Received: 29 June 2021 | Revised: 12 August 2021 | Accepted: 13 September 2021

DOI: 10.1111/geoj.12412

THE GJ Royal Geographical Society with IBG

WILEY

COMMENTARY

A novel geographical research agenda on Silk Road urbanisation

Elia Apostolopoulou

Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Correspondence
Elia Apostolopoulou, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.
Email: ea367@cam.ac.uk

Funding information
Cambridge Humanities Research Grant (Grant number: GASR010852).

Abstract

The New Silk Road, also called China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is the largest single infrastructure project since the Marshall Plan and an exemplar of infrastructure-led development of a scope and scale with no precedent in modern history. The project is estimated to cost up to US$8 trillion, involve 130 countries and impact more than 65% of the world's population. Through novel combinations of infrastructure and industrial projects with investments in the urban built environment, the BRI is transforming urban space across the global South and North altering the social and urban geographies of cities at a historically unparalleled scale. Nonetheless, its role in driving global urban transformation remains fundamentally underexplored. Relevant geographical research is scarce and comparative approaches focusing on cities are in their infancy, leading researchers to talk about an 'anti-urban' bias in contemporary BRI scholarship that prevents an in-depth understanding of the initiative's true scope. This paper introduces the novel concept of *Silk Road urbanisation* and puts forward the need for a new research agenda that has the potential to transform geographical and urban research on infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, is the single largest infrastructure project since the Marshall Plan, with a scope and scale that has no precedent in modern history (Ferdinand, 2016). The project is estimated to cost up to US$8 trillion, involve 130 countries and an impressive number of corporate and state actors, and impact more than 65% of the world's population (World Bank, 2017). The initiative is currently organised around six major economic corridors (OECD, 2018). By building or expanding railways, roads and ports, the Belt aims to facilitate the land-based integration of African, Central Asian, and European constellations whereas the Road targets the maritime regions of South and Southeast Asia, East Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean in order to create a maritime corridor (Eder, 2018; MERICS, 2018). The BRI's illustrations reveal a planetary scope encompassing a Digital, a Polar, and a Space Silk Road (Seone, 2020; Woon, 2020), and extensions into the Americas and the Pacific, rendering the initiative an exemplar of a new global paradigm of infrastructure-led development that is increasingly marking a shifting global world order (Apostolopoulou, 2021; DiCarlo & Schindler, 2020; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018).

Even though the reference to a belt and a road implies the creation of continuous surfaces, the flows of capital, goods and people across the BRI's corridors are predominantly occurring within key urban nodes (Summers, 2016) with

flagship projects strategically placed in selected cities (Apostolopoulou, 2021a). As the BRI vision document[1] and the location of investments[2] show, the New Silk Road is a global agent of massive urban transformation that inscribes new purpose and novel economic links between urban regions, transforms existing cities, and creates new cities from scratch within and beyond China. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that BRI projects lead to an intensification of urbanisation alongside its infrastructural and trade corridors (Jing et al., 2020; Linlin et al., 2017). The BRI's potential to alter urban geographies is also supported by policy and journalistic evidence from impressively varying contexts across the globe where Chinese-financed infrastructure projects and investments in urban space are looming. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the literature that deals with urbanisation along the New Silk Road comes from the natural sciences and adopts a strictly quantitative approach (e.g., Liu et al., 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020). Relevant geographical perspectives are still rare (Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Wiig & Silver, 2019; Williams et al., 2020) and unconnected, whereas comparative approaches focusing on cities are in their infancy, recently leading researchers to talk about an "anti-urban" bias (Zheng et al., 2021) that prevents an in-depth understanding of the BRI's true scope.

