

# Crafting “Attractive” Histories: (Visual) Narrative Contestation Along the Silk Road

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This chapter explores narrative contestation over Silk Road histories, focusing on the domestic-foreign narrative dichotomy and visual tropes shaping narratives’ appeal to foreign audiences. Using a case study of a Silk Road-focused temporary exhibition in Kazakhstan, the research shows that China’s representations of the Silk Road are unattractive to Kazakh audiences due to their Sinocentric and Sinicising nature. These narratives conflict with Kazakhstan’s understanding of the Silk Road as a collaborative effort promoting regional unity. The chapter reflects on the importance of operationalising attractiveness in narrative studies and addresses the limitations of state-driven memory manipulation in diplomacy, contributing to historical statecraft literature and providing empirical insights into China’s image-building efforts and narrative power.

Keywords: Narrative contestation; Visualities; Historical statecraft; Silk Road.

## Introduction

Since its inception, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a focus of scholarly research, highlighting the implications of China’s global reach onto international relations. Within this research agenda, the appropriation of Silk Road histories is an evident practice of China’s diplomacy. This chapter thus aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary subfield that includes International Relations (IR), Memory, and Heritage Studies, providing insights into the use of Silk Road narratives and their role in shaping China’s diplomacy.

Previous research has primarily examined the role of Silk Road histories in Chinese diplomacy through the prism of foreign policy narratives. These narratives are viewed as strategic tools used by states to advance their diplomatic agendas, project soft power, and shape perceptions of self and others. Drawing on narrative theory, these studies have developed an interpretivist approach, examining how China uses Silk Road histories to shape its self-identity, present itself to foreign audiences, and negotiate contested narratives.

The chapter aims to examine how Silk Road narratives shape perceptions of China’s global role and inter-state relations. It investigates how these narratives interact with larger discussions

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about national identity and historical memory, contributing to shedding light on the issue of narrative contestation. The study highlights differences in narrative construction and their implications for political messaging by presenting a case study of Chinese and Kazakh Silk Road narratives.

The research seeks to advance knowledge of how narrative contestation functions at the micro-level and influences state perceptions in the international arena. It provides insights into the appeal of state narratives to foreign audiences as well as the limitations of state instrumentalisations of shared memory by focusing on the contestation of state- and foreign narratives and visual tropes. The chapter also reflects on how Silk Road narratives are sites of contestation and negotiation, underscoring the necessity of operationalising their attractiveness for comprehending China's interactions with the outside world.

The chapter is organised as follows. The first section examines the literature on China's appropriation of Silk Road histories as defined by social-constructivist scholars. The two sections that follow go into detail about the theoretical approach and research design, data selection and collection, and methodology. The following section presents the research findings, and the conclusions discuss the case comparison and discuss the study's theoretical and empirical contribution.

## **1. Social-Constructivist Assumptions on the Appropriation of Silk Road Histories**

Building on the extensive body of literature exploring various facets of the BRI and its role in shaping our understanding of China's global outreach (e.g., Hall and Krolkowski 2022; Jones and Zeng 2019; Rolland 2017; Y. Wang 2016; Zhou and Esteban 2018), this chapter seeks to contribute to a sub-research endeavour that spans IR, Memory, and Heritage Studies. Taking an IR-inspired second-image approach, this work delves into questions surrounding the appropriation of Silk Road histories—a hallmark of Chinese diplomacy—adding to an emerging interdisciplinary research agenda.

Previous studies have predominantly examined the role of Silk Road histories in Chinese diplomatic practice by framing the Silk Road as a foreign policy narrative (e.g., Dadabaev 2018; Gloria 2021; van Noort 2020; Winter 2020, 2021), where “history is ... claimed and, where necessary, written anew” (Winter 2020, 909). Drawing on narrative theory (Miskimmon 2013), especially interpreting Silk Road histories as issue-specific narratives (Oppermann and Spencer 2022), these discussions have developed a robust IR-based (critical) social-constructivist

epistemology. This ontological foundation is rooted in the interpretivist notion that reality is “what states make of it” (Wendt 1992).

