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Hoffman, I.; Visser, O.; Kalinovsky, A.

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Introduction: Encounters after the Soviet collapse: The contemporary Chinese presence in the former Soviet Union border zone

Irna Hofman, Oane Visser, and Artemy Kalinovsky

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Abstract:

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of the former Soviet Union's borders, cross border interactions between the former Soviet Union states and China have augmented, and particularly the impetus given by the Chinese authorities to the Belt and Road Initiative has increased the presence of various Chinese actors in the countries along China's western border. Notably, China's 'going global' has received increasingly scholarly attention in the past few years. Hitherto comparative analyses or in-depth case studies on Chinese presence in the states along China's western border are yet sparse. By focusing on specific actors and on the ground interactions, this special issue, which includes case studies of the interactions between Chinese and Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik actors, aims to show a) the diversity in scope, actors and modalities of involvement, and b) the sometimes ambiguous goals and interests within China's going out strategy in the region. At the same time, it aims to present a more close-up study of the responses of the population in the host states. Through a focus on encounters on the ground, imaginaries, and perceptions, we aim to get deeper insights in the character and consequences of China's involvement in the post-Soviet border region.

¹ University of Oxford, Faculty of Oriental Studies, UK. E-mail: irna.hofman@orinst.ox.ac.uk

² International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, part of Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: visser@iss.nl, website: www.iss.nl/visser

³ University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities, the Netherlands. E-mail: a.m.kalinovsky@uva.nl

1. China's Silk Road endeavours from below

"To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an 'economic belt along the Silk Road'" (Xi Jinping 2013).⁴

"Tajikistan will continue to push deep coordination between our national strategy and the BRI and actively strengthen our regional cooperation, thus reaching more projects" (Emomali Rahmon 2019).⁵

On the 7th of September 2013 Xi Jinping announced China's Belt and Road Initiative, also called the One Belt One Road (OBOR). Since that day, Chinese projects ranging from small to large, and from private commodity trade to state-sanctioned loans and investments, are presented as part of this gargantuan initiative. The overwhelming impetus given by the Chinese authorities to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as provisions for Chinese companies and credit provided by Chinese banks (such as the Chinese Development Bank), highlights the increased importance of the initiative, in which China's direct border zone appears important. While Central Asia is a destination for Chinese goods and investments in itself, beyond that it has become an important transit area for the new Silk Road between China and the large EU market, with a new, big railway and road transport hub like Khorgos in Kazakhstan, now constituting an important knot connecting Beijing all the way by rail with London, and the - now Chinese owned- Greek port Piraeus. Such hubs with their new connections have been labelled "game changers" (Dave 2018, 99, see also Rolland 2017) as they potentially benefit recipient countries. These developments not only allow unprecedented large volumes of goods to travel over land, but simultaneously generate a rapid rise in manifold exchanges between Chinese investors, shuttle traders, overseas farmers and other Chinese citizens and Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Russian ones.⁶

⁴<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/database/events/president-xi-jinpings-speech-nazarbayev-university/> (Accessed 5 February 2020).

⁵ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/26/WS5cc26932a3104842260b8863.html> (Accessed 5 February 2020).

⁶ Turkmenistan remains much more isolated than the other Central Asian states, and insights on the Chinese presence in the Turkmen economy and society remain limited as a result of the difficulty to conduct research and journalism in the country.

In countries receiving increasing Chinese attention and investments, the developments, in forms of flows of money, people, and goods, have triggered and strengthened a lot of ideas and “imaginaries” of what “China” aims for, does, and wants. These on the ground exchanges, daily encounters and the expectations and imaginaries connected to them, constitute the main focus of this special issue. As such, this special issue addresses China’s going global in Central Asia and Russia’s Far East “from below”. It studies the incarnations of these global tendencies (and the local responses they generate) on the ground by zooming on the micro-level with the help of ethnography and local surveys. Such an approach has been virtually absent so far in the surge of attention for China’s BRI. An exception is the special issue in the Central Asian Survey (see Alff 2016; Parham 2016; Steenberg 2016). However, that issue focused exclusively on border interactions along China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), whereas the special issue this article introduces, investigates encounters beyond the immediate border, treating Central Asia and the Southern areas of Russia’s Far East as one large region of intensifying cross-border exchanges.

Analyses of China’s role in the former Soviet border region have remained largely macro, with a focus on state- or even Central Asia level politics and economics, and broad discourses (such as the work by Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012; Kerr 2010), perhaps due to the difficulties associated with conducting research in this geographic space largely ruled by authoritarian regimes.⁷ While macro-level analyses give us important insights in state-level interactions, including within multilateral organisations (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, focused primarily on the aspect of security and the three “evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism), at the same time, such a macro view has the danger of leading to a monolithic approach to “China” and actions undertaken by Chinese actors.