In what follows, I introduce the novel concept of *Silk Road urbanisation* to describe the BRI's role in altering global urbanisation patterns and reconfiguring the patterns of urban inequality. By starting from the hypothesis that there is a direct link between BRI-led infrastructure development and shifting urbanisation patterns, and by setting at the epicentre of geographical enquiry what makes Silk Road urbanisations both distinct and diverse, I argue that this novel concept can bring forward a theoretical breakthrough on contemporary BRI scholarship and broader geographical and urban research. Given that the convolution of the political and the economic is a key feature of the shifting configurations of contemporary global political economy (Summers, 2020), I argue for a geopolitical/geo-economic approach that considers the dialectical relation and tension between the territorial and the capitalist logics of power (Gramsci, 1971; Lee et al., 2018). This approach necessitates moving beyond the dichotomies that currently dominate the literature towards locating the drivers of Silk Road urbanisation in changing global accumulation patterns without underestimating China's geopolitical interest in advancing its regional and international influence. Crucially, I do not theorise the BRI either as a top-down, fixed strategy simply exported from China to other countries or as a fragmented initiative predominantly characterised by the particularities of each BRI project. I rather combine an analysis of the context of context (Brenner et al., 2010), the macrospatial and macroeconomic landscapes within which the BRI is articulated, with a postcolonial, relational, grounded analysis of its unfolding in specific cities. Based on an extroverted understanding of place (Massey, 1994), such an approach can offer novel explanations of how a Chinese-led strategy coalesces with diverse transnational, national and local, private and state interests, and materialises within diverse urban contexts producing homogeneity, unevenness and heterogeneity (Apostolopoulou, 2020a; Lefebvre, 1974). My goal is to contribute to initiating a dialogue on a crucial and unexamined aspect of the New Silk Road that has the potential to inspire a new research agenda transforming geographical and urban research on infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality.

In the next sections, I identify three important shifts towards the above direction. It is worth noting that the theoretical reflections that follow are grounded on my ongoing empirical research in a number of cities across the global South and North where BRI projects are being materialised, profoundly transforming urban space and the geographies of everyday lives in the city.

2 | A NOVEL GEOGRAPHICAL AGENDA ON SILK ROAD URBANISATION

By placing its emergence within the broader infrastructure turn (Dodson, 2017; Turner, 2020), I consider urbanisation and its interrelationship with infrastructure a defining and under-theorised aspect of the BRI that is driving urban transformation within and beyond China at a historically unparalleled scale. By paying attention to the political economy context within which the BRI was launched, I explicitly link the initiative to the response of the Chinese government to the 2008 global economic crash (Tooze, 2018) through a state-funded economic stimulus package that supported infrastructural development. Geographical analyses of urbanisation patterns beyond and within China (Hsing, 2010) as well as broader research on the interrelationship between the production of urban space and capital accumulation processes (Christophers, 2011; Ekers & Prudham, 2017; Harvey, 2018; Lefebvre, 1974, 2003; Smith, 2010) are key in theorising Silk Road urbanisation and understand the BRI's role as a major spatial fix to capital's global overaccumulation crisis (Harvey, 2016; Summers, 2016; Zhang, 2017). The latter is evidenced in the ways BRI interventions strategically use urban and infrastructural expansion to increase land (exchange) values, expanding the profitability of the real estate industry as well as their ability to absorb surpluses that would otherwise be devalued. This is emblematically manifested in the major resources that China spent since 2013 on BRI projects to absorb capital, commodities, and labour surpluses, and redirect its domestic overcapacity towards overseas infrastructure and investments in the built environment allowing Chinese goods and services to enter new markets.

The way BRI corridors are designed, despite their fuzzy state due to the absence of official cartographic representations of the initiative (Narins & Agnew, 2020), along with the strategic combination of special economic zones (SEZs) with transport infrastructure and investments in the built environment, further confirm the above tendencies by manifesting a clear aim to use large-scale infrastructure to facilitate transnational trade and boost urban growth. This underlines the importance of economic connectivity for the BRI (Flint & Zhu, 2019) and signals a strategic attempt to reduce spatial barriers to facilitate capital flows by integrating subnational urban systems into transnational territories through networked infrastructure mega-projects (Schindler and Kanai, 2021). Moreover, and relatedly, my ongoing empirical research on selected cities across the global South and North reveals the emergence and gradual domination of novel patterns of BRI urban interventions. These primarily consist of the strategic combination of transport infrastructure, trade corridors, housing and commercial projects, with SEZs, industrial parks and smart cities. Increasing investments in the built environment and urban infrastructure can be seen as capital switching efforts in the sense of redirecting surplus capital that can no longer be absorbed by the productive sector under conditions of over-accumulation to other domains. Crucially, these novel urban formations underline the pivotal role of and complex interrelationship among economic connectivity, transnational trade, transport infrastructure, industrialisation, and investments in the built environment for global urbanisation patterns of contemporary capitalism. These formations show that the BRI is marking a new global era where infrastructure, industrialisation and urbanisation are more complementary than ever (see also UNIDO, 2017).