These studies have explored the instrumentalisation of Silk Road histories in Chinese diplomacy based on four interconnected assumptions. First, scholars have scrutinised China’s uses of Silk Road histories through the lens of intangible power, particularly as a soft power exercise (Gloria 2021; Ohnesorge and Owen 2023; van Noort 2020, 2022; Winter 2021). Connecting various conceptualisations of soft power—such as “geocultural power” (Winter 2021), “aesthetic power” (van Noort 2022), or “mnemonic soft power” (Ohnesorge and Owen 2023)—these narratives are generally understood as a means for states to “advance their diplomatic agenda” (Winter 2020, 899).

Second, scholars have examined China’s appropriation of Silk Road histories within a Self-Other juxtaposition. In this context, Silk Road histories have been understood as constructing a reality that contrasts visions of self and other in the international arena (Benabdallah 2021; Dadabaev 2018; Gloria 2021; van Noort 2020). Some studies propose that these narratives serve as a way for China to present itself to foreign audiences, as characterised by Carolijn van Noort’s (2020) conceptualisation of “Self-Orientalism” or by Lina Benabdallah’s (2021) notion of “autobiographies”. Both concepts share the perspective that these exercises form part of a broader storytelling endeavour, wherein China employs shared histories with target audiences to “imagine itself in a desirable world order” (van Noort 2020, 204), implying the potential to shape global order narratives (Benabdallah 2021).

Third, these studies converge on understanding China’s construction of instrumentalised Silk Road historical narratives as an exercise contested by alternative narratives and cyclically renegotiated (Dadabaev 2018; van Noort 2020; Winter 2021). For example, Tim Winter (2021) argues that external powers like Turkey, Iran, India, and Russia use the same shared histories as China, presenting competing narratives to the same target audiences. While acknowledging that China’s narrative production does not occur in isolation, a limitation of these approaches is the assumption of a perpetuation of a global order hierarchy.

However, the instrumentalisations of Silk Road histories at the national level is a significant source of contention, echoing interpretations of the shared past that delve into questions of national identity. Kazakhstan, for instance, observes post-independence national identity being promoted by its government through the appropriation of a fantastical, unreal past where memories of the Silk Road are intertwined with traditional nomadic culture (Isaacs 2018).

Allowing for alternatives in narrative production raises the issue of competition and the conditions under which China’s Silk Road histories are “persuasive” (van Noort 2020), “effective”

(van Noort 2022), or, borrowing from soft power theory, “attractive”. Scholars have only partially addressed this question, acknowledging a negative role for Sinocentrism in historical narrative production (Winter 2020; Gloria 2021; Sciorati 2022). Here, van Noort (2020) argues that persuasiveness depends on how historical narratives are translated across time and space.<sup>1</sup>

These questions also relate to the criticalities emerging from adopting some variant of “soft power” as a theoretical anchor, as the concept, despite its broad usage, still lacks formal operationalisation as an analytical category (Hall 2010).

Therefore, apart from a few contributions, what makes Silk Road histories attractive in diplomacy still requires further investigation. This chapter aims to contribute to filling this gap, offering some considerations to the question: under what conditions does the appropriation of Silk Road histories in diplomatic practice have the potential to (un)attract foreign audiences? To do so, the study adopts an interpretative-constructivist approach to narratives and memory, building on van Noort and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody (2023) in theorising visualities as the “missing link” between representations and the reality represented. It develops an argument on attractiveness that places the national-international dichotomy of narrative competition at the centre and questions the usefulness of characterising the appropriation of shared histories simply as discursive narratives, carving out a space for visual tropes.

## 2. Crafting Attractive Histories: A Theoretical Framework

In addressing the identified gap, this chapter explores the appropriation of Silk Road histories in diplomacy through a social-constructivist lens, offering insights into attractiveness. The study defines attractiveness as a state winning the “battle of narratives” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013), meaning its preferred narrative enters the discourse of target audiences. Indeed, states do not project their narratives in isolation; multiple states may simultaneously promote alternative narratives to the same target audiences (*ibid.*).