The financing of the BRI has also gained increasing attention from policy-makers, media, and also from academia in the past few years (see for instance Lai *et al.* 2020, Bräutigam 2020). Yet already before the launch of the BRI foreign capital injections by the Chinese state and

⁷ Further, the scant history of international studies on the region due to the isolation caused by the sharp borders between the Soviet Union on the one hand, and both China and the West on the other, also has not been conducive to fieldwork.

Chinese banks, in the form of aid and loans, triggered a lot of attention in which particularly “debt trap diplomacy” featured prominently (Bräutigam 2020, Lai *et al.* 2020). Debt owed by Central Asian states to China is also frequently discussed in international media and by local actors in the Central Asian region, yet a matter we do not engage with in this special issue.

We instead focus on interactions “on the ground”. In doing so this special issue aims to show a) the *diversity* in scope, actors and modalities of involvement, and b) the sometimes *ambiguous* goals and interests within China’s going out strategy in the region. Our special issue particularly focuses on imaginaries and perceptions of China held by different strata in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia. In doing so it aims to present a more close-up study of c) the *responses* of the rural population (or better, different actors within it) in the host states. Through a focus on encounters on the ground, applying amongst others “ethnographies of encounter” (Faier and Rofel 2014), this special issue aims to get deeper insights in the nature and consequences of China’s involvement in the post-Soviet border region (on frontier encounters see also Billé *et al.* 2012).

As a result of the growing interactions in the border zone, there is a host of actors involved in the Central Asian/Russian border region. The contributing papers cover a variety of countries from the Post-Soviet/Central Asian borderlands (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), and a range of actors. The papers have an extensive empirical base with insights from recent field research. They provide insights from ethnography and surveys and analyses encounters, interactions and attitudes that take place on the ground, while also drawing out the wider importance of these case studies for understanding the Chinese presence in the region at large, and possibly beyond.

Next to the bottom-up view, another feature of this special issue is that it does not only engage with the contemporary developments, but actively and critically engages with the role of imaginaries of the *future*, as well as legacies (and imaginaries) of the *past* in shaping current encounters. The importance of these temporalities in understanding the current encounters within China’s BRI, is aptly captured by Karrar (2016, 335), who noted that: “The Silk Road is a flexible trope, capturing everything from an imaginary of an idyllic past to a futuristic vision of hyper-connectivity between states.” Therefore, the next sections of this introductory article

will briefly discuss the envisaged *future* and the relevant *histories* that inform current encounters.

The following, second, section will discuss the *future* orientation as expressed in official plans and projections regarding the BRI and China's role in the region. The subsequent two sections will address the *past*. Beyond superficial references to the history of the old Silk Road, which are abundant in both policy, media and academic accounts of China's rising role, nuanced attention to the continuities between China's current role in Central Asia and more recent histories - such as Moscow's role during the Soviet era, or China's role in the Tsarist era - is scarce (see Lin 2018 for Chinese presence Tsarist Russia). Section three will discuss the Soviet past, focusing on continuities (and differences) between Moscow's influence in the region during the Soviet era (and local responses to that influence), whereas section four will explore Beijing's role in the pre-Soviet era, which was rather large, until it rapidly vanished after the distancing of communist China and the USSR during the 1960s, and the virtual closing of all the border crossings. Section five will introduce the individual papers of this special issue.

2. Plans and Projections: The envisaged future of China in Central Asia and Russia's Far East

Since the 2000s, that is, before the official launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's "going global" received growing media and scholarly attention. Particularly the growing Chinese presence on the African continent has been widely scrutinised, through cross-country studies and detailed case studies (Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, Driessen 2019, Lee 2016). However, comparative analyses or in-depth case studies on Chinese presence in the states along China's North-Western border is yet sparse (Zhou 2017 and Hofman 2016 are some exceptions), while the characteristics and implications of China's "going global" cannot be fathomed without a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which Chinese "going out" takes shape in China's direct vicinity – an objective which also drives this special issue.

Macro-level studies and reports of the BRI, in Central Asia and other regions, often focus on the future risks and threats coming along with China's growing global influence (on the environmental impacts, see for instance Tracy *et al.* 2017). The country's loans and investments are said to be particularly attractive for resource-scarce and cash-strapped states, such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and – outside Central Asia – countries such as Pakistan and Sri

Lanka. Indebtedness, in turn, can provide Chinese actors access to essential raw materials that are in high demand in China's domestic economy, through a so-called debt/equity swap.

