassies, delegations to international organisations and consular services. However, since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, a distinctive feature of Chinese

diplomacy has been the central role that the CCP apparatus plays in shaping how the Chinese diplomatic system functions (Zhao and Gao 2015). In essence, the CCP Central Committee, and specifically the General Secretary of the Party, has ultimate authority over the MFA and thus the diplomatic system. Not only are the structures and practices of contemporary Chinese diplomacy dictated by the CCP but, as Chen (2016, 353) notes, 'reflecting a long Chinese tradition and stipulated by the socialist political system, contemporary Chinese diplomacy is highly centralised in the hands of the party leadership'. With a focus almost exclusively on the orchestration of diplomacy by the Chinese state, scholarship on contemporary Chinese diplomacy has reinforced this image of a highly centralised and top-down diplomatic milieu (Wang Y.W. 2008). This is both out of kilter with broader trends in diplomacy studies towards highlighting the diversity of actors in practising and 'doing' of diplomacy and, as Jones and Zeng (2019) contest, ignores trends towards fragmentation, decentralisation and internationalisation within Chinese foreign policy. There are two principal ways in which Chinese diplomacy is being fragmented and decentralised in the contemporary period: (i) functional decentralisation within the CCP system with a decline in the power held by the MFA (Chen 2016) a trend towards 'corporate pluralisation' (Lampton 2001, 12) with sectoral areas of expertise being utilised in the fields of economic cultural and military diplomacy, and (ii) geographical decentralisation in terms of the delegation of diplomatic roles to actors beyond the CCP. Diversification of foreign policy roles and responsibilities beyond the MFA is, on the one hand, directly attributable to the promotion of 'comprehensive diplomacy' at the 18th National Congress whereby economic, cultural, social and military endeavours were brought under a unified framework of foreign affairs (Zhao and Gao 2015). This aligns with the wider international context of multi-dimensional diplomacy (Constantinou et al. 2016). On the other hand, it is part of a fragmentation of state governance, with the dispersal of authority to 'overlapping, agencies, ministries and quasi-independent

regulators… whereby apparently subordinate actors may influence, interpret or even ignore central policy' (Jones and Zeng 2019, 1415).

This fragmentation of diplomatic roles also extends beyond agencies of the CCP. As Flint and Zhang (2019, 296) note, 'all of China's foreign policy decisions are the product of the behaviour of many actors; state ministries, state-owned enterprises, provincial governors, and the AIIB and other multilateral organisations'. In the context of the BRI there has been both notable decentralisation of diplomatic roles to provinces, cities and commercial actors, and an uptick in initiatives from these actors seeking to 'shape the directions, coherence and success of China's foreign policy' (Wong 2018, 753). Perhaps most striking is the growing role of China's provinces in the formulation and implementation of its diplomatic strategies (Liu and Song 2020). What started out as provincial governors managing provinces' external *economic* relations in the context of promoting economic liberalisation (Chen 2005) has since widened to provinces themselves concluding international agreements and managing transboundary security issues (Su 2015). In the context of the BRI, Wong (2018) notes the role of Yunnan in generating new foreign policy strategies with regards to a cross-border pipeline policy that shaped China's bi-lateral relations with Myanmar, and the role of Hainan in 'trailblazing' aspects of the China's South China Sea policy through its assertion of sovereignty claims in the Paracels. Like paradiplomacy in other contexts (see Jackson 2018), this enhanced diplomatic role of China's provinces has been promoted by the CCP as a mechanism through which to solve 'non-sovereign foreign-related issues' (Zhao and Gao 2015), but can also create tensions when the actions of provinces diverge from or are perceived to undermine central foreign policy (Wong 2018).

This internationalisation of the role of sub-national actors can is also evident in the case of Chinese cities. Like provinces, cities have been promoted as diplomatic actors by the CCP for both their role in fostering public and cultural diplomacy – for example through city-

twinning initiatives (Leffel and Amiri 2018) – and as a key element of China's economic diplomacy.[3] The latter can be seen as an extension and internationalisation of the CCP's prioritising of urban clusters within regional political economy plans since the 2010s (Summers 2016). Yet, there are arguably more profound spatial implications for the enrolment of cities as diplomatic and economic bridgeheads for the BRI. As Williams et al (2020, 132) note, scholarship on the spatial conceptualisations of BRI has, to date, primarily focused on national territories and relations between states, but Chinese geographical imaginations have been dominated by 'a global geography of nodal points hyperconnected to one another by corridors of transport, trade, and communication infrastructures': a geography that is inherently urban. Indeed, the authors go as far as to argue that the spatial reconfigures imagined under the BRI are emblematic of 'planetary urbanisation' (Brenner 2014).

