

CHINA EXPANDS TIANXIAISM ALONG THE MODERN SILK ROAD

1. INTRODUCTION

The OBOR is an outcome of a complex shift in China's strategy. The vision of the Modern Silk Road was first announced by Chinese premier Xi Jinping at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in 2013. The speech entitled "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" outlined China's foreign policy (chiefly) towards its immediate neighbors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). In September, Xi revealed a new foreign-policy initiative involving five general issues: policy communication, improving road connectivity, trade facilitation, facilitating currency conversion, and strengthening people-to-people exchanges. In the months following the One Belt announcement, Xi called for the re-establishment of ancient sea networks in the form of One (Maritime Silk) Road.

Since it was first mentioned, numerous papers and studies were written on the OBOR's different aspects. However, the situation is still uncertain for the international commercial and construction partners since there are only a few contracts signed. The plan initially aimed to promote the bilateral relationships of China and its neighbours; however, the initiative has since crossed the region's borders and become a global project.

The global financial crisis was a wake-up call which showed that China could not put its economic development in risk by relying on Western markets. The realization was expressed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he "said that 'economic imbalances' are the root causes of conflict and that China should provide more 'public goods' to mitigate them" (Godement, 2015, 7). China's economic independence and stable growth necessitated increasing the role of the Chinese market on the demand side. This entailed reducing saving rates, expanding consumer freedom, and possibly transforming economic power into political power able to handle competently the ever-louder questions about the legitimacy of the current leadership. At the same time, the rhythm of the Chinese economy means a continuously increasing need for resources and markets, and, consequently, for a progressive policy that could ensure the broadly conceived national security, which as such includes maintaining the infrastructure and the institutions vital to China's sustainable development (Geeraerts, 2011, 58).

Disillusioned with the effectiveness of the Western institutions, China has realized it must take responsibility for the balance of the global economy. The OBOR may be one tool among

Chinese instruments to rebalance international trade where needed. If China uses this opportunity, it may be able to adapt to changes in global governance, turning the OBOR concept into a contribution to the stability of the new world order.

The OBOR network may be fully constructed in about 35 years, which means that it may be completed on the centenary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (2049) (Li, 2014). The historical timing carries a message, as the project can be understood as a first step in China's high-profile diplomacy (Huang, 2015).

To set the stage, we will begin with a political-economic outline of the New Silk Road. By highlighting the OBOR's opportunities and challenges in the following section, we will underline its non-financial benefits. Subsequently, we will discuss Tianxia as inscribed in China's high culture to offer a sound interpretation of this intercontinental project. We argue that the Modern Silk Road can be a successful exercise in applied Tianxiaism which demonstrates that Chinese high culture accommodates global governance. To conclude, we claim that the concept of the New Silk Road is a milestone in the development of China and evidence of its status as a responsible global power.

2. ONE BELT ONE ROAD ON BALANCE

The historical Silk Road was an organically developed infrastructure to meet foreign demand for luxury goods while offering 100-fold profit. A vast majority of Chinese exports was comprised of silk products and porcelain, while its major imports included glassware. Precious stones, precious metals, and cosmetics materials were also among the top traded goods (Juhász, 2015). But the current concept, instead of being geared to the market, is rather a tool of the Chinese government designed to lead the entire market and all the actors involved. Another difference between the classic and the modern Silk Roads is that, in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, cultural exchange was only a subsidiary part as the Road was predominantly a piece of infrastructure aimed to facilitate economic cooperation. While China mainly *exported* technologies, several social principles and spiritual practices flowed into the country. The classic Silk Road meant a corridor through which at least seven religions and several influential Western thinkers arrived to China (Juhász, 2015). Tharoor also underlines this factor:

“The historical Silk Road comprised an overland and a maritime route, both of which facilitated the transfer to Europe of South and East Asian goods and ideas, from Chinese tea to inventions like paper, gunpowder and the compass, as well as cultural products like Buddhist scripture and Indian music” (Tharoor, 2015, 18).