In this study, historical narratives are understood as a brand of issue-specific narratives (Oppermann and Spencer 2022) in that they revolve around a specific concern – that is, shared history. Contrary to prior theories, the research posits that winning the battle of narratives does not necessarily result in the disappearance of alternative narratives. Here, contestation is seen as relational but not zero-sum (Maracchione, Sciorati, and Combei 2024). This means that the gains for one state do not necessarily translate to losses for another. Instead, the narratives of one state

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<sup>1</sup> To expand on these “stories” in the context of China and Central Asia, see, among others, Yau (2021), Duturaeva (2022), and Maracchione and Jardine (2024).

inform how the narratives of another state will be received by the same target audience, and vice versa. In this sense, this chapter aligns with studies treating narratives as tools in foreign policy (above all, Risse 2000; Lynch 2002), particularly focused on states' self-image building.

One could thus posit that when historical narratives are directed at foreign audiences, there will also be a contestation between the preferred narrative of a foreign state and state-sanctioned "memories". As Kathrin Bachleitner argues (2019), in fact, "a country's memory is defined as its state-sanctioned, official narrative; that is, the story its political elites publicly tell about its history" (246).<sup>2</sup> Silk Road narratives, therefore, are here understood as "memory narratives" echoing competing state-sanctioned memories of shared history.

In this scenario, contestation goes beyond narratives promoted solely by equally foreign actors; it broadens to encompass a foreign actor and the domestic elites of a state. This case is crucial in narrative contestation because it has the potential to delve into matters concerning national identity and nation-building and even ontological security, especially when the same memories and histories are appropriated to promote alternatives. As an example, one can examine varying interpretations of the historical figure of Napoleon, viewed either as a hero in native French historiography or as a foe in foreign English historiography—a view equally shared with domestic audiences.

In this context, for a narrative to be attractive it would mean that it entered the discourse of target audiences alongside state-sanctioned memories. Building on van Noort (2020), who considered narratives persuasive depending on how they were translated over time, narratives are here hypothesised as being potentially more attractive when:

H1) Foreign narratives valorise state-sanctioned memories on the same issue, as foreign audiences tend to reject information that contradicts their pre-existing ideas (Holsti 1967).

*and*

H2) Foreign narratives refer or adopt variants of visual tropes commonly recognised by foreign audiences, as visualities tap into social emotions (Callahan 2020), "transport" people into narratives (Escalas 2004) and can be empathised with (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On memory and nationalism, see Malinova (2021).

<sup>3</sup> On tropes in IR, see Cienki and Yanow (2013)

Theoretically, the chapter aligns with studies treating narratives as tools in foreign policy and emphasises the contestation that occurs when narratives target foreign audiences. It problematises the concept of contestation between the preferred narrative of a foreign state and the memories within the target country, involving both foreign and domestic actors.

Attractiveness in this context relies on narratives entering the discourse of target audiences alongside state-sanctioned narratives. Building on this, the chapter proposes hypotheses for attractiveness, suggesting that narratives aligning with memories *and* engaging with visual tropes familiar to target audiences hold greater attractive power.

### **3. Research Design, Data, and Methodology**

To test these hypotheses, the study employs a comparative case design, comparing Chinese traditional Silk Road narratives with the Silk Road conceptualisations promoted and communicated within Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan emerges as a compelling case for this comparison due to its historical association with China along the Silk Roads, and its unique geographical position (e.g., Frankopan 2016; Winter 2022). Furthermore, after independence, Kazakhstan also embraced the ancient Silk Road as a historical and nation-building construct (Laruelle 2014; Roy 2022). Notably, Kazakhstan continues to experience Sinophobia (Owen 2017), as evidenced by numerous anti-Chinese protests in recent years (Aisarina et al. 2021). Consequently, Kazakhstan is well-positioned as a least-likely case for the attractiveness of China's Silk Road narrative construction.

The chapter first examines Kazakhstan's domestic conceptualisations of the Silk Road, laying the groundwork for a comparison with insights drawn from secondary literature on China's uses of Silk Road histories in diplomacy. To encompass the visual component of the hypotheses, the study offers generalisations from the analysis of a particular museum exhibition titled "Eurasia: Legacy of the Silk Road" (Евразия: Наследие Шёлкового Пути). Held at the A. Kasteev State Art Museum of Almaty from 14 April to 21 May 2023, this exhibition commemorated UNESCO's Silk Road Programme. Its primary aim was to visually narrate the story of the ancient Silk Road, utilising artifacts from the museum's permanent collections (Bazhenova 2023). Notably, despite the inter-cultural mandate of the Silk Road Programme, the exhibition placed a specific emphasis on showcasing the works of Kazakh national artists (*ibid.*), featuring a total of sixty-five artifacts representative of the Silk Road. Given the focus on Kazakhstanness in the items,<sup>4</sup> this exhibition

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Laruelle (2014).

represents a valuable starting-point for identifying the Kazakh visual conceptualisation of the Silk Road.