Another crucial and underexplored aspect here concerns China's New Urbanisation Plan (NUP) that, despite its temporal and spatial coincidence with the BRI, has not yet been related to it. A significant strand of China-focused urban research (Chen et al., 2018; Chu, 2020; Fang & Yu, 2016) has shown that NUP is characterised by a combination of urban–rural integration, urban consumption and services sector expansion with investments in urban infrastructure, public services, and housing. NUP has been considered a strategy designed to increase urban consumption and enhance the nodal roles and "global city" status of Chinese cities by connecting them to Central Asia and Europe through new transport and trade corridors. These patterns are observable in many Silk Road cities and, similarly to evidence coming from Chinese cities (Li et al., 2016), they are increasingly accompanied by extensive land acquisitions and expropriations exacerbating urban inequality (Apostolopoulou, 2021a, 2021b).

Additionally, and relatedly, phenomenal urbanisation in China (Ren, 2013), despite attracting great scholarly attention focusing on its urban formations and governance regimes (Lin & Xu, 2019; Wu et al., 2016), has not yet been linked to the BRI's unfolding beyond China. Here, I identify three central aspects of China's distinct model of urban development that are key in understanding and theorising Silk Road urbanisation. These aspects include the extended commodification of state-owned land as a means of leveraging urban growth, the combination of setting up SEZs and industrial parks with initiating new urban business districts, real-estate developments and urban regeneration projects, and the central role of state-owned enterprises (Hsing, 2010; Jiang & Waley, 2020). As my work on the BRI shows, the above characteristics are not only dominant in many Silk Road cities, but are also blended with previous and current urban legacies that may dominate in each place. In particular, I have so far observed that elements of entrepreneurial, smart, speculative, fast-track, authoritarian, neoliberal austerity, and postcolonial urbanisms (Bruff, 2014; Datta, 2015; Goldman, 2011; Peck, 2012; Roy, 2011; Sheppard et al., 2013) coexist with Chinese state corporatist or state entrepreneurialism urbanisms (Wu, 2018), creating new, distinct urban formations, governance regimes, and politics. An indicative example is the complex ways Chinese state-owned enterprises and city-specific urban investment and development companies (UIDCs), both forms of urban governance that drive China's urban entrepreneurialism and have no clear parallels elsewhere (Jiang & Waley, 2020), interact with transnational, national and local actors, including multilateral agencies, development banks, corporate actors, transnational capital, and national/local governments (Mayer & Zhang, 2020) within and beyond China. One of the distinct outcomes of these interactions is the simultaneous increasing power of Chinese state-owned enterprises in managing strategic public urban infrastructure and novel cross-scale urban growth coalitions. These coalitions support Silk Road urbanisations across diverse urban contexts to agglomerate (cheap) labour, redirect investment into the built environment, reduce spatiotemporal barriers, ensure privileged access into new markets and facilitate capital circulation (Apostolopoulou, 2021a).

3 | BRI's UNEVEN URBAN GEOGRAPHIES: THE URBAN METABOLISM AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF SILK ROAD CITIES

Geographical research focused on the uneven impacts, place-based encounters, local realities and urban lived experiences in the places where BRI projects are materialised remains limited, especially when viewed in comparison to the burgeoning analyses of its geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural aspects (Sidaway et al., 2020). Even though this partly reflects a pragmatic gap since the BRI is still in the making, as stressed in recent calls for grounded analyses (de

Oliveira et al., 2020), it also underlines the need for research approaches that would explicitly focus on understanding how the BRI's uneven geographies influence patterns of urban inequality. In the limited number of existing grounded analyses, a focus on urban areas and cities is rare, with research mostly focused on highways, trade corridors, dam projects, or coal power plants in rural areas.[3]