Shifting attention away from territorial actors, commercial companies– dominated by but not limited to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) – have also been fragmenting and reconfiguring the BRI diplomatic landscape. Again, with antecedents in earlier initiatives – specifically Jiang Zemin's 'Going Out' Strategy of the late 1990s – these actors have been promoted by the Chinese Government not only in terms of opening up new markets but also in developing 'global brand recognition through a range of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic and economic platforms' (Yeh and Wharton 2016, 286). Indeed, SOEs in particular are key agents of Chinese soft power and public diplomacy, undertaking a balancing act of ensuring profit maximisation while also being the bearers of 'national pride'. However, the response of host states and communities to the diplomatic role of SOEs is not always favourable, particularly when companies overestimate 'cultural proximity' (e.g. Jackson and Dear 2016).

This diversity of Chinese diplomatic actors and spaces operating at a range of scales and sites again highlights the importance of giving due credence to relationality. These non-

CCP diplomatic actors are inherently relational. They are granted diplomatic agency from the centre, as well as articulating it themselves, and they forge a range of new diplomatic connections with other provinces/cities/companies, and with political actors that the central state might struggle to sit down at a negotiating table with. As a result, these dynamic diplomatic relations are 'constitutive of, and ontologically prior to, these entities' (Sending et al. 2015, 7). They also illustrate the extent to which the BRI is a 'multi-scalar and relational geopolitical project' (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 232). The reach of the Chinese state has been externalised, and yet is also underpinned by the tension between centralised state-led diplomacy and the ability of particular non-CCP actors to 'bypass' the state and engage in their own diplomatic agency. Here, the importance played by distinctly 'Chinese characteristics' of this tension are again debated. Is it simply another case of the pluralisation and 'transprofessonalisation' of diplomacy (Constatinou et al. 2016), or is this a Chinese-style regulatory geography that is still ultimately controlled by the CCP (Jones and Zeng 2019)? Likewise, with scepticism about the roles of non-state diplomatic actors vis-à-vis the ambitions of the Beijing government potentially undermining the flattening of diplomatic relations across a wider range of scales, there is also ambivalence regarding the extent to which non-CCP diplomatic actors enhance either China's ethical or hierarchical relationalism that is embedded within the notion of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'.

Conclusion

In a recent book, Jinghan Zeng (2020) contends that Chinese foreign policy concepts should be understood as political slogans rather than coherent strategic plans. In this formulation, foreign policy ideas advanced by the CCP government are often declarations of intent, and they remain vague and subject to change. It is in this context that we have sought to map out contemporary evocations of the discourse of 'major country diplomacy with Chinese

characteristics' as they evolve and acquire different meanings. Specifically, we argue that the ways in which China's new slogan of diplomacy is being mobilised and propagated are underpinned by webs of relationality. On the one hand, China's insistence that the ethos of 'win-win cooperation' is embedded within its diplomatic mantra imply a condition of ethical relationalism. On the other hand, China's self-assessment of its 'major country' status connotes that the international system remains resolutely hierarchical, with 'minor'/'peripheral' states implicitly having less influence and power. By scrutinising how spatial imaginations, sites and scales associated with the BRI are produced by diplomatic engagements, we have mapped out how these relational contradictions are closely bound up with three spatial tensions. In doing so, we have sought to forge a dialogue between geographical theorisations of relational space and existing work in diplomacy studies that draws on relational thinking from sociology and communications theory.

What emerges is, we believe, an approach that productively foregrounds the spatial underpinnings and dynamics of diplomacy. Alongside applying relational and spatial lenses to contemporary Chinese diplomacy, we have also given analytical prominence to the role of discourse, and in particular how geocultural projections and topological imaginaries are crucial to how 'new era' Chinese diplomacy is articulated and perceived. We have thus tried to make sense of the multiplicity of descriptors that have been affixed to Chinese diplomacy (e.g. neighbourhood, peripheral, infrastructure etc.) in order to underscore the 'work' they perform to bequeath (at times, divergent and contested) meanings to China's new foreign policy approach. However, this is by no means an exhaustive characterisation and delineation of China's contemporary diplomacy. Rather, the relational and spatial lenses employed here provide a starting point to reflect on and ground other (Chinese) diplomatic interventions, from China's increasingly prominent role at the UN (Huang et al. 2021) to its articulation of health diplomacy. These lenses also respond to growing calls for the study of Chinese

geopolitics to be more aware of the conceptual utility of critical ('Western') theories (An et al. 2017). This approach is particularly significant, given that extant investigations of China's international manoeuvres through the BRI have thus far been skewed towards trade, infrastructural and geopolitical perspectives. This research inquiry has allowed further insights into how China has framed its diplomatic initiatives and to what spatial (and relational) manifestations and consequences. This academic task has never been more urgent if we are to have a fuller picture of the promises, potential and disjunctures of China's rapidly expanding geopolitical and diplomatic actions on the international stage.

Notes

1. According to Xi, the 'new era' signifies a significant milestone in China's 'rise' in which the country is projected to achieve the status of a 'moderately advanced' country by 2030 and an 'advanced country by 2049' (Xinhuanet, 2017).
2. The classification of maritime neighbours is disputed. China claims it has eight: South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, Thailand and East Timor (http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/)
3. Many urban centres enact both roles. For example. the Chinese city of Khorgos on the Sino-Kazakh border is both an expanding regional economic hub and promoted as a site of inter-cultural exchange.

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