The author collected data on the exhibition during two visits to the A. Kasteev Museum in April 2023. This encompasses photographs of exhibited objects, their captions, and the exhibition's explanatory panels. Two official museum catalogues further provided technical information on some of the items exhibited.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of methodology, the study adopts a qualitative visual narrative analysis on the exhibits (Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Schneider 2013). A three-phased description-explanation-interpretation approach is employed to mitigate potential analytical bias (Müller 2008). Each exhibit underwent independent analysis, followed by a cross-comparison to identify recurring visual tropes across the exhibition. Items belonging to a series were collectively analysed, consistently with their captions. According to the tenets of this visual methodology, exhibits were first described, paying attention not to attribute *a priori* meanings to what was seen. In the subsequent explanation phase, I considered the constitutive visual elements of the exhibits, understanding how these visuals worked together. During interpretation, I brought the context back to the analysis, asking the question of how the physical, cultural, and political environments informed the meanings of the analysis.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Visual Silk Road Histories in Kazakh Exhibition Practice

The following sections detail on the recurring visual tropes identified in the exhibition. They construct a brand of Silk Road histories primarily connected to “lone travellers” and transnationalism, “hospitality” and ethnic unity, and “women and mothers” and traditionalist modernity.

##### 4.1 Lone Travellers and Transnationalism

The first Silk Road visual trope identified in the exhibition is the one depicting “lone travellers” – i.e., solitary figures represented in the act of journeying across natural landscapes. These are often portrayed as inhospitable environments with little to no human presence; however, these landscapes do not exclusively perpetuate traditional Silk Road scenarios (such as steppes or deserts)

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<sup>5</sup> These are *Fine Arts of Kazakhstan* (2017) and *Watercolours of Kazakhstan* (2019). Captions and introductory panels were translated from Kazakh and/or Russian to English with the help of a professional translator. In the case English translations were also present in the original texts, these were compared with Kazakh and Russian texts.

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph reiterates Schneider (2013).

but also include, for example, a Chinese ink-painting styled waterscape, wherein a fisherman is depicted balancing on the front of a boat, fishing through a half-immersed long pole; a distant port village and mountains are visible in the background (Antoshchenko-Olenev 1960). Like this example, these lone-travelling figures are generally shown as physically reaching out in the direction towards which they travel, conveying the idea of extending toward their travels. For instance, the two, black and white human figures at the centre of the allegoric *Silk Road: Diptych* (Tolepbai 1986) lean toward viewers, bent onto their walking poles.

Fourteen of the sixty-five exhibits presented in the exhibition reiterate the lone travellers' visual trope to conceptualise the ancient Silk Road. It is interesting to note that the solitary figures at the centre of these visualisations are seldom depicted as humans and artists usually dehumanise these visuals by replacing human travellers with machines or animals. This is the case, for instance, of two watercolours where travelling, as an action, is conveyed by anthropomorphising lone vehicles traversing a rocky desert or a steppe landscape (Kasteev 1964a, 1969). In other items, in contrast, humanised camelids are the ones that give materiality to the lone traveller trope (Tkachenko 1927; Yadrintsev 1998; Kabizhanova 2017).

In its different visualisations, this trope constructs a narrative of the Silk Road that echoes Western traditional Orientalisations of such trade routes (e.g., *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian* 2008), where explorations of uninhabited, desertic or steppe lands are a constitutive element of national history.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the visualisations, explorations via caravans of camelids (Tkachenko 1927) are replaced by travels via more modern vehicles (Kasteev 1969). Such a story of the Silk Road, rooted in historical continuity, gives value to the role of explorers, reiterating central themes of Kazakh folklore.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these visualisations hint at another side of the explorations – that is, discovery. This exploration-discovery juxtaposition visualises the Silk Road as a route to an unknown other, investing explorers (and, above all, Kazakh explorers) of a central role in stimulating cross-cultural exchanges.<sup>9</sup>

These visuals also forge a similar link between the Silk Road and Central Asia's nomadic culture. By means of different contextualisations, in fact, the act of travelling and the movement shown in the exhibits is reminiscent of Kazakh nomadic heritage — an aspect of Kazakh culture that, to this day, remains central in post-independence nation-building endeavours (Isaacs 2016). The nomadic past, for instance, is exemplified in the *Silk Road* (1992), where a Kazakh nomadic caravan is depicted in the mid-ground of a mountainous and steppe landscape. In *Valley of Khan-*

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<sup>7</sup> To expand on Central Asian exclusivist identities, see Zhussipbek (2014).