My ongoing research on selected cities across the global South and North by combining a Lefebvrian understanding of urban space and everyday lives in the city with geographical and urban political ecology theories on urban metabolism that theorise the city as a shifting socio-natural assemblage (Smith, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2006) puts forward the need for an interdisciplinary analysis of the contested nature of BRI-driven, infrastructural, material restructuring of urban space and its effects on the contours of lives, places, and socio-natures. Even though this can offer novel insights on the diverse and interrelated ways Silk Road urbanisation transforms the entire urban fabric by reconfiguring cities as nodes of transnational trade, wealth, and entrepreneurship, such an approach is rare in contemporary BRI scholarship. Seeing the city through such a lens broadens the epistemology of socio-spatial change and the objects of research and analysis to encompass material infrastructures, built environments, ecosystems, policies and laws, governance regimes, ideologies, places, livelihoods, and struggles (McFarlane, 2013). This method allows the capture of phenomenal change initiated by BRI projects that has so far largely escaped the literature, brought about by emblematic interventions in urban space. These interventions include artificial islands, ocean reclamation projects, gated urban communities, consumerism-driven, gentrifying enclaves, coal and industrialisation centric urbanisation processes, and grandiose, futuristic urban projects expressed through neologisms, such as 'aerotropolis' for the city of Zhengzhou where one of China's fastest growing airports is located, and a "green futuristic city" for Forest City in Malaysia where a luxury futuristic city has been created composed of four man-made islands.

The above approach along with a theorisation that considers social, spatial and environmental inequalities as inextricably linked (Apostolopoulou, 2020a, 2020b; Apostolopoulou & Cortes-Vazquez, 2019) can reveal the unequal geographies of BRI projects, shedding light on both existing and novel forms of injustices that Silk Road urbanisation may generate. Empirically this translates to a research programme that pays attention to a range of possible inequalities that characterise BRI-driven urban transformation, including the uneven and gendered vulnerabilities for marginalised groups (e.g., women, migrant labourers) living and working in places where BRI projects are materialised; the exclusion of vulnerable populations, including Indigenous people, from decision-making processes; the exacerbation of accumulation, dispossession and exploitation processes; the enclosure and privatisation of public space and strategic public infrastructure; the intensification of labour precarity; violations of workers' rights; the unequal impacts of techno-social differentiation; the transformation of urban space into logistical spaces, infrastructural hubs, free industrial zones, manufacturing areas, and commercial projects that profoundly alter the geographies of everyday lives by turning cities into industrial enclaves and BRI transit corridors. As my research on exclusionary projects of Silk Road urban development shows, BRI-driven urban transformation also interacts with past genealogies that in the global South involve city beautification programmes that entailed mass evictions of the urban poor, demolitions and displacements of marginalised urban communities from city centres, as well as with austerity politics and controversial urban regeneration and gentrification programs in the global North, intensifying housing precarity, urban marginality, social segregation, territorial stigmatisation and discrimination.

A key aspect of the above research is the way Silk Road urban formations and politics produce and exacerbate urban inequality. In Sihanoukville, for example, the establishment of the first SEZ based on the principles of the Shenzhen model, led to the establishment of foreign, including Chinese, enterprises that took advantage of the city's maritime location, ease-of-business adjustments, and cheap production and labour costs. Shenzhen's transition into an urban centre of accumulation is a feature that Cambodia attempted to replicate in Sihanoukville. As empirical evidence shows, this is instigating two forms of inequality and discrimination in the city: first, between existing landowners and local businesses as rental prices increase beyond the capacity of low-income workers to pay them; and second, between the growing Chinese diaspora and the Cambodian community. In Khorghos, however, the BRI's attempt to dematerialise borders and promote the free trade of goods, ideas, and cultures through a cross-border free-trade zone, namely the International Border Cooperation Centre (ICBC), has been followed by the increasing securitisation of the border crossing to reach the ICBC. While the majority of visitors to the ICBC are Kazakh citizens from Almaty who come in multiple busloads to purchase cheap Chinese goods, the same level of freedom is not afforded to non-Han Chinese (ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic peoples in Xinjiang) who are the demographic majority in China's largest autonomous region. The selective permeability of the cross-border free-trade zone is pernicious to these ethnic minorities and, far from being a zone of socio-cultural engagement, the Gateway highlights the struggle of China's security urban politics against the BRI's discourse of openness and connectivity.