Today, such a normative convergence is the primary goal and, in itself, a political facet of the OBOR. The current concept involves a policy-driven, supply-based commercial system, and its production and trade processes target political goals, where *political* refers to high culture, such as philosophical objectives, rather than simply to party politics.

If the OBOR did not fit China's geopolitical plan, it would erode China's chances to implement its global vision. The OBOR idea reflects China's understanding of the distribution of global power in the 21st century, which makes it a much deeper strategy than a just simple cost-benefit analysis. China's current interest is in a multipolar world rather than in an America-dominated unipolar one, and, as such, favors a prosperous and strong EU since "it is the most likely candidate to become another pole" (Turcsányi, 2014). As Geeraerts states, "[t]he unipolar moment is definitely fading and slowly giving way to an international system characterized by multilayered and culturally diversified polarity" (Geeraerts, 2011, 57). The current Chinese strategy unhides the goals of and the barriers to the country's striving for global responsibility.

To further the project, the Chinese government has set up, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. The multilateral AIIB was founded by 50 members, including non-Asian countries. Like many other components of the OBOR, the AIIB is yet to become fully operational. Its authorized capital is USD 100 billion (to compare, the shareholders of the World Bank own over USD 250 billion) (The World Bank Treasury, 2015). The Silk Road Fund Co Ltd. is a USD 40-billion fund dedicated exclusively to developing transport and trade links in countries and regions along the Silk Road (Fung Business Intelligence Centre, 2015, 8). Other regional funds have also been established (e.g., the China-ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund [for South-East Asia] and the China-CEE Investment Cooperation Fund [for Central and Eastern Europe]), which assist China's large international infrastructure construction policies (Van der Putten-Meijnders, 2015, 31). The latter is endowed with USD 3 billion and was announced in December 2014 with the aim to "further enhance cooperation, which includes plans to construct «a new corridor of interconnectivity»" (Rolland, 2015, 2).

It is not our aim to give a concrete financial estimation of this decades-long economic cooperation; instead, we want to show that the concept can be balanced only if political advantages fill the gaps that the numerous financial and operative challenges are likely to create. Table 1 lists some of the OBOR's pros and cons in order to outline China's strategic manoeuvres, while the main points are discussed in the following two sections.

Table 1. Pros and Cons of the Silk Road

Pros	Cons
More robust trade partnerships between China, EU, and transit countries	Immense fixed cost of constructing the network
Saves potentially a week in shipping time (from 2.5-3 weeks to 2 weeks)	National tariff systems of the transit countries mean extra costs
Securing China's energy resources	Logistic challenges, increasing transport costs
Diversifies China's dependence on sea transport, which could reduce the importance of its regional diplomatic conflicts	Overcapacity threats with a one-way trade (the lack of cargo on the return journey increases the costs)
Supports the new normal (EX-IM)	China is not competitive in all three directions (East, West and South)
Affects Chinese regions and foreign countries (transit): creating infrastructure for international negotiations	Micro-hazard: Investment in infrastructure has low and delayed expected profit with high opportunity cost

Source: Author

A. EXPECTED ADVANTAGES

The OBOR itself is an infrastructural and technical vision of the future cooperation, and since it reduces the transaction costs, improves the security of intercontinental trade, and builds official cooperation of approximately 60 countries, it also affects future trade flows.

Focusing on the China-EU trade of goods on Figure 1 we see that the trend where Chinese exports showed a financially unbalanced cooperation. Over the last ten years, Chinese exports have more than doubled from 161 008 million to 350 535 million EURO, while European exports have more than tripled from 51 749 million to 170 362 million EURO. With these changes, total trade grew from 212 757 million to 520 897 million EURO, producing a significantly growing surplus on the Chinese side. The balance of trade of total goods can be seen in-between the lower two lines: it increased from 109 259 million to 180 174 million EURO.