<sup>8</sup> As a reference, see Abazof (2007a).

<sup>9</sup> A trope also perpetuated in Chinese constructions of the Silk Road. See, e.g., Liu (2010) and Wang (2024).

*Tengry*, moreover, a steppe landscape is populated by a distant nomadic camp, while a herd of horse and sheep is placed centre-stage, thus connecting nomadism to pastoralism (Kasteev 1964b).

The construction of the lone-travellers visual trope and its cultural connections to explorers and nomads feeds into what Marlène Laruelle (2014) has theorised as the discursive paradigm of “transnationalism” in Kazakh identity-building – i.e., the notion that “interconnectivity and globalization alter the nation-state and its integration into the world community … Kazakhstan’s international prestige is supposed to strengthen political legitimacy at home” (11). Under this lens, one of the ways through which the state visually memorialises the Silk Road is by forging a connection to the issue of transnationalism—a tool of nation-building and regime survival.

## 4.2 Hospitality and Ethnic Unity

The second Silk Road visual trope uncovered in the visual analysis links the Silk Road to the concept of “hospitality”, counting seventeen exhibits. Kazakh tangible and intangible heritage is portrayed as open and accessible to viewers. Indeed, following Kazakhstan’s independence and the development of Kazakh identity, “hospitality became a hallmark of Kazakhness” (Michaels 2007, 197). In the exhibition, for example, numerous depictions of water jugs (*kumgan*), vegetables, and fruit, particularly melons, reflect Kazakh tradition of hospitality (Babad Unknown; Galimbaeva 1960; Burmakin 1971; Leostiliev 1975; Tyo 2008).<sup>10</sup> In items like *Ancient Vessels* (Babad Unknown), the composition exclusively features four water jugs and a felt scarf. Similarly, in *Pomegranates with Kumgan* (Burmakin 1971), the scene is limited to a fruit plate and a water jug. These depictions present objects as if poised for immediate use, with the fruit appearing either peeled, cut, or plated, extending a metaphorical invitation for the audience to immerse themselves in the scene and partake in its offerings. This perspective paints the Silk Road as a hospitable construct, emphasising positive and peaceful interactions and overshadowing historical conflicts.

A similar connection is evident in representations of Kazakh traditional folk music (Mkhitaryan 20th century; Marwait 1992; *Vase: China* 2001). The exhibition often portrays hospitality through musicians playing traditional instruments like the dombra, the kobyz, or the dangyra.<sup>11</sup> Notably, this theme maintains a cross-ethnic association, suggesting that hospitality through music is a shared way of life among different regional cultures and non-Kazakh ethnic

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<sup>10</sup> To illustrate the significance of these objects in Central Asian cultures, one can point to their role in regional architecture. For instance, the Music Hall in Astana, Kazakhstan, shaped like a water jug, and the teahouse of Hisor, Tajikistan, designed in the form of a melon, serve as notable examples.

<sup>11</sup> See Abazof (2007b).

groups. Noteworthy is the fact that a direct link is established between this trope and China, portraying Chinese musicians partaking in Kazakh hospitality (*Vase: China* 2001) or recognising Turkmen musicians as Chinese (Marwait 1992).<sup>12</sup>