Western analysts often draw attention to the fact that Chinese capital injections tend to come without strings attached, an approach with which the Chinese growing presence may challenge Western donors who tend to offer only conditional loans. In this way, Chinese capital injections may offer a welcome alternative to loans from the West, particularly for authoritarian regimes. One important exception to the non-conditionality of loans and investments however is that Chinese "soft loans" tend to include the requirement for host countries to employ Chinese contractors, and it is widely thought that Chinese contractors bring their own labourers along with their projects. The paper by Van der Kley in this special issue deals with labour in the context of Chinese projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. He nuances the above-mentioned assumption as he found that Chinese companies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do increasingly recruit a substantial part of employees locally.

The Legacy of Soviet Development

Contemporary issues related to Chinese involvement in Central Asia have to be understood against the background of Soviet development and the complicated legacies that the USSR left behind. Whereas the Chinese involvement is widely depicted as a break with the past, aside from its origin (China/Beijing versus USSR/Moscow), it actually represents a mix of remarkable continuities as well as – unsurprisingly – some dissimilarities. Continuity between Soviet approaches and Chinese ones is most visible in three areas: infrastructure, extraction, and industrialization. In these areas Chinese companies, backed by Chinese capital, are either stepping in to directly revive Soviet-era projects, or to continue more generally what the USSR was doing by new means and with new technologies. By contrast, with regards to agriculture and education, Chinese involvement is both more varied and represents more of an explicit break with the Soviet legacy.

During the first Soviet five year plan (1928-1932), Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were assigned the role of cotton producers for the socialist economy. As a result, most investment that came from Moscow was geared to irrigating lands to make that possible, with major projects such as the Great Ferghana Canal that runs through Tajikistan

and Uzbekistan and the Vakhshstroi waterworks in Tajikistan (a giant water work constructed by the Soviet leadership, located in southwest Tajikistan) (Teichmann 2007, Reid 2016, Obertreis 2017, Peterson 2019). In the post-World War II era, cotton production continued to expand, but in line with Lenin's slogan "Communism is Soviet power plus electrification" the Soviet Union also committed to electrification, and, next to that, to industrialization. These two aims spurred investment in hydropower plants, primarily in mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well as in the exploration of oil and gas fields in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Together the hydrocarbon republics and the hydropower republics formed a united energy system which was supposed to balance out the seasonal variations in hydropower production.

Aside from bringing electricity to residential consumers, this energy system was supposed to support a range of factories that would draw on the workforce made available by the region's booming population. However, while many factories were built, they generally failed to make much use of the Central Asian labour force, and instead ended up importing labour from outside the region. By the 1980s, concerns about pollution from giants like the aluminium plant in Tajikistan led to popular opposition to further industrial construction, as well as to large dams. The construction of the Roghun dam in Tajikistan, that began in the 1970s, was frozen in 1990.

The Roghun dam aptly illustrates the changing geopolitical landscape as well as the long-term continuities in large-scale infrastructural projects. Following the abandonment of the project at the time of the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia attempted to re-start the project in 1994. Yet an agreement between Tajikistan and Russia to this end never materialised. Subsequently, a Western consortium involving the World Bank and an Italian construction company renewed the project, which was stalled due to a complaint by neighbouring Uzbekistan filed by the World Bank, for fear of a drying up of the rivers and canals used for irrigating its downstream cotton fields. In 2017, a Chinese company resumed the building of the dam. The following year, Uzbekistan, also a recipient of Chinese loans and infrastructural projects, gave up its resistance against the dam project. These steps shed some light on the complicated steps taken by the Tajik government to finance the Roghun project. Notably already earlier on, the Tajik government forced the Tajik population, including households but also individuals, to buy shares of the project, only to gather capital to continue constructing the dam. People in rural Tajikistan, who were forced to spend part of their limited

household budget to buy shares, keep their paper shares filed with other personal documents, but seriously question the meaning of them (Hofman fieldwork, 2013). More recently, in 2017, the Tajik government placed 500 million US dollars “worth of international bonds with the express aim of funding project” (Eurasianet 2019).

The Soviet Union also vastly expanded imperial road and rail projects, connecting the region physically to the European core of the Soviet Union. By the end of the Soviet period, passengers and freight could travel by train between any of the Central Asian republics and Moscow although connections within the mountainous republic remained limited – the train from Tajikistan’s capital Dushanbe to Khujand in the north passed through neighbouring Uzbekistan to avoid the mountain ranges that lie between central and northern Tajikistan. Such arrangements meant little in the Soviet period, when republic borders did not impede movement, but they generated major complications after the USSR’s collapse.