4 | TOWARDS a POSTCOLONIAL, COMPARATIVE AND COMMUNITY-ENGAGED URBAN RESEARCH AGENDA

A geographical agenda on Silk Road urbanisation by definition responds to longstanding postcolonial calls because it shifts the focus of urban theory-making beyond the West (Robinson & Roy, 2016) and theories that treat northern urbanisation as the norm (Sheppard et al., 2013). Towards developing a novel comparative methodology capable of theorising a global, diverse phenomenon, I put forward the need to draw on postcolonial geographies, comparative urbanism and countertopography (Hart, 2018; Katz, 2011; McFarlane & Robinson, 2012) to initiate a relational comparison of diverse histories, urban trajectories and cities. Three more specific proposals are given below that can lead to innovative theory building.

First, it is imperative to compare the practice of Silk Road urbanisation within China and across Asia, ranging from setting up SEZs and industrial parks to new urban business districts, real estate development and urban regeneration, with urban practices in cities across the global South and North. This comparison has not been made as yet, at least not in any comprehensive way. Second, a relational comparison of diverse urbanisation trajectories of Silk Road cities is needed to grasp the complex dialectics of heterogeneity and homogeneity in the geographical patterns of Silk Road urbanisation. As my ongoing research demonstrates, places involved in the BRI range from highly urbanised cities (e.g., London, UK) and cities experiencing a phenomenal urbanisation in the last decade (e.g., Xi'an, China), to places now undergoing a rural-to-urban transition (e.g., Kathmandu, Nepal) and newly created cities (e.g., Forest City, Malaysia). A key aspect of this demanding endeavour entails exploring the role of power in producing and contesting (or not) comparisons between diverse cities. Indeed, in the context of the New Silk Road it is typical to rename places according to the cities they wish to resemble, foreclosing more inclusive imaginaries of urban futures (McFarlane, 2010). Djibouti, one of the principal East African BRI beneficiaries where infrastructural megaprojects are currently materialised, is called the "new Dubai," and Piraeus Port in Greece is the "new Docklands." Third, even though Silk Road urbanisation is a highly contested process that is fashioned by local social relations and power struggles, comparisons of social struggles across Silk Road cities, including urban struggles and everyday practices of resistance in Chinese cities, are absent from the literature. This absence prevents the understanding of factors that shape and differentiate urban resistance and the spatialities of grassroots activism. Here, I suggest a radical re-conceptualisation of Silk Road urbanisation as the product of social and political struggle, an approach that is missing not only from contemporary BRI scholarship but also from comparative urbanism more broadly. By considering the particularities of place as key in the emergence of social struggles and by using countermapping and community-engaged research, I argue that such an approach can offer novel insights into the collective and individual strategies through which urban dwellers remake urban space, social relations and everyday lives, and ultimately, Silk Road urbanisations on the ground, by redrawing the socio-spatial and cognitive maps of the city along lines of class, gender, and race. Most importantly, it has the power to move beyond generic theorisations and offer a real-world analysis that acknowledges the centrality of people's struggles in shaping the urban.

It has to be noted here that the unprecedented scale of the initiative and the unusual breadth of BRI interventions necessitates empirical research to expand across different continents and cities. This is posing significant challenges for geographical research, requiring, inter alia, international collaborations and novel research networks, but is also central to innovative theory building processes. Relational comparison, grounded in Lefebvrian conceptions of the production of space, place and scale, would be key to such an approach because it can offer an in-depth understanding of diverse histories, urbanisms and urban trajectories of different cities to develop a novel comparative methodology capable of theorising a global, diverse phenomenon.

5 | CONCLUSION

The introduction of the concept of Silk Road urbanisation responds to two important gaps in the literature. First, the gap in analysing China's emerging hegemony in infrastructural development and its distinct role in shaping contemporary urbanisation patterns beyond its borders. Second, it also addresses a broader gap: even though infrastructure has been a key concern for urban scholars and there is an important emerging literature that links the emergence of the New Silk Road with infrastructure-led development (Hildyard & Sol, 2017; Schindler & Kanai, 2021), the implications of the global rise of the latter, especially in the period following the 2008 financial crash, for urbanisation patterns and urban practices remain under-explored (Dodson, 2017). The major need for urban geography to understand and theorise the global

rise of infrastructure-led development becomes evident if we consider that the latter by driving socio-spatial and socio-environmental urban transformation within and beyond the limits of the traditional city is unevenly and profoundly rescripting urban space across the global South and North at an unprecedented scale.