Another visual representation of the hospitality trope emerges from depictions of urban landscapes like bazaars and street views (Kalimov Unknown; Chervyakov 1965; Romanov 1965; Abdulkarimov 1978; Yarema 2009). Cities are portrayed as open spaces, often painted in gold and blue, with traditional Central Asian architecture taking centre stage.<sup>13</sup> Human figures are few, engaged in everyday activities, especially trade. Viewers are immersed in the scenes, appearing as active participants in the depicted activities. Notably, some pieces like *Children of Bagir* (Chervyakov 1965), *Khiva* (Abdulkarimov 1978) and *In Samarkand at Registan* (Yarema 2009) create an inclusive atmosphere, where viewers feel a part of the scenes. For instance, in *Khiva*, the observer seems to traverse a bustling alleyway, following the movements of traders, while, in the latter, a human figure gazes directly at the viewer, as if extending a personal invitation to join the scene. Similarly, in the former, the viewer becomes an integral part of the artwork, sharing the same vantage point as the depicted children, observing pigeons in unison. In contrast, pieces like *Bazaar* (Romanov 1965) and *Dolls from the Friendship of Peoples Series* (Aleksandrov 1969) convey hospitality through the portrayal of inter-ethnic, peaceful spaces, suggesting a communion of regional ethnicities within the context of Kazakh traditional social spaces.

In summary, the exhibition's visual trope of hospitality appropriates traditional Kazakh hospitality to fabricate a narrative of the Silk Road as an open and harmonious encounter among regional ethnic groups. These narratives echo state-sanctioned nation-building constructs, portraying the Silk Road as a welcoming haven for diverse ethnic groups and religions (Laruelle 2014).

#### 4.3 Women, Mothers, and Traditionalist Modernity

The third trope identified across the visual analysis of the exhibits encompasses depictions of “women and mothers” – that is, female figures portrayed in traditional clothes and accessories, engaged in everyday activities, perpetuating the traditional gender roles of Kazakh culture.

The exhibition includes ten items presenting variations of this visual trope. Among them, women either acquire centre-stage, capturing the viewers' attention standing against the backdrop

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<sup>12</sup> The Turkmen kobyz player in *Musicians: China* (Marwait 1992) stands out as a striking example, carrying out the Central Asian traditional role of *manas*, thus serving as a storyteller. In this context, the term “Turkmen” is used in accordance with Kazakh practice, indicating the Uyghur ethnic group.

<sup>13</sup> Blue and gold are recognized as Kazakhstan's national colours, reflecting the country's nationalist identity.

of busy backgrounds, or they are the only human figures represented. For instance, in *Khiva Bazaar*, a pink-and-orange-dressed female figure emerges from two parallel lines of street vendors, positioned at the centre of the painting (Yuldashev 1992). At the same time, in *Sketch from the Series In Central Asia*, a female figure appears from the bottom right-hand corner of the ink painting standing out against a human-less mountainscape (Krylov 1964).

Except for a few items (Bobylev 1966; Galimbaeva Unknown; Kapterev 1977; Vuskovin 1957; Yuldashev 1992), these characters are depicted alone, often the sole (females) figures in the representations. They are portrayed wearing traditional clothes, the majority sporting headscarves, or Central Asian traditional embroidered caps. When depicted in social contexts (above all, in bazaars), artists show solitary women reappropriating traditionally male-owned, “immoral” social spaces (Schröder 2016), and thus embodying a “new modernity” as envisioned by contemporary state authorities.<sup>14</sup> However, references to Islam (such as the above-mentioned headscarves) or women’s traditional gender-based roles in Kazakh society (e.g. mothers and/or agents of intangible heritage transmission) contrast with the modernity some of these paintings aim to project. For example, *Women of the Orient* shows the portraits of two headscarved women, carrying a melon and a kumgan on their heads, respectively (Kapterev 1977). Not only do these objects remind of Central Asian traditional culture but also maintain a metaphorical connection to bazaars, as shown in other items in the exhibition (e.g., Romanov 1965; Tyo 2008). Also tied to tradition, the characterisation of women as mothers is prominently visualised. In the wood carving entitled *Travelling*, a cloaked human figure is represented while holding a child in its arms, thus visually connecting the trope of the traveller to motherhood (Rapoport 1990). Moreover, in the series *Dolls: Family*, terracotta figurines portray the two characters of mother and daughter, respectively wearing a headscarf and a traditional Central Asian double-braided hairstyle under an embroidered cap (Bobylev 1966). The way femininity is represented here again refers to tradition, but also links it to inter-generational differences.