Finally, the Soviet Union carried out exploration works throughout the region and developed mines for the extraction of precious metals. These included gold mined in Kyrgyzstan, silver in Tajikistan, and uranium for the nuclear industry in northern Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and copper in Mongolia (which although not part of the Soviet Union, was one of its satellite states, and part of the Comecon). How much these sites benefited the local population depended on their function and the role they played in Soviet domestic politics and even foreign propaganda. Closed cities – such as nuclear sites in Kazakhstan or Chkalovsk outside Leninabad in Northern Tajikistan – offered a privileged life to those who lived within their confines (mostly outsiders, with some local political and technical elites). Few outsiders – let alone foreigners – were allowed to visit those cities, which received what was known as “Moscow provisioning;” food and other goods from around the USSR were sent to these cities to keep their residents happy. Even if they relied on the surrounding countryside for food, interaction was limited (Guth 2018, Florin and Zeller 2018, Wooden 2018). The contemporary complaints about Chinese companies bringing in their own workers, into compounds isolated from the surrounding local population (as critically discussed by van der Kley in this issue), with much of their food produced by local Chinese-owned farms (Hofman 2016b) suggest interesting parallels with the Soviet closed towns with their Russian specialists and the “Moscow provisioning”.

By the late 1980s, enabled by the space for debate by Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, and further reinforced by the *Chernobyl* disaster, Soviet development came under attack from

environmentalists as well as from nationalist activists and politicians from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia (Josephson *et al.* 2013, Weiner 1999). As already mentioned, the hydropower projects in Central Asia were recognized as being destructive locally and also blamed (correctly) for the infamous drying out of the Aral Sea (Spoor 1998, cf. Richardson 2014 for a failed irrigation project elsewhere in the USSR). Industrial plants, once demanded by Central Asian politicians and planners, were now as polluting and of little benefit to the local population. Finally, the environmental impact of mining projects, especially the pollution of rivers and waterways, was an issue readily taken up by an emerging civil society (Wooden 2018). But perhaps central to the disappointment of many Central Asians, including those who had once encouraged these projects, was that many seemed to benefit only European Soviet citizens, and did little for the local population (Kalinovsky 2018).

Although all of the Central Asian republics adopted market reforms in some form after independence, they retained many of the presumptions on which Soviet development policy was based. One was that a large population requires employment in the formal sector, and that state policy (often through parastatals) should be aimed at creating those jobs. Another is that cotton, despite all of the environmental consequences of its cultivation, continues to play an important role as an export commodity and thus a source of foreign currency (Hofman 2018; Spoor 2007). If anything, in some of the Central Asian countries, cotton's importance only increased after independence, because other sources of funding were so few (only showing some decline in recent years). A third was the continued focus on hydropower and hydrocarbons as sources of energy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the new governments of the now independent Central Asian republics tried to preserve or revive the projects that had been condemned at the end of the previous decade. Tajikistan declared its intention to revive the Roghun Dam – discussed above – while still embroiled in Civil War; Kyrgyzstan sought foreign investors for its mines, and Kazakhstan invited foreign multinationals to develop its oil and gas fields. But with the USSR gone and Russia itself in dire economic straits, the republics lost their main source of investment and the customer base for its products, as well as the political unity that made cooperation on energy and infrastructure possible.

It is in these last two areas where China has stepped in most dramatically. The Belt and Road Initiative revives Soviet-era connectivity projects, but goes much further. Chinese mining firms can be found almost everywhere Soviet geologists once operated, and are even

exploiting some deposits that had been passed over in the Soviet period because of their technical difficulty. Further, Chinese firms are reviving older industrial sites or building new ones. Most recently, a Chinese company expressed interest in buying and modernizing Tajikistan's massive aluminium plant. Of course, China's involvement takes place in a very different political economy compared to that which existed until the late 1980s; the economies have been liberalised to varying degrees, and many of the enterprises and farms in which China is investing have been privatized, at least formally, and a wide variety of farms – in terms of size and legal-organisational status – has emerged across and within countries.⁸

One area where Chinese firms, until recently, seemed uninterested in taking over from the USSR was in the area of human capital. Although they were not always successful, Soviet industrial enterprises made a concerted effort to hire and educate locals, and to train them for senior technical and managerial jobs through a network of universities and institutes in the republics themselves. Even from Mongolia, which was “only” a Soviet satellite state, many local specialists were trained in Soviet institutes (Sneath 2015).⁹ China has only recently begun to take up such a role, providing scholarships to Central Asian students to study in China. At the same time, Chinese enterprises tend to hire Chinese labourers in particular for technical components of their projects, as well as for instance for catering food (Hofman, fieldwork Tajikistan 2020). The hiring of Chinese labour for these segments of the work remain despite the fact that millions of Central Asians are forced to travel to Russia and beyond to look for work on construction sites, in factories, and in the service sector.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the trend in recent years seems to be towards more use of local labour. As van der Kley argues in this volume, Chinese companies appear to become more receptive to demands from governments in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to include more local labour in their projects, using citizens of these countries for up to 70 or 80 percent of their labour force on some projects.

