Relational Heritage Sovereignty: Authorisation, Territorialisation and the Making of the Silk Road

Introduction

In 2005, a new category of heritage called cultural route was formally introduced by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (UNESCO-WHC) to recognise clusters of otherwise disparate sites that are linked by the mobility of people, things and ideas across multiple dimensions (ICOMOS-CIIC 2005, Timothy and Boyd 2015). Since then, continuous efforts have been exerted to develop a multi-scalar system of rules to identify, map, manage and monitor such sites (UNESCO 2008a, c, 2012a, 2010b). As Laurajane Smith (2006, 3) notes, ‘Heritage is heritage because it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply is’. The physicality of the Western idea of heritage is to convert the ‘heritage’ to a field in need of intervention, so that international agreements, conventions and charters and the corresponding national, regional and local legislations are required. The trans-locale cultural route thus emerges as a new type of territory that requires rules transcending jurisdictional boundaries, which renders it almost inevitable that a new transnational expert regime is called for: one that can intervene with an associated set of management rules. With UNESCO’s grand Silk Roads project, transnational heritage has led to intensive experimentation in rulemaking that transcends national territories.

Although scholars (Harrison 2009b, a, Smith 2006, Lowenthal 1985, Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2015) have commonly recognised the rulemaking power play of experts in the construction of authorized heritage discourse, the territorial understanding of heritage has been limited by national boundaries (Winter 2016b). Developed during the politically turbulent period of post-Napoleonic Europe, the effort
to consciously identify and conserve heritage was nurtured to serve the purpose of state making (Smith 2006, Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, Ashworth 1997, Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2015, Willems 2014). Thus, it is no coincidence that there exists a noticeable connection between the conception of heritage and the Westphalian reading of sovereignty delimited by territorial boundaries. Heritage properties, as they are called in the charters of the UNESCO-WHC, are very much oriented towards the right to possess and mobilise resources within national territories (Rakic and Chambers 2008).

In this light, the idea of trans-boundary cultural routes requires a post-Westphalian approach that is flexible enough to address a porous territory and disaggregated (Slaughter 2004), variegated or graduated sovereignty (Ong 1999), which have been discussed in recent scholarship in political geography and international relations (Agnew 2005, Cox 2013, Painter 2010, Gill and Cutler 2014, Kuus and Agnew 2008). Specifically, I am inspired by recent studies that bring expertise, technical knowledge and rules into this debate on territoriality, such as eco-certified aquaculture farms that have been made subject to the rules of international organisations (Foley and Havice 2016, Vandergeest and Unno 2012, Mitchell 2002). Behind the rules of international experts is the global market of goods that is shaped by the transnational capital, which is usually envisaged as external to the internal resource management of a nation state (Vandergeest and Unno 2012). The issue of sovereignty in the interplay among nation states, international knowledge bodies and human and non-human subjects, among others, is contested (Kuus 2002, Foley and Havice 2016). Nevertheless, the government–expert distinction and the internal–external demarcation may still bear the legacy of the Westphalian political reasoning (Barkan 2015). Instead, I follow Agnew’s (Kuus and Agnew 2008, 2005) call to understand sovereignty as constructed
through the flow of things and as a form of governance dispersed to various actors. Drawing insights from the process of authorising heritage discourse in heritage studies and relational sovereignty in political geography, my study proposes the concept of ‘relational heritage sovereignty’. Through this study, I analyse the politics of assemblage, knowledge and territory. In particular, I explore how a cultural route offers space for international and local experts as well as political and economic organisations to collect, compare, categorise and reassemble sites/places, historical episodes and technical knowledge to legitimise a new territory where new power relations can be imagined (Cresswell 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. After reviewing the power issue in critical heritage studies and effective sovereignty in political geography, the study explores the heritage nomination of Silk Roads: Chang’ an–Tianshan Section through two dimensions: authorisation and territorialisation of relational heritage sovereignty. To chart the structural relations of domestic and international knowledge bodies, intellectual statecraft and other political and economic organisations and their networked coalitions, I break down the highly technical framed narratives in official reports, meeting minutes, memos, notices, newsletters, TV documentaries and radio programs by UNESCO-WHS, International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and their regional branches, institutions in China’s cultural sector and central and provincial governments; I also analyse interview transcripts and continuous chats on Weibo and Wechat (Chinese social media sites) with my interlocutors working in the abovementioned organisations in the past two years. Given the complexity of the Silk Roads, my study focuses only on the interplay between China and the international knowledge bodies and other state parties.
Heritage sovereignty: Authorisation and territorialisation