This visual trope makes use of the more private, familial dimension of Kazakh society to represent the Silk Road as an exercise of modernity that remains linked to Islamic tradition. Women are here anthropomorphist representations of Kazakhstan itself, particularly in its cultural heritage dimension, mimicking the strive toward a state-directed modernisation of the country that appropriates and perpetuates traditions. Indeed, women are the primary active agents in the fabled society narrated in the exhibition. However, while actively appropriating traditionally male spaces, women’s agency is bound to the societal roles of caregivers and keepers of intangible cultural traditions. These functions echo the state’s mandate to transport Kazakhstan into modernity, while

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<sup>14</sup> To expand, see Maltseva (2021).

re-discovering its national history and traditional values.<sup>15</sup> Notably, visualisations of these tradition do not exclusively reflect nomadic culture but make extensive use of Islamic iconography, which is chosen as the primary anchor for showing Kazakhstan's respect of traditions. In sum, the Silk Road is represented in terms of the country's own Islamic modernity.

## 5. Discussion: Unattractive Chinese Silk Road Histories

On 19 May 2023, President of the People's Republic of China and Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech within the context of the first ever “China-Central Asia Summit” (*Zhongguo – Zhongya Fenghui* 中国-中亚峰会). He stated that: “over the past decade, China and Central Asian countries have worked hand-in-hand together to *fully revive* the Silk Road” (Xi 2023, emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> Ever since the BRI has been launched in Astana in September 2013, the appropriation of Silk Road histories has become an evident practice of Chinese diplomacy as much as the BRI has started to resemble a “transnational collective memory project” (Pozzi 2022, 157).

A region with its own deep-seated state-sanctioned memories of the ancient Silk Road, Central Asia has been at the receiving end of China's attempts to appropriate shared memory and forge immaterial bonds to support diplomatic practice. Xi has been “mythologising the past” (Cohen 1997) by transforming Silk Road histories into narratives serving Chinese foreign policy goals, thus “redirect[ing] Silk Road memories into a more positive direction” (Yau 2021, 42). Territorial conflicts between the Xiongnu confederation of nomadic tribes (匈奴) and the Western Hans between the 1st and 3rd century BCE, for example, have disappeared from China's historical recounts and narratives on good-neighbourliness have taken their place——e.g., as Xi said (2023), for instance, during the same Summit: “Zhang Qian, the Chinese Han dynasty emissary, opened the door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asia”.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous scholars have analysed this practice and provided insights into the narratives and visual tropes utilised to appropriate memories of the ancient Silk Road in China's foreign political communication (among others, Godehardt 2014; Winter 2020; Benabdallah 2021; Yau 2021; Pozzi 2022; van Noort 2022; Maracchione and Jardine 2024). According to the theoretical framework informing this study, for Chinese appropriation of Silk Road histories to be effective, it should valorise state-sanctioned narratives of the ancient Silk Road and reference visual tropes

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<sup>15</sup> On women in nomadic societies, see Abdikadyrova et al. (2018).

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese, “十年来，中国同中亚国家携手推动丝绸之路全面复兴”.

<sup>17</sup> In Chinese, “中国汉代使者张骞 … 打开了中国同中亚友好交往的大门”.

commonly recognised by foreign audiences. Thus, within the context of the analysed case study, Chinese Silk Road narratives should echo the principles of transnationalism, unity, and tradition underlying Kazakh constructions. Additionally, they should refer to traditional Kazakh imagery, such as travellers, manas, caravans, bazaars, or Islamic religious iconography, to be attractive to Kazakh audiences.

Whilst resembling Kazakh visual constructions, China's appropriation of shared Silk Road histories develops narratives that diverge from Kazakh memories, thus weakening the China's political messaging. This becomes evident when comparing China's Silk Road tropes of "exploration" (e.g., Yau 2021; Benabdallah 2021; Pozzi 2022; van Noort 2022) and "invention" (e.g., Winter 2020; Pozzi 2022; Benabdallah 2021) with the Kazakh Silk Road narratives.