⁸ See for instance the growing divergence between farms in the highland and lowland Tajikistan (Hofman 2019) or the sharply grown divergences between herding farms in Mongolia and border regions in Russia following the Soviet collapse (Visser and Schoenmaker 2011).

⁹ Mongolia's national income grew with some 5-6% annually in the 1970s-1980s, with 37% of GDP coming from Soviet subsidies (Sneath 2015).

¹⁰ The magnitude and importance of outmigration to Russia is illustrated most of all by Tajikistan which has become one of the most remittance dependent economies in the world.

Notably, there are no national laws that stipulate such percentages (Hofman, fieldwork Tajikistan 2020). What is more, China has begun to invest in education. Its investment in schools in Nurek, previously a Soviet showcase for including and training locals on an all-union project (in that case, the Nurek Dam), symbolizes China's apparent willingness to fill the gaps left by the Soviet collapse more fully.

It seems clear, however, that the more Beijing and Chinese companies become involved in Central Asia, the less likely it is that they will be able to avoid the kind of criticism and protests faced by Soviet authorities by the late 1980s. In those years, protests mainly focused on the negative impact of industrial production, the cotton monoculture, and living standards that lagged behind the rest of the USSR. The (expected) negative (environmental) impact of Chinese investments in industrial production in Central Asia nowadays also plays a role in triggering anti-China sentiment in the region.

In the late 1980s, critics argued that Moscow was earning much more from cotton than it was paying for it to producers or investing in the region, and that its industrial investments did not benefit the republics. Such criticism was not without merit, although in most cases it was overblown. In any case, Soviet economic policies were one part of a fairly intricate social contract which saw investments in health, schooling, shelter, and so on, at no direct, short-term cost to the population but in exchange for its acquiescence and labour.¹¹

The aspect of "benefits" also features prominently in debates on Chinese investments, of which benefits (compared to Soviet leadership's projects) are even less clear. Do they flow primarily to politically connected individuals and companies? Or does the broader population benefit in some ways as well? These are paramount questions that both Chinese companies and Central Asian governments will have to address, and future research needs to engage with them more in-depth.

In some areas, such as regarding questions of labour use and training, it is clear that China is prepared to listen to local concerns and take them into account. In others – such as the environment – it is much less clear how far Chinese firms are willing to listen to local concerns. One of the things that makes China an attractive development partner for many governments is that it does not practice conditionality the way that IFIs and donors from Europe and North America tend to do. Chinese investments and aid are not tied to questions

¹¹ The longer-term cost constituted the environmental effects.

of democracy, human rights, or environmental stewardship. The corollary, however, is that Chinese firms expect local governments to ward off any political challenges and popular mobilisation to their activities.

Increasing anti-China sentiment is overtly expressed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where it has already created problems and will almost certainly create more. Those protests particularly relate to society's concerns over sovereignty, exploitation of labour and the environment. In the last few years, the "Uyghur question" has also increasingly concerned Central Asian societies, and in Kazakhstan increasingly sparked debates (Putz 2018). Yet awareness of concerns such as the situation in Xinjiang is confined to localities; in isolated parts in the Central Asian region, where people can only access state-controlled media and are mainly concerned with daily survival, much less is known about these developments and debates. Remarkably, this seems different with the present spread of the Coronavirus (February 2020), which (worldwide, but certainly also in Central Asia), strengthens Sinophobia and the "othering" of Chinese people.

China- former SU relations from a historical perspective

The current Chinese influence not only shows similarities with Moscow's Soviet involvement in the region. In an even longer-term historical perspective it can be seen as a re-emergence of China's substantial pre-Soviet influence in the region (up till the late Tsarist period).

While the contributions in this special issue look at contemporary interactions, historical interactions and relationships are the backdrop of contemporary encounters between Chinese actors and host societies in the former Soviet Union border zone. What is more, historical ties are of importance particularly when it comes to expectations and perceptions, myths and imaginaries, as also described by Saxer in this special issue. As Garibov (2018) described, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and – from our own observations – also in Tajikistan, there is widespread fear for the growing number of temporary and permanent Chinese migrants, in which people recall historical struggles between Chinese empires and groups living in the area of today's Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Garibov 2018).

Interactions in China's Northern/Western border zones took place long before the Soviet arrival. Importantly, as Lin (2018) noted, there were substantial numbers of migrants from Asia in the Russian Far East, and "the Chinese formed the majority of these migrants,

making up 10-12% of the population in the Russian Far East in 1910 and a third of the population of Vladivostok in 1916. It stoked further fears of a ‘Yellow Peril’, in which the Chinese (and Japanese) seemed poised to out-compete the Russians demographically and economically.”

