

Unpacking the spatial imaginaries of ‘One Belt, One Road’- from representation to performativity

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Introduction

In 2013, China sought to respond to depressed demand in the global economy by launching a major macro-economic initiative known as ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR). This seeks to re-imagine the traditional trade links that existed between China, much of Asia and Europe dating back over thousands of years, in what became popularised as ‘the Silk Road’. This initiative has a number of spatial dimensions and implications, ranging from infrastructural projects, regional development to Eurasian geopolitics. This short paper considers the OBOR concept from the perspective of spatial imaginaries in terms of both representational and performative discourse. The latter is a useful conceptual lens for interpreting and interrogating how the OBOR vision may affect material practices and geographies for spatial planners who are engaged in strategy and place-making in territories that come within the ambit of OBOR.

‘OBOR’ as a representational discourse

Much discussion of spatial imaginaries has viewed them as being representational discourses, placing an emphasis on interpreting how they are constituted linguistically through text and images (Watkins, 2015). Applying this perspective, the OBOR initiative can be seen as seeking to (re)represent the spatial imaginary of ‘the Silk Road’ – the diverse trading routes, dating back thousands of years, connecting Europe, much of Asia, and ultimately reaching into China and the city now known as Xi’an. The way the OBOR initiative is being represented linguistically and through images, seeks to reassert a spatial imaginary created by such material links. The term ‘Silk Road’ is itself relatively recent, having been coined by the German geographer and traveller Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, when ironically the importance of these trade routes had temporarily diminished. The Silk Road, in the singular, was also to an extent a misnomer, as in practice, it comprised a number of overland and maritime networks connecting places together to facilitate the two-way trade of goods and services. Yet, even though the linguistic representation of the Silk Road was an oversimplification of the material and geographical reality of the trade links between and through its constituent territories, and its emergence coincided with the decline of the importance of these trade routes, it nevertheless has anchored a powerful spatial imaginary which resonates to the present day. The very term ‘The Silk Road’ may conjure-up an imaginary of camel trains, encampments under starry desert

night skies, and the sights, sounds and smells of ‘exotic’ and ‘faraway’ (for Europeans!) cities like Tashkent and Tehran. In associating the trade route(s) with the material silk, the term also tied into the western perceptions of ‘the East’ as a place of luxury, sensory stimulation, and fulfilment. The imaginary of the Silk Road carries echoes of the western ‘Orientalism’ identified by Edward Said (1978) in which ‘The East’ and its places, peoples and traditions were variously patronised, romanticised, loved, feared and othered through linguistic and visual representations. Such representations also served to legitimate the various acts of Western colonial expansion and imperial dominion over other peoples and territories. Yet it should also be remembered that the trade links and cultural influences flowed in both directions along the Silk Road, and its legacy is also claimed beyond Europe. For example, in X’ian it forms an important part of the city’s identity, marketing and ‘tourist offer’. Indeed one of the striking features of OBOR is that it seeks to appropriate and reanimate the (originally) ‘European’ terminology and spatial imaginary of the Silk Road for the material ends of re-establishing spaces for co-operation based on reconnecting, or better connecting, places largely through improving infrastructure connections (see Map 1).

Launched by the current Chinese President Xi Jinping, the initiative is intended to be a long-term vision for the next thirty-five years. It envisages three overland routes (‘The Silk Road Economic Belt’ including both road and rail) and one maritime route (Aoyama, 2016). The principles of peace and co-operation, openness and inclusiveness in decision-making, mutual learning and benefit are foregrounded by the initiative’s promoters in arguing that the initiative will help create ‘win-win’ situations for all those involved. President Xi Jinping has stated that the OBOR initiative “should be jointly built through consultation to meet the interests of all, and efforts should be made to integrate the development strategies of the countries along the routes. It is not closed but open and inclusive; it is not a solo by China but a chorus of all countries along the routes” (cited in CBBC and FCO, n.d.). Yet there are also some commentators who see the initiative as China flexing its economic muscles as part of an agenda to develop as a hegemonic global power, or at least seeking new markets to help absorb over capacity in her home market thereby avoiding, or mitigating, a domestic economic crisis. Indeed, Aoyama (2016, 22) argues that a key question as the initiative develops will be whether China is ‘able to convince the world that it is not a threat but rather an opportunity?’

‘OBOR’ as a ‘performative’ spatial imaginary

For Watkins (2015: 519) a performative view of spatial imaginaries examines how they ‘influence the material practices producing our geographies’ and help overcome a ‘representation-then-action’ view of causality whilst also stressing how material practices may also modify spatial imaginaries. Similarly, Davoudi notes how ‘ideas and practices are not rival causal agencies’, adding that the existing literature on spatial imaginaries “largely focuses on the social construction of spatial imaginaries and much less on the role of space and place in the construction of social imaginaries” (Davoudi, 2018: X). This attention to space and place seems particularly important in a ‘performative account’ of spatial imaginary because it involves considering not only how the spatial imaginary of OBOR may be affecting material practices, but also how material practices within the territories it covers may modify the spatial imaginary of OBOR. We have shown how OBOR has been represented through a discourse that seeks to reanimate the spatial imaginary of the Silk Road with hoped for material effects in terms of improved communication routes both by land and sea, and increased trade links. The investments and infrastructure associated with OBOR may, for example, modify the relational geographical position of places creating a variety of spatial development opportunities and challenges. To date sixty five separate nation states have become associated with the initiative and a newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has been created, intended to support infrastructure investment in the Asia-Pacific area. As an initiative which covers such a range and number of countries across Asia and Europe, the places which are, or become connected/reconnected to the new revived and re-imagined networks are likely to have distinctive experiences that may in turn/in time modify its underpinning spatial imaginary.