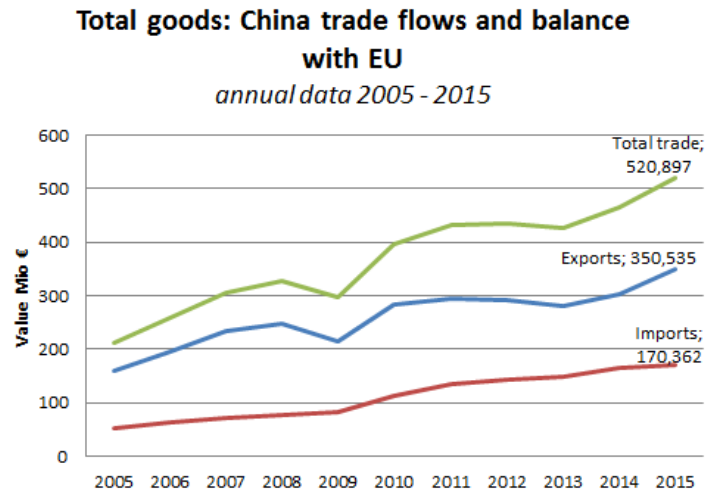


Figure 1.

Source of data: European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, Eurostat Comext. Edited by Author

The downturn after the crisis referred to in the introduction is visible in Figure 1, as are the expanding volumes of traded goods since 2013, the year the OBOR’s vision was introduced. This coincidence may forecast China’s further intentions. One possible institutional outcome of the cooperation project can be a free trade area agreement as hinted in the title of a very recent study by Francois and Pelkmans. The authors argue that “much could be achieved with ‘Tomorrow’s Silk Road’, in the form of a Free Trade Area Agreement between the EU and China, especially if it is a ‘deep and comprehensive’ one” (Francois & Pelkmans, 2016, ii). As summarized in Table 2, Chinese exports are dominant in both their modest and ambitious estimations, possibly fueling the main challenges we will describe in the next section.

Table 2. Modest and ambitious FTA: Changes in bilateral trade (in %)

	Modest	Ambitious
China total exports	9	12.9
EU total exports	2.21	3.18
EU exports to China	79.2	110.64
China exports to EU	39.2	56.89

Source: Francois & Pelkmans, 2016, p. 250. Edited by Author

Even if transport by land is significantly more expensive than by sea, the New Silk Road may have considerable advantages: shipping times may be reduced to two weeks, potentially saving shippers’ a full week and diversifying China’s dependence on sea transport. This could reduce the importance of China’s regional diplomatic conflicts. While maritime transportation takes roughly 2.5-3 weeks, by land the time can be cut down to only 13-15 days.

Additionally, observing the growing conflict on the South China Sea, Chinese strategists have had to find an alternative direction to prevent the country's possibilities of transport from shrinking. (Given this, we can understand why Peter Nolan has a digression on China's historical ownership of this sea in the first chapter of his recent book *Understanding China: The Silk Road and the Communist Manifesto*.) An obvious direction to choose is the West with a focus on land rather than on sea, where the US has an immense comparative advantage.

Another benefit for China is a possibility of securing energy resources from its Western neighbors, which could minimize the state's reliance on the Strait of Malacca (Rolland, 2015, 2). While the OBOR policy indicates that China does not view Central Asia as the sole provider of energy resources, China is eager to provide generous loans to Central Asian countries to develop their gas fields. It has already extended USD 4 billion to Turkmenistan and USD 5 billion to Kazakhstan (Fedorenko, 2013, 13). In return for (1) Beijing's financial aid to its neighbors, (2) development of their transport and communications infrastructure through contracts and (3) subsidies for China's national railcar manufacturer, China will strengthen its position vis-à-vis foreign competition and advance in overseas markets (Rolland, 2015, 2). Since, the EU abides by the principle of transparent bidding processes, the usually "more flexible" Chinese companies' can be more competitive in the region than European ones (Schweisgut, 2015, 9).