The far east of what is now Russia belonged to China before the 1860s (Lin 2018), and the border between Tsarist Russia and China was erected at this time (Parham 2016). The drawing of borders has had lasting effects on groups living on both sides. As Parham (2016, 351) noted, “[t]he existence of this new line gradually brought borderlanders into the orbit of state affairs as well as confronting local Kyrgyz pastoralists and Tajik/Pamiri subsistence farmers with new notions of bounded territoriality and political belonging.” Until today the relationship between China and Central Asia can be characterised as “warm politics, cold public” (Kerr 2010). This is a corollary of past relationships. Under Soviet rule, borders were sealed, and little interaction took place between the populations living on each side of the border. Alff (2016a, 329) argues “that the hardening of the border during the Sino–Soviet confrontation between the 1960s and 1980s severely limits social interaction between immediate borderland communities to this day.”¹² This isolation triggered “othering” and imaginaries because of spatial and social distinctions (on imaginaries and place see also Humphrey 2014).

After two decades of hostility between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, in the early 1980s four border posts were opened and trade gradually resumed between China and its western neighbours (Karrar 2016). Over the course of the years, shuttle trade has become particularly important. Particularly in the early days of Soviet independence, with severe economic contraction in the Central Asia states, petty trade in the border zone rapidly rose to become a prolific livelihood strategy (Karrar 2016). To this day, goods flow primarily from China into Central Asia and Russia’s Far East, rather than the other way around (see also Parham 2016). The China-Central Asia/Russia trade is really unbalanced. Chinese goods have flooded the Central Asian markets in the past decade, which reinforced the post-Soviet contraction of the light industries in Central Asia. While Russia probably will benefit from exporting gas to China through the “Power of Siberia” gas pipeline, at the same

¹² The long border between Russia and Mongolia remained more permeable, as the latter while not being part of the Soviet Union, was part of the Comecon, and strongly interlinked with the Soviet Union.

time the gas pipeline under construction at present (2020) through Central Asia to China is controlled by China, with, besides the creation of employment, little involvement and benefits for the Central Asian economies through which the pipeline passes, such as Tajikistan. While there is an influx of consumer products and brands, which features for instance in daily encounters between Chinese and Russian itinerant traders (see Humphrey 2018), the self-employment of Central Asian and Russian cross-border traders insufficiently compensate for the economic decline in border areas caused by the overall retraction of the (socialist) welfare state following the demise of the Soviet Union. While the Soviet leadership significantly invested in border zone localities until the late 1980s, the independent Soviet states have rather divested, leading to state neglect and deteriorated living conditions in settlements in the China-Central Asia border zone (Alff 2016b).

Contributions to this special issue

Globally, China's rise has triggered significant attention. Yet, as mentioned earlier, there has been a fixation on large-scale acquisitions of harbours, infrastructure, and extractive industries. These dynamics have triggered particular assumptions, imaginaries and myths regarding China's growing global presence. Chinese actors are always coming; they are not going. In this special issue, we aim to highlight the interactions that commonly remain under the radar. In this way, we (also) want to question and challenge specific discourses and the rhetoric regarding China's "going global."

Kembayev's paper starts with the macro-level of bilateral relations and large investment project in infrastructure. Based on the case of Kazakhstan it illustrates very well how the relationship between China and Central Asia has been forged and successively strengthened since the 1990s. He also attends to the role of Russia and the United States in the formation of Kazakhstan-China relations, and notes that much of the appeal of the BRI for Kazakhstan is not (just) the improved physical connections and political and economic ties with China it brings, but also the possibilities the new infrastructure generates to smoothen pre-existing trade with Europe and Russia. As such, the paper illustrates how "old" and "new" external powers shape the position of Central Asia in global trade flows. While this paper focus on geopolitics and large-scale investments, it also briefly engages with societal aspects by noting the relatively recent backlash experienced regarding the Chinese presence in Kazakhstan.

Imaginariness is an overarching concept of our special issue. Whereas Chinese investments and loans in the former Soviet Union border zone have significantly increased in the past few years, the Central Asian (and Russian) population primarily experienced China's rising presence through the flow of goods that flooded the Central Asian markets. There was a virtual absence of "China" in everyday life beyond exposure to those consumer goods. Until the late 2000s, the Chinese companies operating in the border zone brought in their own labour. Chinese workers were segregated, living in isolated enclaves, and interactions between Chinese individuals and the host societies were minimal.