Therefore, a major need has been created for new research approaches explicitly focused on the ways the BRI, as an exemplar of infrastructure-led development, is reconfiguring patterns of urban inequality affecting urban lives in a growing number of cities, in a systematic, theoretically robust and empirically grounded way. As I argue elsewhere (Apostolopoulou, 2021a), evidence from my ongoing research shows that Silk Road urbanisation signals a new stage of authoritarian, infrastructure-led, neoliberal urbanism characterised by the aggressive prioritisation of private profits, corporate interests, and multinational, cross-scale growth coalitions over the infrastructures of social reproduction. This has so far engendered a type of revanchist and authoritarian urban development that deepens spatial fragmentation, territorial stigmatisation, and social segregation expressed, inter alia, in the uneven redirection of surplus capital, the establishment of SEZs that sit outside traditional understandings of statecraft and advance anti-democratic agendas (Wiig, 2019), and the creation of urban spaces of exception, graduated sovereignty, nature's exploitation and workers' precarisation. A geographical agenda on Silk Road urbanisation has the potential to deepen these initial analyses and unravel what makes Silk Road urban formations, governance, and politics both *distinct* from broader capitalist urbanisation and *diverse* across cityscapes transforming geographical and urban research on infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality, and informing critical, beyond the state of the art, thinking on the future of cities and urban dwellers across the globe.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Elia Apostolopoulou https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8166-4639

ENDNOTES

[1] See https://reconasia-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/filer_public/e0/22/e0228017-7463-46fc-9094-0465a6f1ca23/vision_and_actions_on_jointly_building_silk_road_economic_belt_and_21st-century_maritime_silk_road.pdf

[2] See also https://www.merics.org/en/bri-tracker/interactive-map

[3] See two recent special issues in *Political Geography* (https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/political-geography/special-issue/10H61ZGZNZD) and in *Environment and Planning C* (https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/epc/38/5). Even though both issues offer valuable insights from the BRI's implementation on the ground, none of the 17 included papers focus on urbanisation or cities.

REFERENCES

Apostolopoulou, E. (2020a) *Nature swapped and nature lost: Biodiversity offsetting, urbanisation and social justice*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer-Palgrave.

Apostolopoulou, E. (2020b) Beyond post-politics: Offsetting, depoliticisation, and contestation in a community struggle against executive housing. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(2), 345–361. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12354

Apostolopoulou, E. (2021a) Tracing the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation, and inequality in China's belt and road initiative. *Antipode*, 53, 831–858. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12699

Apostolopoulou, E. (2021b) How China's Belt and Road Initiative is changing cities—and threatening communities. The Conversation UK. Available at https://theconversation.com/how-chinas-belt-androad-initiative-is-changing-cities-and-threatening-communities-153515?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=bylinetwitterbutton

Apostolopoulou, E. & Cortes-Vazquez, J. (2019) *The right to nature: Environmental justice, social movements and neoliberal natures*. Oxon, UK: Routledge-Earthscan.

Brenner, N., Peck, J. & Theodore, N. (2010) Variegated neoliberalization: Geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks*, 10, 182–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00277.x

Bruff, I. (2014) The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism. *Rethinking Marxism*, 26, 113–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.843250

Chen, M., Liu, W., Lu, D., Chen, H. & Ye, C. (2018) Progress of China's new-type urbanisation construction since 2014: A preliminary assessment. *Cities*, 78, 180–193. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.02.012

Christophers, B. (2011) Revisiting the urbanisation of capital. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101, 1347–1364. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.583569

Chu, Y.W. (2020) China's new urbanisation plan: Progress and structural constraints. *Cities*, 103, 102736. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102736

Datta, A. (2015) New urban utopias of postcolonial India: 'Entrepreneurial urbanisation' in Dholera smart city, Gujarat. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820614565748

DiCarlo, J. & Schindler, S. (2020) Will Biden pass the America LEADS Act and start a new Cold War with China? Global Policy. Available at https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/10/12/2020/will-biden-pass-america-leads-act-and-start-new-cold-war-china

Dodson, J. (2017) The global infrastructure turn and urban practice. *Urban Policy and Research*, 35, 87–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2017.1284036

Eder, T. (2018) *Mapping the belt and road initiative*. Berlin, Germany: Mercator Institute for China Studies.