Authorising Heritage Discourse

Studies on the conception of heritage have a long history of exploring the power of knowledge. Through experts, the ‘European heritage regime…consists of two main elements: sovereignty and expertise (Willems 2014, 109)’. Smith (2006) rejects the reading of heritage as something that exists naturally or as material remains with inherent historical value. Instead, she interprets heritage as a ‘cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present’ (p.11). The values, which are claimed to be embedded in the authorised past, regulate social relations in the present. Therefore, heritage is driven by a desire to promote or consolidate a particular order in our present lives that—according to cultural institutions and elites—constitutes heritage itself. Heritage and the rules of governing heritage always go hand in hand, such that particular knowledge-based intervention is justified to advance enlightened governance (Mitchell 2002). The World Heritage Convention, with its charters and principles written in highly technical language, Authorised Heritage Discourse, which justifies and masks the process by which the Authorised Heritage Regime creates heritage, thereby converting it into a process of imposing dominant elite norms and values on others. The constructed concept of heritage, the World Heritage list and the World Heritage Convention, in that sequence, comprise a series of deliberate actions to ‘put the power to establish the canon into the hands of experts’ (Harrison 2009b, 9).

Heritagisation in globalisation

Since the introduction in 1972 of ‘World Heritage Sites (WHS)’ as sites with universal outstanding values, the uncritical export of European norms of heritage to other parts of
the world has added a geographic dimension to the tension between expert and subject, thus creating a power relation between the so-called civilised north and the less civilised south (Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2007). In the increasing recognition of cultural diversity, some view UNESCO’s constant alterations to the definition of WHS as a welcome gesture that promotes world culture and multiculturalism. However, Wallerstein (1991, 194) adheres to the political authority of rulemaking and cautions that this concept of world culture is a double-edge sword, as ‘the planners of cultural resistance are, in effect, legitimating the concept of universal values’ because they are then ‘pressed to prove the validity of their asserted value in terms of criteria proclaimed by the powerful’. The increasingly comprehensive definitions of WHS serve to establish a consensus among all component bodies. Harrison argues that they are, in fact, a hegemonic action of UNESCO through the expansion of its ‘territory’ to ‘countries that have not yet ratified its convention (Harrison 2012, 31)’. Introducing the concept of heritage diplomacy, Winter (2016b) cautions against the assumed passiveness of state parties in the global south. On one hand, booming international preservation aids exist and are frequently conducted by western allies or UNESCO (1982) to claim a ‘triumph of international solidarity’ in post-crisis countries. On the other hand, many Asian countries are not subjects simply awaiting the governance of European norms but have also proactively appropriated the process of heritagisation for political gains on the world stage. These networked collaborations between transnational bodies of experts and individual states foreground the issue of national borders. Whereas some projects have resulted in the re-demarcation of borders and fuelled campaigns of domestic nationalism, others have led to the proliferation of new regions with a shared past; the Silk Roads is a typical example of this case (Winter 2016a).
**Relational heritage sovereignty**

Political geographers have delved deeply into the question of sovereignty and territory in our increasingly mobile world. On one hand, scholars such as Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) argue for a highly flattened world, where cities are heavily affected by horizontal networks that transcend the boundaries of national and sub-national territories. On the other hand, the significance of territory and scale cannot simply be wished away. Forces that try to hold down the fluid elements of global life and generate fixity are usually territorially anchored. Conceptual efforts that challenge the binary scenario of ‘networks versus territories’ (Allen and Cochrane 2007, 494, Jones 2009) have emerged. Acknowledging power in both networked and territorial forms leads us to a processual reading of territory in the ongoing process of (re)production, that is, as both input and output and therefore as inevitably porous and erratic (Cox 2013).

Agnew introduces the concept of ‘effective sovereignty’ to construct a relational interpretation of sovereignty. Refuting the ‘territorial trap’ that assumes a static, bounded territory, Agnew (1994, 2005, 441, Agnew and Corbridge 1995) notes that it is not the existence of sovereignty that has changed but rather its nature. In the post-Westphalian era, sovereignty ‘can be practiced in networks across space with distributed nodes in places that are either hierarchically arranged or reticular (without a central or directing node)’. Similarly, the assumed boundedness between sovereignty and central state authority is also questioned, as the ‘state is not ontological prior to a set of interstate relations’ (440). Instead of fixing actors with a particular territory or scale, the power struggle may be better explained as one that occurs ‘among elites and interest groups in one state in relation to elites and interest groups elsewhere and between elites and the civil society’ (2005, p. 443). The gap in the detailed analysis of agency calls for ‘a “peopled” account’ of political authority, which emphasises the agency of
intellectuals, think tanks and policy practitioners in their construction of a (geo)political space (Kuus 2011).

If political authority dwells in the practices of acquiring and consolidating the apparatus of rulemaking, determining how to mobilise territory, population and others to serve political, social and economic ends is one crucial means of establishing effective sovereignty. Whilst Foucault (1991, 93) examines government as ‘the right disposition of things’, he reveals two interwoven but sometimes contradictory rationales of governing: the power of discipline that seeks to regulate everything, thus becoming centripetal, and the power of security that operates for circulation, thus becoming centrifugal (Foucault 2007). Under these two intertwined forces, human and non-human things are always in a process of coming together whilst also pulling apart. Indeed, a state is produced through mobilising and immobilising human and non-human things, participating in the transnational system of rulemaking and extracting power from the transnational circulation of things (Emel, Huber, and Makene 2011, Painter 2010, Cochrane 2012).