Over the past few years, this seems to change (see van der Kley this issue), particularly now Chinese individual entrepreneurs also cross the border in search for income earning opportunities. What is more, a growing group of Chinese individuals, who have entered Central Asia as employees of a large Chinese enterprise, venture out into new businesses. These endeavours undertaken by Chinese individuals, although often small-scale, have important implications, as they entail – in general – more interactions with the population in the respective host country (be it Russia or one of the Central Asian republics); because these Chinese individuals leaving the confines of the compounds of their previous large-scale employers need local housing, access to markets and middlemen, and to consumers. The past few years have clearly seen a significant rise in the number of Chinese individuals wandering, working, and residing in the centres of the Central Asian capital cities (Hofman, observations 2019 and 2020), resulting in more frequent interactions and encounters between people in daily life.

Through these personal encounters, grand labels and discourses (the "yellow peril" and the "red dragon") tend to be unpacked and may be challenged (on different perceptions see also Peyrouse 2016). While we do not ignore the anti-Chinese sentiment featured in social media, in particular instances the discourse is in transformation. For example, for some segments of the younger generation in Central Asia, for whom migration to Russia used to be a primary source of livelihood, "China" is gaining traction as a potential trading partner, and a source of employment (fieldwork by Hofman, spring 2019 and 2020). However, the United States and Europe remain to be parents' and youngsters' first desire, despite knowing the difficulties of obtaining scholarship and visa requirements.

At the same time, the Chinese government and private Chinese actors take an active role in an attempt to modify the "China as a threat" discourse. Several initiatives undertaken

by Chinese corporate actors demonstrate “soft power,” and “corporate social responsibility.” In Tajikistan, Chinese enterprises have started building schools (Hofman fieldwork Tajikistan 2020, see also Van der Kley, this issue). Yet the Russian government also continues to strive for influence in Central Asia, seen for instance in the construction of around a dozen of Russian schools in Tajikistan in the past few years (see Najibullah 2020). With regard to China, “soft power” is also reflected by efforts of the Chinese government nowadays to provide a substantial number of scholarships to students from Central Asia, as noted before (see also Garibov 2018). Apparently, besides tangible infrastructure projects and loans and investments in Central Asia’s extractive industries, the Chinese government now also has (hesitantly) started to attend to human capital development.

Through personal encounters “China” has become more visible and present in the everyday life of the ordinary Central Asian and Russian citizen. Before entertaining movies featuring Bruce Li and Jackie Chan appeared in Tajik media in the 2000s, many people thought of the Chinese as “яҷуҷу маҷуҷ” (*Yajuju maju*) – a kind of wild horde taking over – (Kholbek 2012).¹³ Humphrey’s (2018) earlier work on interactions in the China-Russia border is also insightful in this regard. She described not only practices but also perceptions of people involved in trade across such a stark border. Mutual perceptions and attitudes are coloured by imaginaries. Imaginaries also continue to surface in Central Asia, as described by Saxer in this special issue. Saxer highlights the striking absence of Chinese actors in Tajikistan’s Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBO). While there is widespread talk of Chinese who are coming to invest in the extraction of natural resources, their presence is not tangible. The rumours of Chinese investments continue to circulate, and Chinese trucks cross the region, but there is little interaction between incoming Chinese actors, and the local population.¹⁴ Yet “China” is present in daily life in artefacts, such as goods at the bazaar. “China” features also regularly in discussions, triggered by the growing Chinese presence in mining in the

¹³ This expression used to denote the growing Chinese presence is also used in Pakistan (personal communication with professor Matthew Erie, October 2019).

¹⁴ Chinese investment in the Tajik mining industry have substantially increased in the past decades, including in the mountainous Pamir region. Very recently (October 2019) a Chinese company was given access to a silver mine in Tajik Badakhshan have been allocated to Chinese investors, which (again) stirred up debate (see Ibragimova 2019).

mountainous region, and the border shift of 2011-12 with which a part of Tajik territory located in the Pamir mountains was handed over to China (as described by Saxer). One other striking observation of Saxer (also) concerns the fact that local people never really benefited from trade in the China-Tajik border zone (across the Kulma pass). This contrasts, as Saxer notes, with trade relations in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan or Siberia, and makes the paradox of the Chinese presence in the Pamir region even more striking. The paradox observed by Saxer was also noted by Dave (2018, 100), who wrote: “One well-known expert on China [in Kazakhstan] mentioned that so far, these [Chinese] investments and projects are like apparitions: everyone talks about them, but nobody has seen them.” This seems reminiscent of observations of Hofman (2016a), who observed that Tajik rural dwellers were puzzled with the arrival of Chinese agribusinesses in their locality.

Yet very recently people in various (remote) villages in the Pamir mountains have been noting changes, as Chinese traders have started to approach village inhabitants to buy up wool products of local livestock (Hofman, interview with an international organization in Tajikistan, 24 February 2020). At the same time, in the past couple of years relatively high educated young people from the mountainous region are increasingly recruited by Chinese universities to teach English. These developments call for growing attention on the economic implications of China’s growing presence in Central Asia, and the potential changes in discourses they may trigger.