Ekers, M. & Prudham, S. (2017) The metabolism of socioecological fixes: Capital switching, spatial fixes, and the production of nature. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 107, 1370–1388. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1309962

Fang, C. & Yu, D. (2016) *China's new urbanisation*. Berlin, Germany & Beijing, China: Springer.

Ferdinand, P. (2016) Westward ho—The China dream and 'one belt, one road'. *International Affairs*, 92(4), 941–957. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12660

Flint, C. & Zhu, C. (2019) The geopolitics of connectivity, cooperation, and hegemonic competition: The belt and road initiative. *Geoforum*, 99, 95–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.12.008

Goldman, M. (2011) Speculative urbanism and the making of the next world city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35, 555–581. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.01001.x

Gramsci, A. (1971) In: Hoare, Q. & Smith, G.N. (Eds. and trans), *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Hart, G. (2018) Relational comparison revisited: Marxist postcolonial geographies in practice. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(3), 371–394. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516681388

Harvey, D. (2016) *The ways of the World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2018) *The limits to capital*. London, UK & New York, NY: Verso books.

Hildyard, N. & Sol, X. (2017) *How infrastructure is shaping the world: A critical introduction to infrastructure mega-corridors*. Brussels, Belgium: Counter Balance.

Hsing, Y.T. (2010) *The great urban transformation: Politics of land and property in China*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Jiang, Y. & Waley, P. (2020) Who builds cities in China? How urban investment and development companies have transformed shanghai. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 44(4), 636–651. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12918

Jing, C., Tao, H., Jiang, T., Wang, Y., Zhai, J., Cao, L. et al. (2020) Population, urbanisation and economic scenarios over the Belt and Road region under the Shared Socioeconomic Pathways. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 30(1), 68–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-020-1715-x

Katz, C. (2011) Accumulation, excess, childhood: Toward a countertopography of risk and waste. *Documents D'anàlisi Geogràfica*, 57, 47–60.

Lee, S.O., Wainwright, J. & Glassman, J. (2018) Geopolitical economy and the production of territory. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50(2), 416–436. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17701727

Lefebvre, H. (1974) *La production de l'espace [The production of space]*. Paris, France: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, H. (2003) *The urban revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Li, B., Chen, C. & Hu, B. (2016) Governing urbanisation and the new urbanisation plan in China. *Environment and Urbanisation*, 28(2), 515–534. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247816647345

Lin, G.C. & Xu, Z. (2019) Remaking China's urban space of the spectacle: Mega-events, temporary growth, and uneven spatial transformation in Shanghai. *Geoforum*, 102, 126–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.03.013

Linlin, L., Huadong, G. & Pesaresi, M. (2017) Remote sensing of urbanisation dynamics along the Belt and Road. *Bulletin of Chinese Academy of Sciences*, 32(1), 74–81.

Liu, H., Fang, C., Miao, Y., Ma, H., Zhang, Q. & Zhou, Q. (2018) Spatio-temporal evolution of population and urbanisation in the countries along the Belt and Road 1950–2050. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 28(7), 919–936. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-018-1513-x

Massey, D. (1994) *Space, place and gender*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Mayer, M. & Zhang, X. (2020) Theorizing China-world integration: Sociospatial reconfigurations and the modern silk roads. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(4), 974–1003. https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1741424

McFarlane, C. (2010) The comparative city: Knowledge, learning, urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34(4), 725–742. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.00917.x

McFarlane, C. (2013) Metabolic inequalities in Mumbai. Beyond telescopic urbanism. *City*, 17(4), 498–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.812354

McFarlane, C. & Robinson, J. (2012) Introduction-experiments in comparative urbanism. *Urban Geography*, 33(6), 765–773. https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.33.6.765

MERICS (2018) Mapping the belt and road initiative. *Mercator Institute for China Studies*. https://www.merics.org/en/bri-tracker/interactive-map

Muhammad, S., Long, X., Salman, M. & Dauda, L. (2020) Effect of urbanisation and international trade on CO_2 emissions across 65 belt and road initiative countries. *Energy*, 196, 117102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.energy.2020.117102

Narins, T.P. & Agnew, J. (2020) Missing from the map. *Geopolitics*, 25, 809–837. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1601082

Nordin, A.H. & Weissmann, M. (2018) Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order. *International Affairs*, 94, 231–249. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix242

OECD. (2018) *The belt and road initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape*. Paris, France: OECD.