Drawing insights from the authorising heritage discourse in heritage studies and relational sovereignty in political geography, this study proposes relational heritage sovereignty measured by two axes: the political authority of rulemaking and enforcement as one axis and territorialisation as the other axis. By situating the power struggle in heritage authorisation with expert–subject interplays and relational territorialisation, the constitution of the Silk Roads as cultural routes enables a dynamic and interactive process of engagement for all actors—albeit with different powers—to collect, select and reassemble intangible pieces of the past and tangible territorial sites, thereby allowing them to take both ‘an active and informed role in the production of [an imagined] future’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, 229, Harrison 2012). In the
following two sections, I will address the temporal and spatial strategies accordingly, bearing in mind the same concern about accentuating the correspondence between rulemaking in the heritage value construction and rule enforcement in the present time.

**The Silk Roads as a Cultural Route**

The collection of land routes that have served the utilitarian purpose of communication between Europe and China had no name. It was later given the name ‘Silk Roads’ by German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 whilst working in Turkestan (UNESCO 2008a). Given that the Silk Roads is a general designation of the collection of roads and has no clear territorial boundary or temporal scope, it has always been subjected to alterations with the accumulation of archaeological findings. These alterations are evident in UNESCO’s official documents, which extend the project from the initial section demarcated as ‘stretching from China to the Mediterranean and down into the Indian subcontinent’ to one that covers East, Central, South, Central and Western Asia, encompassing both land routes and short sea crossings (UNESCO 2008a, 6, Williams 2014). The Silk Roads, in its plural sense, offer the opportunity for UNESCO to advance its experimentation with the emerging idea of cultural routes (Timothy and Boyd 2015). The official definition of cultural route is premised upon intangible elements, which, similar to a religious pilgrimage, are free from temporal or geographic constraints. In other words, the idea of a cultural route promotes and legitimises a new category of territory without boundary and calls for transnational actions to move towards a borderless understanding of the heritage world. It is no wonder then that the 10-year project earned the name ‘Roads of Dialogue’ in 1988 (UNESCO 2008b) because of two advantages: the geographic location that bridges the west and the east and the opportunity of ‘filling the gaps’ in the existing World Heritage Sites list (ICOMOS 2004).
Figure 1: Map Showing the Geographical Distribution of the Silk Roads: Chang’an-Tianshan Section (courtesy: UNESCO) (about here)

Expert–Subject Interplays: Sovereignty through Networking

*Muddling through the three versions of the past: ‘communication, be it conflict or integration’*

The dialogue project inaugurated a series of regional meetings and scientific expeditions, followed by the creation of an action plan for the preparation of serial nominations of the Silk Roads in Central Asia and China in 2003 (Jing and van Oers 2003). Since then, it has taken 11 years for the first section of this serial nomination to be registered. This process suffered from contestations and endless negotiations among state parties as well as between state parties and the international organisation UNESCO-ICOMOS. A series of sub-regional workshops was conducted in Almaty (2005), Turfan (2006), Samarkand (2006), Dushanbe (2007), Xi’an (2008), and Almaty (2009), but these workshops failed to reach an agreed-upon framework. What has been contested is the overall framework, which situates various state parties in the structural relationship, to articulate the universal outstanding value: roads of dialogue. Two discourses emerged from the process: the monumental approach with the imperial power of ancient China and the assemblage approach with a collection of various civilisations. Throughout the turbulent process of preparing the nominations, the two ideological discourses were woven into the three major documents developed by experts: the concept plan in 2008, the thematic study put into discussion since 2010 (Williams 2014), and the final nomination dossier submitted in 2013 (People's Republic of China, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic2014).
The concept plan (UNESCO 2008a), although it only offers preliminary instructions on delimiting the temporal and geographic scope of the Silk Roads, bases its narrative on a monumental understanding of heritage. Emphasising the scale of trade and the formality of a transnational trading path, the plan requests a threshold-oriented system to define what can be considered the Silk Roads as well as the forces that have converted the scattered sites of spontaneous exchange into a path that has ‘a degree of control or safety to allow sustainable, structured trade…worthwhile to carry high value goods over long distances’ (p. 9). According to this plan, the Silk Roads began with a diplomatic visit by Zhang Qian, who was dispatched by Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty, and ended with the death of Ulugh Beg, grandson of Timur the Great, in 1449. His death indicated the end of the Chinese-imposed control and ‘insecurity on the overland routes’ (p. 9). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the concept plan designated China as the principal initiator and coordinator of the joint work, as the concept plan states that ‘the first nominations will be submitted jointly by China and one or more of the Central Asian States Parties’ (p. 16).