Chen and Günther (also) attend to perceptions on China in their paper in this special issue, which they interrogate in their paper through survey data conducted among Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek as well as Afghan students. While not everyone in Central Asia (and in neighbouring Afghanistan) might be aware of differences, Chen and Günther describe that there are actually two conceptualisations of China in the region: *Khitoj* (or *Khitoy*), used in reference to the Chinese state, and *Chin*, which has a different connotation, being related to Chinese people, culture, traditions, and art. The survey results of Chen and Günther show that there are varying opinions and ideas regarding China’s influence in the Central Asian region; Kazakh respondents of their survey show a relatively positive stance towards China, while Kyrgyz adolescents are more sceptical. Chen and Günther explain differences by – amongst other factors – people’s perception of their own country, i.e. its strength and stability vis-à-vis China and other countries. Remarkably, given all the international media attention, Chen and Günther observe that only few students appear to know about the BRI (or the One Belt One

Road (OBOR)). Among the students in the different countries, Kazakh students appear to have the most positive stance towards China. Chen and Günther attribute this to the fact that Kazakhstan is a relatively strong actor in Central Asia, and “China as a business partner and investor stabilizes the Kazakhstani national narrative.” Of course it is a question to what extent students’ perceptions reflect the sentiment of the overall population in that country (and the Central Asian region at large). One can imagine huge divergences in sentiment regarding the Chinese presence between university students, who might envision a future studying in China, and say farmers who may fear a Chinese land acquisition in their vicinity (see also Peyrouse 2016 on different perceptions).

Others have noted the mythification and imaginaries of China. Scarborough (2019) found that the Tajik state agency ‘Tadzhikvneshtorg,’ sent telegrams to a number of Chinese firms in 1990 to inquire the potential interest among Chinese investors to invest in turtle production in Tajikistan for sales in China. Apparently Tajik businessmen had particular “culinary assumptions” and thought to tap into the (assumed) demand for turtles in China. There was no response from the Chinese side. Whereas people tend to admire the Chinese work ethic – as Chinese individuals are thought to labour day and night – on the whole, derogatory ideas about China prevail. It is thought that Chinese people next to their (actual) preference for pork, also eat dogs and donkeys, and food imported from China is thought to make people ill, as chemical input use in Chinese agriculture would be enormous. The current Corona virus (January 2020). obviously strengthens those ideas. China’s mighty population numbers and outmigration are (also) issues triggering fear in Central Asia (see also Burkhanov 2018).¹⁵ In 2013, a Tajik member of parliament raised concern over intercultural marriages, in particular regarding marriages between Chinese and Central Asian individuals (Umarzoda 2013). In Kazakhstan, the media has (also) paid significant attention to the “possibility that masses of Chinese men would come to Kazakhstan to marry Kazakh women” (Burkhanov 2018, 159). Hence there is a lot of fear mongering about China’s growing presence in Central Asia, even though the primary migration pattern of Chinese in Central Asia is of temporary, not permanent nature (which we argue based on fieldwork of Hofman in Tajikistan, 2019/2020).

¹⁵ It should be noted that the Chinese population will soon start to decline, reaching its peak of 1.44 billion already in 2029 according to predictions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Gonzalez 2019).

The final paper in our special issue by Dirk Van der Kley. Van der Kley discusses Chinese companies' hiring of local labour. His paper draws on a unique mix of data: fieldwork observations, and local as well as Chinese (media) sources. Van der Kley notes that there are misassumptions with regard to Chinese companies' use of local and Chinese workers. Whereas nowadays there is more empirical work on Chinese firms operating overseas, which provides more nuanced pictures of Chinese firms' labour regimes (see for instance Lee 2016, Oya and Schaefer 2019), Van der Kley notes that in Central Asia empirical studies are scarce in this regard, and the overall scholarly and popular literature still holds that Chinese firms predominantly import Chinese labour. Van der Kley's paper therewith fills a void. He finds that Chinese companies active in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan employ local labour, to varying degrees. Reasons why Chinese companies active in Central Asia try to hire local labourers are governmental pressure as well as wages; local wages are lower than the rising Chinese wages. Barriers to recruit local labour are language barriers and the lack of professional skills. In order to overcome these obstacles Chinese companies train local Kyrgyz and Tajik workers in China. As a result, van der Kley argues, there is a trend towards more local labour recruitment.

Van der Kley's findings thus point to the need for empirical work on the manifestation and materialisation of the Chinese presence in other countries. Particularly the current impetus given to BRI and the ideas, fears, and hopes that it may trigger, warrant scholarly attention. Our special issue therewith takes a first initiative to trigger wider ground-breaking fieldwork.

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