Another reason why the OBOR initiative is important to China is the questionable future of the Chinese economy. The main concerns pertain to economic growth and the role of domestic consumption in it as the data shows that in the last three years China has failed to meet its trade objectives. However, the common observation that China is giving up its export-oriented model is far from reality. The current trend in the Chinese economy is that, following the global economic crisis and the emergence of the Chinese middle class, a shift to a consumption-based economy has been urged by the government, but this does not mean that China has given up its export targets.

Moreover, the shift from an export-oriented growth model to one relying on domestic demand neither has been nor will be instantaneous. Currently, the Chinese economy still has abundant resources (in terms of an educated labor force, infrastructure, and SMEs), as well as a strong household propensity to save, which foreshadow a dual growth path of increasing both domestic demand and exports. Not only does switching to domestic demand rely heavily on households' inclination to reduce savings and focus on consumption, but it also overlaps with the goals of Chinese SMEs, which could enter the international market. The Chinese strategy of the 21st century to establish a strong institutional framework and quick decision-making goes hand-in-hand with the sustainment and development of the export-oriented model. As Inotai argues,

China will shift its economic policy from a simply export-driven one (chosen by China when it was a lone country among the big developing states) to a more balanced structure (Inotai, 2011). Chinese exports are unlikely to decrease, and, at the same time, the government will encourage a gradual increase in consumption paired with growing imports.

Even if China has a strong and manifold interest in promoting the OBOR, it most importantly serves to foster development in the Western regions and to connect transit countries, which can otherwise threaten global security. Beside the international facet of development through the OBOR, President Xi has a domestic motive as well to further the project, namely, to bridge a significant prosperity gap between Eastern and Western China. China sees the OBOR and the establishment of transportation infrastructure as a key to developing its Western regions and neighboring Central Asian nations. In the future, trade liberalization and monetary cooperation will serve as the basis of a new regional economic community with new hubs and industrial parks in the region (Rolland, 2015, 1). The initiative is founded on expectations that “transcontinental connectivity via rail could boost trade, stimulate technological development and transform the strategic landscape” (Rolland, 2015, 2). Yet the Chinese market is, still does not (seem to) be engaged in developing the region, with a large discrepancy in the amount of FDI the East and West receive. While Central China is becoming a more popular investment destination (a 7.5% growth of FDI in 2014), the Western provinces are behind with a 1.6% growth registered in 2014 (KPMG, 2015, 27). This shift in the country’s developing strategy is phrased by Tharoor: “The government hopes that the Silk Road initiative will make China’s west and southwest regions the engines of the next phase of the country’s development” (Tharoor, 2015, 19). Here the author emphasized the governments active role and commitment in developing these regions what describes a new policy.

B. EXPECTED CHALLENGES

Since it is hardly calculable what resources the OBOR will need, it is not our purpose to provide an estimate of its costs. On the one hand, we expect that the tremendous fixed costs of constructing the network will increase as a result of the national tariff systems of several transit countries and other logistic challenges. On the other, we review investment capacity and institutional initiatives. These considerations are expressed in the following quote:

“China’s financial commitments to the project seem huge: some multilateral and bilateral pledges may overlap, but it is still likely we are looking at up to \$300 billion in infrastructure

financing from China in the coming years — not counting the leveraging effect on private investors and lenders, and the impact of peer competition” (Godement, 2015, 1).

Railway transportation costs are increased by the lack of cargo on return journeys from Europe and inefficient modes of transport of various goods. There are numerous reasons for this. First, the Chinese destinations are not distribution hubs; in comparison to maritime trade, concentrated around ports that are simultaneously distribution hubs, it costs too much to transport the imported goods to other cities via international railways (Maxxelli Consulting, 2015). Furthermore, as the publicity is not wide enough, many Chinese firms do not want to relinquish the transportation alternatives they have used so far. Unless the value of the Chinese exports increases, the proposed railroad investments would be inefficient (Erdősi, 2015, 120). Lastly, government subsidies in various Chinese provinces’ hubs have led to distorted prices and unbalanced competition on the local markets (Liu, 2014, 8) — these artificial conditions lead also to inefficient modes of transport. The current state of affairs strengthens the Chinese foreign policy’s geopolitical strategy since joining the new world order and endowing it with not just Western, but also Chinese characteristics eclipse the short-run cost-efficiency.