Following the logic of property ownership assumed in the monumental approach of heritage construction, this decision legitimises the right of China to inherit a leading position practiced by its ancestors. Consequently, the six countries (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) became divided on a wide range of issues, such as outstanding universal value, narratives of integrity, authenticity and site selection. For one, the term ‘Ancient China’ was questioned because of its vague definition that ignores many rounds of political changes to the terrain of China itself, which was also porous (interviews, 2016). In the words of Chen Tongbing, chief architect of the Chinese team, ‘They (Central Asian countries) were not happy because they were part of China in the historical periods like the Tang dynasty’°. The major
issue is the establishment of a single dimensional integration of sites required by UNESCO’s early version of operational guidelines. Representatives of the six countries questioned the feasibility of finding an overall framework to encapsulate the otherwise widely scattered, largely varied sites, historical moments and cultures of all types for the transnational nomination (UNESCO 2009). As a result, a Coordinating Committee for the Silk Road’s Serial Nomination was established, and it sorted various requests such as technical support and more detailed instructions (UNESCO 2009). International experts from University College London were commissioned to develop a thematic study. One year later, the meeting of the international expert committee for UNESCO-WHC, held in its European headquarter in Ittingen, responded promptly and considerately by allowing multiple dimensions to articulate the framework of cultural routes, ‘with different aspects developing and adding to its prime purpose that may be religious, commercial, administrative or otherwise’ (UNESCO 2012b, 91). In May 2011, The Coordinating Committee organised its second meeting (UNESCO 2012b), through which the thematic study draft was presented along with a new corridor approach that broke down the entire cultural route of the Silk Roads into different sections, thus enabling nomination in phases. Since then, the tasks of all sub-regional meetings and workshops have been explicitly stated as follows:

• ‘To accept, in principle, the heritage corridor approach proposed by the ICOMOS Thematic Study…

• To agree, between the Central Asian countries and China, on the priority of the transnational heritage corridors for the first phase of the Silk Roads nomination process.’

The thematic study (Williams 2014) changes the tone almost completely by shifting the lens to assemblage. Ontologically, the thematic study takes nodal points, such as cities, post houses, civilisations in all forms and so on, as the output of the flow
of exchanges. The Silk Roads resembles a network of nodes and corridors through which various objects and entities, including silk, copper, salt, tea, people and ideas, travelled and reshaped civilisation in the places they passed through and/or settled. This account defines the chronological scope of the Silk Roads by the quantity of its activities, including both socially embedded exchange and trade. Over thousands of years, exchange activities peaked and declined in different historical moments in accordance with the fluctuating relations among different civilisations. The flaw of previous studies, as argued here, is the overemphasis on the two ends, that is, China and Europe, and the frequently under-recognised section between the two, which is the route itself. However, the study then shifts to an apolitical framework that fetishes the pure scientific-techno lens of man–nature interaction, but rejects political factors because they are dynamic and always in the process of shaping and reshaping. The study then develops a set of criteria that aims to identify regimes of civilisation based on their geographic and geological characteristics.

Due to the protracted negotiations, the ‘China impact’ discourse was considerably softer in the final nomination dossier. Framed in the scientific man–nature interplay, the initial Tianshan section of the Silk Roads is depicted through the testimony of encounters in four locations: Central China, the Hosi Corridor, the North and South Tianshan Mountains and the Zhetysu Region. Each involves the rise and fall of various regimes. Evidently, China has compromised in multiple ways—including its statements on the overall framework—its claims of integrity and authenticity as well as its terminology. However, a study published in an in-house journal indicates that China’s impact is nevertheless illustrated at the scale of the sites. According to Guo Zhan (2014, 94), who is the vice president of ICOMOS, vice chairman and secretary general of ICOMOS China, former director of the ICOMOS International Conservation
Center-Xi’an (IICC-X), director of the World Heritage Expert Committee of China and consultant professor at the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, ‘The sections of the Silk Roads initially nominated…focus on the impact of ancient China’. As an inside man, Guo did not hide China’s political standing, which was a persistent item of emphasis throughout the lengthy period of preparing the nominations. He further developed his point and stated that, ‘of the 33 heritage sites…, numerous towns, palaces and citadels of the same style bear witness to the willingness, management skills and determination of the ancient Chinese Empire to protect the roads…’ (p. 95). Then, Guo lamented how shameful it was that the ‘originally purely academic description of the values of the Silk Roads’ could be so ‘sensitive and difficult to discuss at an international level’ because of ‘some historic sentiments and political relations’ (p. 98).