Oliveira, G.D.L.T., Murton, G., Rippa, A., Harlan, T. & Yang, Y. (2020) China's belt and road initiative: Views from the ground. *Political Geography*, 82, 102225. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102225

Peck, J. (2012) Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy. *City*, 16(6), 626–655. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2012.734071

Ren, X. (2013) *Urban China*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Robinson, J. & Roy, A. (2016) Debate on global urbanisms and the nature of urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 40(1), 181–186. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12272

Roy, A. (2011) Postcolonial urbanism: Speed, hysteria, mass dreams. In: Roy, A. & Ong, A. (Eds.), *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 307–335.

Schindler, S. & Kanai, J.M. (2021) Getting the territory right: Infrastructure-led development and the re-emergence of spatial planning strategies. *Regional Studies*, 51, 40–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1661984

Seone, M.F.V. (2020) Alibaba's discourse for the digital Silk Road. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 13(1), 68–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1606838

Sheppard, E., Leitner, H. & Maringanti, A. (2013) Provincializing global urbanism: A manifesto. *Urban Geography*, 34(7), 893–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2013.807977

Sidaway, J.D., Rowedder, S.C., Woon, C.Y., Lin, W. & Pholsena, V. (2020) Politics and spaces of China's belt and road initiative. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38(5), 795–802. https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420911410

Smith, N. (2010) *Uneven development: Nature, capital, and the production of space*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Summers, T. (2016) China's 'New Silk Roads': Sub-national regions and networks of global political economy. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(9), 1628–1643. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1153415

Summers, T. (2020) Negotiating the boundaries of China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38(5), 809–813. https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420911410b

Swyngedouw, E. (2006) Circulations and metabolisms: (Hybrid) natures and (cyborg) cities. *Science as Culture*, 15(2), 105–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505430600707970

Tooze, A. (2018) *How a decade of financial crises changed the world*. New York, NY: Allen Lane.

Turner, C. (2020) *The infrastructured state: Territoriality and the national infrastructure system*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization). (2017) When industry meets the city: The Belt and Road Initiative. Available at: https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/makingit_24_full_web_0.pdf

Wiig, A. (2019) Incentivized urbanization in Philadelphia: The local politics of globalized zones. *Journal of Urban Technology*, 26(3), 111–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/10630732.2019.1573628

Wiig, A. & Silver, J. (2019) Turbulent presents, precarious futures: Urbanisation and the deployment of global infrastructure. *Regional Studies*, 53(6), 912–923. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1566703

Williams, J., Robinson, C. & Bouzarovski, S. (2020) China's Belt and Road Initiative and the emerging geographies of global urbanisation. *The Geographical Journal*, 186(1), 128–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12332

Woon, C.Y. (2020) Framing the "Polar Silk Road" (冰上丝绸之路): Critical geopolitics, Chinese scholars and the (re)positionings of China's Arctic interests. *Political Geography*, 78, 102141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102141

World Bank. (2017) *World development indicators*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Wu, F.L. (2018) Planning centrality, market instruments: Governing Chinese urban transformation under state entrepreneurialism. *Urban Studies*, 55, 1383–1399. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017721828

Wu, Y., Li, X. & Lin, G.C. (2016) Reproducing the city of the spectacle: Mega-events, local debts, and infrastructure-led urbanisation in China. *Cities*, 53, 51–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2016.01.004

Zhang, X. (2017) Chinese capitalism and the maritime silk road: A world-systems perspective. *Geopolitics*, 22(2), 310–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1289371

Zheng, H.W., Bouzarovski, S., Knuth, S., Panteli, M., Schindler, S., Ward, K. et al. (2021) Interrogating China's global urban presence. *Geopolitics*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1901084

How to cite this article: Apostolopoulou, E. (2021) A novel geographical research agenda on Silk Road urbanisation. *The Geographical Journal*, 00, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12412