In terms of micro- and macroeconomic approaches, there are significant points of criticism on Chinese planning. Many scholars (e. g., Anbound, Xu Gao) insist that the new concept of three commercial directions (East, West and South) is beyond the Chinese capacity. As they warn, the Western route is logical, but further diversification disperses Chinese resources; meanwhile, China does not have an advantage in competitiveness over the ASEAN countries. As Xu (Xu Gao, 2014) argues, this project is a “micro-hazard” since it requires huge investments in infrastructure. The OBOR already represents a quarter of China’s total investments, but offers low returns and, thus, might spur a debt-crisis.

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Even though there is no consensus on the future investments’ precise value or the timespan before all the OBOR actors turn a profit, the project remains a highly welcome vision. It is essential to highlight that “at a time when China’s assertive stance in the South and East China Seas is provoking anxiety among its neighbors — including Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore — the Silk Road initiative has aroused significant geopolitical apprehension” (Tharoor, 2015, 20). The Golden Age of the Silk Road was the time of the Pax Mongolica (Juhász, 2015), which effectively unified the Eastern and Western civilizations in a peaceful cooperation. China’s cultural heritage preserves this vision in the concept of Tianxia, and Tharoor may be right when

he prognosticates that “the modern Silk Road’s establishment will also mark a step toward reinvigorating the ancient Chinese concept of tianxia” (Tharoor, 2015, 20-21).

3. TIANXIAISM

By creating a negotiation platform, the OBOR may indeed be a flagship of the 21st century’s international cooperation. After the unipolar 1990s, a normative search for a new model of international cooperation has commenced. As unipolarity is fading, there is a shift toward multipolarity, albeit it still entails polarized interests. Yet, that unipolarity is no more does not necessarily mean that poles exist. This “pole-less¹” vision (in other words, a global partnership vision) was expressed by Xi Jinping when he stated that “[n]ot only should China adhere to the peaceful development road; but other countries must also commit themselves to the peaceful development road” (see Zhang, 2015, 10). In the long run, the peaceful coexistence cannot be an outcome of strong actors dictating the norms of conduct to smaller actors. The fundamental normative principle of peaceful cooperation is that all actors — irrespective of their capacities — are unified in a shared commitment to maintain the global peace-ensuring mechanisms. Even if it may sound utopian “that China’s commitment to ‘peaceful development’ is now premised on other countries’ reciprocal commitments” (Zhang, 2015, 10), it reflects the Chinese vision of existence in the world described by the term Tianxia.

The expression Tianxia (天下) has several translations into English. It literally means a *sphere below the sky* or *all under heaven*, but when referring to as a *political entity*, it can mean *China* itself (usually as the Chinese Empire) or the *world*. Zhao Tingyang, a contemporary Chinese philosopher and researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, describes three meanings of Tianxia (Zhao, 2006; Gao, 2008).

1. *Universe*: It highlights the totality of the (known) civilization and its China-centered attribute, while the source of the ruler’s accountability is a supreme moral force in contrast with the Western principles.
2. *Hearts or general will of the people*: The ruler may be successful only if supported by the people, or, in other words, when the emperor’s practice is a realization of good governance.
3. *Harmonious and peaceful coexistence*: This concept is a utopian ideal in which the whole world is described as a single family or brotherhood, and all the relations among the actors resemble family relations.

The third concept shows an important affinity to the Christian tradition with Jesus’ exhortation to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22, 39). If the whole world is one family, there are

¹ For further literature, see Bremmer & Roubini, 2011.

no fundamental differences among the actors; consequently, all people are equal, and this equality may be measured by the love they receive and give. The Vatican can be seen as the first attempt to set up a world institution, a prototype for global governance which supervises potential conflicts and partnerships without having a concrete and complete physical infrastructure (which would cover the whole territory) to influence it. The same concept is reflected in the Tianxia system with its goal to involve all fragmented actors in a holistic cooperation unified by ethics and the pursuit of common interest, in which the ruler's power is legitimized by perfectly transmitting nature's harmony.