In 2014, the nomination at the Congress of UNESCO-WHC went smoothly with successful assessments by both the expert panel and the committee. In this peopled account, the laborious process of negotiations was consequential (Kuus 2011). The flexibility of this process was evident. In the process, both state parties and UNESCO made compromises, and their interests were also codified in the dossier to different extents. As stated in the nomination dossier, the historical encounters among different power regimes along the Silk Roads went through a series of ‘communication, be it collision or integration’ (People’s Republic of China, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic 2014). Perhaps, this series of communication illustrates the laborious process devised phrase by phrase by international and domestic experts. Depoliticising the assemblage approach by fetishising the scientific lens does not stop the power play in the current interpretation of the past. Rather, it gives space for various actors to manoeuvre the past for political emergence in the articulated value of heritage and further towards effective sovereignty through a path-oriented understanding of a region.
(Agnew 2005). The corridor approach and its anti-meritocratic standing limit the influence of China to a certain extent and gather all the involved state parties and international knowledge bodies into a myriad of particles, the assembling process of which is the political game of power play. As it takes two to tango, both Harrison’s (2012) thesis of hegemonic action and Winter’s (2016b) thesis of heritage diplomacy are demonstrated in this laborious process of negotiations.

Moreover, collision and integration are two intertwined threads, and they both support and limit each other. Whereas integrations are always conditional, compromises are made for reasons. One must note that intervention is the purpose of nomination (Smith 2006). The rulemaking process that is filled with compromises establishes the foundation for a networked coalition for rule enforcement. This rule enforcement, which materialises the political authority of a compromised norm and a networked coalition, relies on territorial institutions and the corresponding (re)formed structure of the state apparatus.

*Forming the apparatus of intervention: the networked coalition*

As reiterated in the Ittingen International Expert Meeting in 2010, ‘The concept of transnational serial nominations [is] (as) a tool for international cooperation [and] shared approaches…’ (UNESCO 2010a). This conflictual process of framing the value of the Silk Roads made it even more imperative for UNESCO and state parties to push for a coordinating system that can enforce rules at the lower levels. This process is further stressed by a crisis talk on its management that the ‘inappropriate management of a single place would affect the whole site and put it at risk’, given that the official definition of cultural route places its overall value as ‘a worth over and above the sum of the elements making it up’ (Torres Martinez 2015, 75). A transnational coordinating
system is requested from the beginning. Hosting the annual conference of UNESCO-WHC in 2005, the Municipal Government of Xi’an invited ICOMOS to co-set up the IICC-X, which has since functioned to ‘support international and regional cooperation for the conservation of monuments, sites and their settings in Asia and the Pacific’.

Afterwards, UNESCO highly recommended China to explore the effective administrative structure for such a project, and it referred to the country’s own fragmented authoritarian administrative structure, which features inter-entangled sectors but is flexible enough to accommodate modifications (Lieberthal 1992) subsequent to the ratification of the UNESCO heritage convention (Coombe 2012).

In 2009, the first meeting of the Coordinating Committee requested that all state parties should set up a steering committee for the corridor, which consists of ‘vice ministers with sufficient and effective coordination power and decision-making authority in respective state parties (UNESCO, 2009)’, aside from a working group, which consists of experts and government officials from each state party. As result of years of experimentation, the formal administrative system of the Silk Roads has two transnational organisations at the top: the Coordinating Committee and the Steering Committee of the Serial World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads, with IICC-X serving as the secretary for both.

Through the Silk Roads nomination project, UNESCO-WHC has been exploring the means for transnational coordination and management with more in-depth interventions in the nomination preparation stage. In the same way that nowhere else is the global hegemonic strategy evident as in the case of a cultural route, so is the new strategy of China’s sovereignty construction. UNESCO’s authority shaping in, and jurisdictional extension to, the imagined region of the Silk Roads is not exclusive to China’s sovereignty construction as the regional leading power, a role that is assumed to
be inherited from imperial China in the logic of property-defined heritage. Rather, a reciprocal relationship is established because UNESCO’s authority in rulemaking is manifested through territorial institutionalisation by domestic elites and intellectual statecraft. The imagined region of the Silk Roads is made possible by arrangements that stretch across existing national boundaries and link together various state parties, international bodies of knowledge, sponsored agencies and new partner institutions (Allen and Cochrane 2007).

**Territorialising the Silk Roads: Shared Past and Shared Future**

The second axis of territorialisation explores the dynamic relations between state sovereignty and territorial (re-)configurations through a processual reading of state-making in the global setting. Situating relational sovereignty within the heritage nomination process raises two concerns. First, how is the spatial reconfiguration of a cultural route deployed by different actors as a strategy to reshape power relations between the state parties and the networked expert regime of UNESCO? Second, following Smith’s point on heritage construction as a means of converting sites to fields of intervention, how does the discourse on a shared past legitimise and impose rules on the present?

*Re-territorialising the past*

**The corridor approach.** Three spatial forms are introduced in the thematic study, namely, routes, corridors and nodes, with the first being a collection of the latter two. A list of 54 ‘corridors with priorities’ is developed according to scientific considerations of ‘cultural responses to topographic, climatic and ecological variations of the Silk Roads’ (p. 60). State parties have the option to either nominate one single corridor, part
of one corridor, or joint corridors.