This turn towards performativity encourages debates on spatial imaginaries which go ‘beyond text,’ giving greater emphasis to material practices and how these in turn may modify imaginaries. Thus, the practice focused research might explore how planners and other place makers respond to imaginaries promoted through mobilising visions such as OBOR. Reflecting planning’s character as an interventionist social practice (Taylor, 1998), it is unsurprising that planning history is full of examples of spatial imaginaries which have emerged, become collectively shared by groups of people, and gone on to achieve performative agency (Davoudi, 2018). Planning scholarship may also offer avenues for the analytical development of the ‘performative turn’ in spatial imaginaries research. For example, the performance school of plan evaluation, developed by Dutch planning theorists, similarly emphasises the performative

role of strategic planning (Mastop and Faludi, 1997). Here strategic spatial plans, frameworks, visions and doctrines are viewed as instruments which frame spatially significant decision-making and action, and considered to be ‘performing’ when they play “a tangible role in the choices of the actors” to whom they are addressed (Faludi 2000: 306). When decision makers imagine or interpret a message of a plan and modify it to their specific local context, the plan might be said to have ‘generative capacity’ (Faludi 2001b). Whilst OBOR is described as an ‘initiative’ rather than a strategy, or a policy, and is far more fluid in character than a formal spatial plan, it nevertheless articulates a spatial imaginary to be operationalised through spatialized investments. Given the diversity of territories and contexts across which the OBOR applies, the performance view of spatial strategy evaluation, may offer one line of enquiry through which the performativity of its spatial imaginary could be assessed.

Conclusion

Both ‘representational’ and ‘performative’ paradigms of spatial imaginaries offer useful perspectives to help define research agendas in relation to OBOR. It also seems clear that such research should not be undertaken in a de-territorialised vacuum, as the transformative spatial imaginary that is articulated through OBOR becomes performative through a process of context-dependent re-territorialisation in which material practices and the actions of planners and other place-shapers may modify the initial spatial imaginary. Such processes may mirror those which have shaped the evolution of the planning discipline and informed performance based conceptions of strategic planning. Apprehending OBOR from the perspective of performative spatial imaginaries also directs our attention to further practice-based and political issues and potential impacts. Macro-economic policies and initiatives, especially those linked to global trade and trade liberalisation may be negotiated from a national or a ‘global-region’ perspective (e.g. the EU), and, as in the case of OBOR, these may typically be promoted as offering ‘win-win’ outcomes. Yet in practice, the impacts of such initiatives are often spatially uneven, and if planning is conceived of as a futures orientated activity, then planners surely need to be aware of how such wider factors and settings, and associated ways of imagining space, notably through ‘spatial transformation imaginaries’ (Watkins, 2015), have the potential to shape their localities. For, as Davoudi (2018, X) notes, individuals such as planners are not just cogs ‘in the machine’ but themselves political actors who are ‘engaging with and transforming the world’ potentially transcending the boundaries of the ‘dominant spatial imaginaries’ within which they operate.

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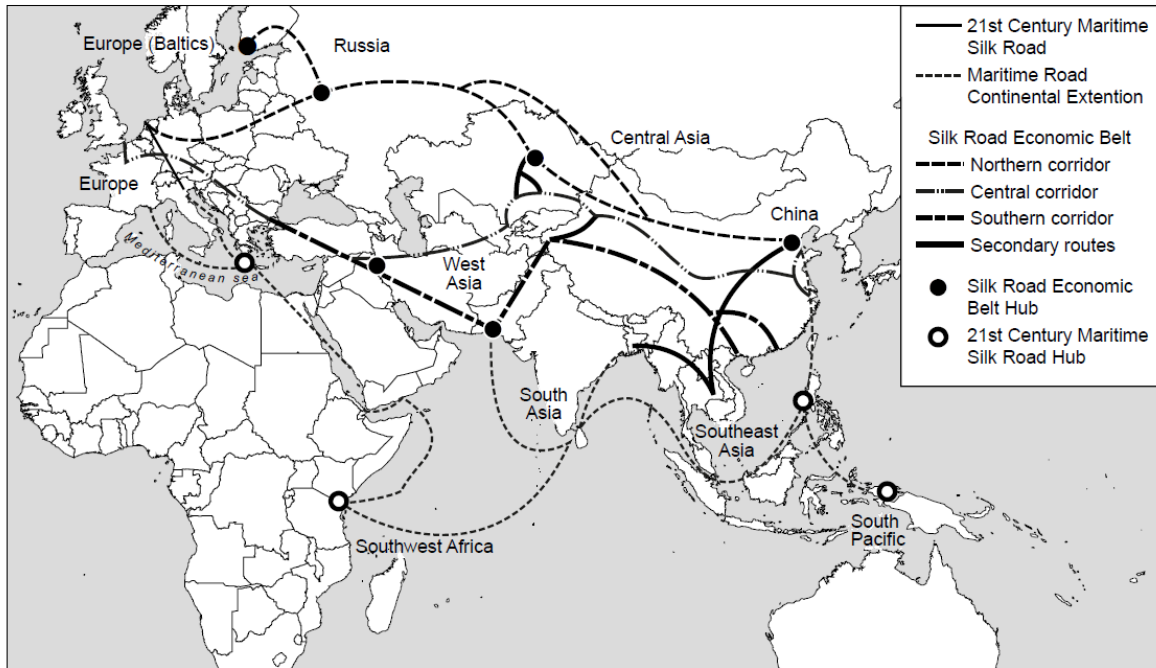
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Map 1: 'One Belt, One Road' corridors and nodes

Source: Suzanne Yee, Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool, based on a map produced by China Investment Research (20150

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