Kazakh representations of the ancient Silk Road, depicted through the "lone travellers" trope, are deeply rooted in the concept of transnationalism. This understanding sees the Silk Road and trans-regional connections as mutually constitutive of Kazakhstan, where its geographic position facilitates global exchanges crucial for the country's modern and internationally integrated development. While China's portrayal of the Silk Road as "exploration" aligns closely with Kazakhstan's notion of exchanges, its emphasis on one-sided exploration neglects the mutuality inherent in Kazakh conceptualisations. Furthermore, Chinese representations often centre on Sinocentric perspectives (Sciorati 2022; Winter 2022), exemplified by the heroic figures of explorers like Zheng He 郑和 and Zhang Qian 张骞, forsaking the idea of mutual exchange and pursuing a visualisation of the Silk Road imbued of Chinese iconography. Consequently, Chinese narratives tend to circle back to Chinese culture, evident in the instrumentalisation of archaeological sites worldwide and the emphasis on Chinese archaeological findings around the world (Maracchione and Jardine 2024).<sup>18</sup> In sum, under the Chinese lens, the Silk Road represents Chinese-led exploration and exchanges, ultimately tracing Silk Road cultures back to a shared Chinese heritage.

Another contentious issue arises from what can be described as the Chinese trope of "invention", wherein the Silk Road is portrayed in terms of the Sinicisations of knowledge advancements. This construct represents the Silk Road as emblematic of China's dominance in the region (Benabdallah 2021; Pozzi 2022) and its historical technological superiority (van Noort 2022). Not limited to technological innovation, this trope also encompasses the intangible, particularly

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<sup>18</sup> On cultural heritage, Xi famously said: "Cultural relics carry splendid civilisation, inherit history, and culture and maintain the national spirit. They are precious heritage left to us by our ancestors and the profound nourishment for strengthening the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation. The protection of cultural relics is in the modern era and the benefits are in the thousands of years" (in Chinese, "文物承载灿烂文明, 传承历史文化, 维系民族精神, 是老祖宗留给我们的宝贵遗产, 是加强社会主义精神文明建设的深厚滋养。保护文物功在当代、利在千秋").

regarding the diffusion of Islam through the Silk Roads, which is attributed to a re-elaboration within Chinese culture (Sciorati 2023). For instance, the White Paper entitled “Some Historical Issues in Xinjiang” discusses this narrative, asserting that “Islam is not the innate and sole faith of the Uyghur ethnic group. Islam, integrated into Chinese culture, takes root in the fertile soil of China and develops healthily” (State Council Information Office 2019).<sup>19</sup> Once again, this trope conflicts with the Kazakh conceptualisation of the Silk Road, which views these routes as harmonious encounters among people of different ethnicities. It also diverges from core Islamic traditions that consistently feature in Kazakh representations of Silk Road routes. Sinicisations place China at the forefront, perpetuating a narrative of hierarchy between ethnicities and religions. Moreover, while Kazakh visualisations of the Silk Roads often highlight women, China relies on male historical figures to convey notions of strength and centrality, adopting visual tropes markedly different from those of the Kazakhs.

## Conclusions

In summary, this chapter has provided insights into how narrative contestation over Silk Road histories operates at the micro-level. It has shown, in practice, the significance of national-foreign narratives and recognisable visual tropes in shaping the appeal of state narratives to foreign audiences. Drawing from the case study of a Silk Road-focused temporary exhibition in Kazakhstan, the chapter has demonstrated that China’s representations of the Silk Road to Kazakh audiences remain unattractive. This is because, in its diplomatic practice, China constructs narratives of the Silk Road that are Sinocentric and Sinicising, conflicting with the Kazakh view of the Silk Road as a mutually constitutive endeavour fostering ethnic and religious unity at the regional level. As these narratives neither value state-sanctioned memories of the Silk Road nor utilise recognisable visual tropes for foreign audiences, the study confirms the expectation that Chinese Silk Road histories are largely unattractive to Kazakh audiences.

The chapter has made contributions to studies on narrative contestation by advocating for an operationalisation of attractiveness. This entails considering both national narratives and the importance of referencing visual tropes as determinants for how narratives are perceived by target audiences. Additionally, it has shed light on the limitations of state instrumentalisations of shared memory, which intersects with the literature on historical statecraft. Empirically, the study has

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<sup>19</sup> In Chinese, “伊斯兰教不是维吾尔族天生信仰且唯一信仰的宗教，与中华文化相融合的伊斯兰教扎根中华沃土并健康发展”.

engaged with research on China's image-building efforts, narrative power, and studies on Sinophobia.

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