However, upon a close examination of the geographical distribution of these corridors, the new approach may be a strategy to force transnational collaboration (see Table 1). First, most corridors transcend the territorial boundaries of nations and therefore belong to no single state party. Second, these so-called ‘corridors with priorities’ do not form geographically continuous pathways. In other words, they are fragmented segments isolated by gaps on the web-like Silk Roads. Chen Tongbing, the chief architect of the Chinese team, complained that

‘Out of the eight corridors that involve the state party of China, six are located within the territory of China, but almost all of them are isolated from each other…how can we convey the message of China’s impact on Central Asia [With these broken segments located within our own territory]? … we must join corridors located in other countries’.

Table 1: Corridors with priority (about here)
Figure 2: Corridors with priority (courtesy of UNESCO) (about here)

Moreover, the corridor approach allowed the initial nominating alliance described in the concept plan (i.e., ‘China and one or more of the central Asian state parties’) to break up into two pre-fixed separate sections. Out of the seven corridors that transcend the boundaries of China and other nations, corridors 8 and 9 (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, respectively) are the only two linking China to countries in Central Asia. In other words, China had no option to directly collaborate with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, or Turkmenistan. In 2012, the first meeting of the Steering Committee released a list of recommendations for two priority transnational sections: the China–Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan transnational Tianshan heritage corridor and the Tajikistan–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan Amu Darya transnational heritage corridor. For China, these subdivisions
transformed former potential allies into rivals. The corridor approach, with its advocacy of anti-meritocracy logic, ran against China’s plan, and thus China had a difficult time accepting it. Furthermore, China’s anxiety deepened as the team of Tajikistan–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan announced that its anticipated date of submission would be in 2012. In this situation, China compromised and agreed to the concept of natural-geographic zones. Indeed, the corridor approach became a significant territorial strategy that was used to overcome the stigmatised transnational communication between China and other state parties.

**Collection and categorisation of sites.** In a similar vein, a list of 46 nodes with priorities was recommended to China for nomination. A total of 22 sites were chosen and classified into five categories: central towns (CT, 7 sites), transportation and defence facilities (TDF, 6 sites), religious sites (RS, 8 sites) and associated sites (AS, 1 site). Putting China’s portion of the entire Chang’an-Tianshan section, which transcends three countries, into perspective is helpful in depicting the overall image shaped by the sites. Along the entire Chang’an-Tianshan section, 63% of the CTs, 85% of the TDFs and 100% of both the RSs and ASs were located in China. In comparison, 27% of the CTs were in Kyrgyzstan, and 10% of the CTs, 15% of the TDFs and 100% of the trading settlements (TS) were in Kazakhstan (see Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of sites in the nomination dossier (about here)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Kyrgyzstan</th>
<th>Kazakhstan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDF</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>1</td>
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The historical functions of the different categories, as addressed in the nomination dossier (pp. 62–69), proved helpful in understanding the power structure embedded in the collection and categorisation of sites. The first category of CT identifies various civilisation centres and sub-centres as well as ethnic power centres that ‘unveil unremitting efforts by the Han and Tang Empires…to develop and grow the
Silk Roads’ (p. 61). The TDF category is a collection of material evidence that is intended to demonstrate the integrated ‘transportation support system…and border management system…developed by the Chinese Han Empire’ (p. 485) and subsequently attests to how ‘continuous, long distance trade [has been] guaranteed and safeguarded’ (p. 485). The dominant share of Chinese sites in these two categories reflects the influence of the imperial power of the Han and Tang Dynasties on trade along the route and on the correspondence between the two (p. 485):

‘When the empire-scale civilization centers rose and grew…it was also the time of smooth and prosperous commerce, transportation and cultural exchange along the Silk Roads. When the civilization centers fell apart…long-distance transportation and commerce along the routes were also controlled by separate powers, obstructed and fractured’.

The four sites in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, in the CT and TS categories, only ‘exhibit the characteristics of convergence and inclusiveness of multi-cultures existing in the historic Zhetysu Region (p. 485) …with various human activities along the route’ (p. 486). In other words, most sites in the two countries are outputs, thereby exemplifying how the trade that had been initiated and sustained by Ancient China led former nomads to settle on terrains along the path, which eventually led to residential settlements.

Masked by the overall anti-meritocracy and man–nature scientific framework, the collection of heritage sites created an ordered vision. In the domain of heritage conservation, the new form of the cultural route offered an opportunity for international and local experts to work like museum curators who collect, compare, categorise and reassemble relics, through which a certain degree of impact can be made from a distance (Bennett 2013, Harrison 2012).
Re-territorialising the present

As Smith (2006) argues, heritage is produced through a process in which particular values, norms and rules can be imposed to regulate our present lives. The value of the Silk Roads, framed as an ‘communication leading to common prosperity’, was employed to revive the historical communication function of the Silk Roads. In particular, the constructed past of the Silk Roads was translated into a new agenda of joining corridors through countries with a shared past and that are destined to have a shared future. In addition to geo-strategies, interventions entail investing deep meaning into the ancient roads, thus creating a brand new historical process and providing relevant countries with transportation, communication and financing.