Tianxia is a comprehensive expression that reflects the classic Chinese heritage, while its various forms can embody impacts of historical periods and represent the peaceable component of China's worldview in contrast to its menacing manifestations. The meaning of Tianxia has changed over time. Within their impact-response model, John Fairbank and Joseph R. Levenson (Juhász, 2015) suggests that the transformation of Tianxia's original meaning was triggered by the work of the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci. Yet, Paul Cohen (Juhász, 2015) insists that the shifts were prompted predominantly by internal processes (Liu, 2006). Modern Western ideas about China's international relations were formed after the Opium Wars, when a concentric, dominant, tributary, and exclusive image had been produced. This generated growing cautiousness in Europe, as the capacity of the country increased. As China realized the wariness of its Western rivals and partners, it became urgent to reform their impressions and expectations of China's future goals and tools. The shift from the tributary system toward the classic values of Tianxia could mean an acceptable alternative instrumental to get over the existing differences between the status quo and the Chinese vision of international relations.

In extreme understanding, Tianxia designates the celebration of the totality of Chinese tradition and power. In another radical sense, it denotes a contemplative behavior of an actor who, instead of pursuing self-interest, remains passive to represent the harmony of the world and, as such, only supports the current processes. The classic Chinese tradition (Tianxia belongs to this category) explains the moderate Chinese position, which can be described as Confucian. Turning *virtue* into a normative term, Confucius' conservatism was not different from the classic European since it did not aim just to retain old traditions, but sought to develop them to be expressions of harmony, peace, and justice in the political community, with nature celebrated as their original source. Without a formal system of checks and balances, this philosophy with its Mandate of Heaven still affected the emperor's power. As Kissinger described it:

“If the Emperor strayed from the path of virtue, All Under Heaven would fall into chaos. Even natural catastrophes might signify that disharmony had beset the universe. The exist-

ing dynasty would be seen to have lost the “Mandate of Heaven” by which it possessed the right to govern: rebellions would break out, and a new dynasty would restore the Great Harmony of the universe” (Kissinger, 2011, 15-16).

Hence the moderate Chinese position emphasizes the previously discussed partnership. The OBOR may be a significant step toward establishing the unpolarized arena of interests, and in this it is a reflection of the classic Chinese virtue and of power-sharing in the 21st century simultaneously. This means that there is a link between Chinese tradition and the modern global concept of power distribution. Best summarized as the recognition of common global interests as sources of competitiveness, this link provides theoretical underpinnings for economic policy planning.

4. CONCLUSION

Our age is in a transition period in which China is becoming increasingly involved in globalization processes. China’s ever stronger presence in global networks will gradually make these networks acquire Chinese characteristics; therefore, the focus of scientific researches should be on how China joins globalization rather than on how China modifies the current workflow or how China spreads its own global narrative around the world. In other words, “China is seeking to ‘supplement’ the existing international order rather than to revise it” (Godement, 2015, 2), and this restructuring does not mean the weakening of the USA, but a turn to global partnership, which empowers developing countries.

The Silk Road Economic Belt initiative has gone beyond the role of a simple trade route, just like the historical one did. Although its concept remains the same as that of the historical Silk Road, its means to deliberately develop regions along the route. China’s interest is to participate in the establishment of an international environment and apply Tianxiaism to it. Developing its neighboring regions and building the Silk Road Economic Belt symbolize the strategy China has chosen to follow in establishing itself in the multipolar world. Historically, cities along trade routes have flourished, and China’s motivation is to develop its Western regions and neighbors.

However these concepts seem to be well founded, we should admit both sides of benefits China can tap due to its engagement in the region — the short-term goal of economic self-enrichment and the long-term (geo)political goals. Only the future will show how China will go on to use its influence to further its interests.

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