In 2013, the ‘Silk Roads Heritage Corridors’ Tourism Strategy Project was eventually announced after continuous actions made by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) since the 1990s⁴. Situating the project in the context of the UN Millennium Development Goal of poverty alleviation, the alliance of UNESCO, UNWTO, ICOMOS and UCL calls for the promotion of tourism development to achieve economic benefits for local communities. Through its Development Report 2009, the World Bank proposed a new future for these Eurasian cities along the Silk Road. By offering new funding mechanisms to boost subnational finance, the World Bank (2013) suggested that its involvement would reconnect these cities to Western Europe in the post-Soviet era. Riding the power of culture is also a priority in China’s political and economic agenda (Callahan 2015). The spatial order embedded in the heritage route of the Silk Roads (i.e., the determinant role played by ancient China) justifies contemporary China’s action as a regional leader following the logic of inheritance defined by the Westphalian interpretation of heritage. Many cultural communication plans were woven into Xi’s official visit to Kazakhstan immediately
after the submission of the Silk Roads nomination in 2013. Deploying the discourse of ‘Silk Roads spirits’, Xi introduced the concept of the ‘Silk Roads Economic Belt’ for the first time (Summers 2016). The new regional concept resonated to a handful of countries, such as China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Turkey, and other international organisations, thus resulting in the international symposium entitled ‘Common Development and Prosperity of Silk Roads Countries’ in Kyrgyzstan in 2014.

Aside from the reported progress on physical infrastructure (Diener 2015), what have stunned many are the proposals at the institutional or regulatory level. The ‘Silk Roads Heritage Corridors’ Tourism Strategy Project inaugurated a series of international and regional conferences in Kazakhstan (2013) and Xi’an (2015), and it focused on developing a more effective visa system to support tourism development in the region. In 2013, five countries, namely, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, agreed that ‘countries must work towards a single Silk Roads visa if the potential tourism growth along the Silk Roads Heritage Corridors is to be fully realized’. The idea of a Silk Roads visa, perhaps resembling the European idea of the Schengen visa, calls for an opening of borders among all members for an imagined Central Eurasian ‘Schengen regime’ (Diener 2015). Given that the European idea of the Schengen regime took centuries to establish, witnessing resistance from the central Asian states is not surprising (Diener 2015). Moreover, these states are also evidently ‘riddled with power networks’ that have extended into their national territories in particular issues such as trade and currency (Kuus and Agnew 2008, 101). In Xi’s speech delivered at Nazarbayev University, he encouraged communication and networking in five fields: policy making, road and transportation systems, trade, currency and friendship among the people. The bilateral currency swap deal between the Central Banks of China and Russia was highly praised as an effective backstop.
liquidity facility that boosted the Russia–China trade in yuan and ruble, whilst cutting both countries’ dependence on the US dollar in bilateral payments. Afterwards, Xi urged for similar practices between countries along the Silk Roads economic belt. ‘If every country adopts the currency swap between our own domestic currencies, we will largely reduce distribution costs, enhance our ability to resist external financial risk, and improve international competitiveness of the region's economy’ (State Council March 28, 2015).

In fact, various new Silk Roads strategies have been enacted and planned by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2011, prior to the planned withdrawal of military troops from Afghanistan (Diener 2015, Peyrouse and Raballand 2015). To some scholars, these strategies ensure sustainable development in Afghanistan (Peyrouse and Raballand 2015); to others, they are driven by the much broader geopolitical interests of the United States and NATO in containing the two influential countries, Russia and China (Kim and Indeo 2013). Less surprising is China’s vigorous efforts to push for the regional integration of countries with a shared past through intra-regional bilateral or multi-lateral deals. The new imagined boundary is drawn between the region of the Silk Roads and others, although what is considered internal is elusive, much like the Silk Roads itself.

The concept of nodes linked by corridors finds its present version in China, which has exercised strict border control in its western part since 1949. To facilitate the development of the Silk Roads belt economy, China decentralised its power to major nodes along the road. Xi’an, then a central town of the Han and Tang Dynasties, was approved as the only Chinese city along the Silk Roads to be an ‘international land-port’ in March 2015. Since June 2014, free transit visas for 72-hour stays have been offered to selected foreigners. In March 2015, the Xi’an Comprehensive Tax-free zone was
demarcated to facilitate the direct bilateral agreements between cities or ports to ease the trade of goods. For example, an agreement on the ‘declaration at host cities, port clearance only’ was established between the Xi’an International Trade and Logistics Park and the Alashankou and Khorgos ports. The Chang’an cargo train made its first journey to Almaty, and more than two years later, it was approved to proceed along the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan–Turkmenistan route, which had stops in nine cities. Therefore, the corridor concept is employed as a new form of regional territory, with nodes opening to each other through infrastructure, which allows the flow of goods and tourists, whilst the other areas remain closed. The territorial re-configuration of heritage production in the form of nodes connected by corridors offers and legitimises the insights of re-territorialisation in the various proposals of reviving the past.

Both China and the networked authorities of UNESCO–ICOMOS–UNWTO are attempting to open borders. As Chen Tongbin commented, China has implemented the strategy of opening borders to ‘convey the message of China’s impact (through) joining with other corridors’. However, border opening, in this case, does not refer to the opening of the linear national boundaries between China and its neighbours but rather to the construction of hard and soft infrastructure that operates as ‘space-spanning networks’ to link selected nodes (Agnew 2005, 441). Such an infrastructure power de-territorialises memberships bounded by national states and re-territorialises them according to whatever needs that arise for the infrastructure to actualise an imagined path of communication for trading goods, currencies and so on (Kuus and Agnew 2008). Territory itself becomes vulnerable and volatile ‘matters of concerns’ (Latour 2005), subject to demarcation, division, merging and re-imagination. Implemented through this spatial form of power exercises, the political authority of China is ‘the willingness, management skills and determination to’ initiate and protect the roads
(China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic2014, 95); this is what Foucault (2007) refers to as centrifugal power. Indeed, the existence of the Silk Roads as a communication path that has cut through the borders of various regimes over the past thousands of years offers historical evidence to counter the assumed boundedness of territory and sovereignty.

In his comments on the changing geopolitical position of the Silk Roads, Laruelle (2015, 358) suggests that ‘in both Europe and North America, cultural rediscovery of the Silk Roads predates the political use of the concept’. In the case of the heritage dedication of the Silk Roads, the construction of its heritage paved the way for the addition of political and economic uses of the concepts, or else they would have always remained entangled. As insightfully stated by Smith, it has the purpose of regulating the present life that we construct the discourse of heritage. Construed as ‘communication leading to common prosperity’, the universal outstanding value of the Silk Roads legitimises actions for its revival in our present lives. Therefore, witnessing an increasing number of transnational organisations joining the heritage regime and adding dimensions—political or economic—to the elastic concept of the Silk Roads is not surprising (Meskell et al. 2015, Willems 2014). The nomination, registration, monitoring and conservation of World Heritage sites further leverage international relationships and strategic partnerships (Meskell 2016).

Conclusion

Through relational heritage sovereignty, we explore a process through which heritage sites have been de-assembled and re-assembled in accordance with particular rules formed and exercised by the network of actors who would like to reach a desired disposition of goods. In doing so, we establish new territorial power relations. Indeed,
heritage is not the end but rather a means of imposing new rules.

First, we observe a temporal alliance assembled by a variety of actors, historical episodes and sites instead of a dominating role played by either side. International and Chinese elites collaborated, though frictionally, in the attempt to form a new strategic partnership of rulemaking over the imagined new territory of the Silk Roads. Nevertheless, the relationality of heritage sovereignty pushed for more serious attention to the politics of assemblage and to the ongoing process of power-territorial reconfiguration, which does not suggest mutual exclusivity between the interest of a sovereign state and that of networked authorities. In this process, historic episodes and heritage sites have been mobilised as transactional devices that enable, mask and sometimes dismantle a multifarious network of political and economic values. By framing the Silk Roads as the value of ‘communication leading to common prosperity’ premised upon imperial power and military forces, the Silk Roads regime imagined new political, economic and cultural territories with shared fates.

Second, in relational heritage sovereignty, we argue that the expert–expert relation is not simply a one-directional influence imposed by an expert upon a subject but rather an interactive one that involves both ‘collision and integration’. Territorialisation may well serve both China’s agenda of emergence and transnational authorities’ agenda of rulemaking, although the new power relations are always contingent.

Third, the study can help shed light on the reflexive thinking of the assemblage approach, which has been deployed in the heritage construction of the Silk Roads. Note that the logic of assemblage is helpful in breaking the formal alliance dominated by China, leading to two networked sub-groups. Thus, neglected forces emerged and rose
to a certain level of power, as in the cases of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and the other team of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. However, deploying an assemblage to justify a brutal dismissal of political factors involves risk. By assessing, categorising, ordering and re-assembling heritage sites, China managed to visualise and materialise particular images of the past. Indeed, as Graham (2002) cautions, the nature of assemblage is politicised. In the field of heritage conservation, the geographical scales of nodes, corridors and sections are newly invented technical terms. Although they are deployed as a methodology of categorising and reassembling, they are not immune to power plays by different social forces wanting to imagine the past that they desire. As such, the assemblage approach is sensitive to various logics, actors and powers, caution must be made against the ‘overlooked political and politicized nature of [an] assemblage’ (Farías 2009, 218).
Endnotes

1. Following Kuus (2013), the identities of my interlocutors must remain anonymous.
2. CCTV, Dec 30 2015. “Chen Tongbin: Looking for spiritual home”.

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