



global
china
pulse.

01
24

SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

This text is taken from *Global China Pulse*: Volume 3, Issue 1, 2024.



Celebrations

Figure 1: Hongqi cars during a parade in Minsk, 2017. Source: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation(CC).

Leveraging the Art of Geo-Cultural Calculus in BRI Projects: A Case Study of the Silk Road Samarkand Project

Julie Yu-Wen CHEN

There is abundant literature on how geopolitical and/or geo-economic interests drive China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. There is, however, a powerful but less tangible geographical, cultural, and political element behind some of these projects. This essay uses Silk Road Samarkand, Central Asia's most ambitious tourism project, to illuminate how various developments surrounding Silk Road Samarkand are used to forge a new historiography and promote a form of cooperative values based on shared heritage and history, which are more in line with Chinese than Uzbek culture, values, and interests.

On the outskirts of the Uzbek city of Samarkand—a key site on the historic Silk Road and the capital of the ancient Timurid Empire, which stretched from Iran to the South Caucasus and parts of India—lies ‘Silk Road Samarkand’, the largest, most ambitious tourism complex in Central Asia, and a development that is partially financed by China. Here, the chauffeur of a new luxury hotel drives a Chinese luxury car, the Hongqi (红旗), for guests and dignitaries requiring a ride around this fabled city. The car’s navigation system uses simplified Chinese and the clock is on Beijing, not local Uzbek, time. The Hongqi (literally ‘red flag’) is revered in modern Chinese political symbolism and used to be employed mainly to serve high-ranking Chinese government officials and foreign dignitaries within China. However, in recent years, this luxury marque has been rebranded to serve other types of customers. According to Hongqi’s website (Hongqi Auto 2023), its cars are currently available beyond mainland China, including in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Japan, and Denmark—but not Uzbekistan.

So, how did that Hongqi end up in Samarkand? It might have been a donation from China, given it had not been remodelled to display local Uzbek time and language, but we have no way of knowing whether the vehicle was donated or simply imported. What does the combination of a luxury Chinese car, the largest and most ambitious tourism complex in the region, and the enchanting historical city of Samarkand tell us about the future of this Central Asian country, which, not long ago, was simply trying to boost its interactions with the outside world? What to make of the Silk Road Samarkand complex? To answer these questions, this essay will introduce this new, little-known tourism project in detail to challenge the view that the development is a manifestation



Samarkand

Figure 2: Registan Square in Samarkand. The city is often referred to as the heart of the Silk Road because of the constructed narrative that it was once the hub of silk trade and the halfway point of the trade route connecting Asia and Europe. Source: Julie Yu-Wen Chen.

of China's growing economic influence in the country, showing instead how local agency played a fundamental role in shaping the initiative. The local calculus behind support for the project is not just the economic and political benefits the country can gain from China. Most importantly, this essay shows, the Silk Road Samarkand and other surrounding projects are good examples of Uzbekistan's efforts to showcase its long history, which also taps into Chinese geo-cultural ambitions. Both sides find common interest in using these projects to forge a new historiography and promote cooperative values based on shared heritage and history, which ultimately will be more in line with Chinese rather than Uzbek culture, values, norms, and practices.

What Is Silk Road Samarkand?

Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and a stop along the historical Silk Road, has become an increasingly popular venue for diplomatic and business meetings in recent years. This is due to both the growing availability of hospitality facilities and the backdrop of iconic architecture that captures public imaginaries of the Silk Road (Figure 2). The opening of Silk Road Samarkand should be situated in this context.

The 260-hectare Silk Road Samarkand includes eight world-class hotels, recreation and sports areas, parks, a newly built 11-hectare 'Eternal City' (*Boqiy Shahar* in Uzbek), and an

international convention centre to host important business and diplomatic meetings (Polonskaya 2022a). The project took three years to build (2019–22) and, at its inception, boasted a capacity of about 1,200 rooms. The complex was inaugurated on 23 August 2022 by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who less than one month later, on 15–16 September, hosted the twenty-second meeting of the Council of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the convention centre—a gathering that was attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, heads of state from India and Iran, as well as all Central Asian leaders and their entourages. Only after this event were the hotels opened to tourists.

Among the eight so-called world-class hotels, the five-star Samarkand Regency Amir Temur (Figure 3) is already a member of the Leading Hotels of the World Association—the first in Central Asia. While the hotel claims to be the finest in Central Asia, one must understand that tourism facilities in the region are still developing, with, for example, Western Hyatt and Hilton arriving in Tajikistan only in the past decade, and a 120-million USD Swiss ski resort entering Uzbekistan in 2020. In most Central Asian cities, Soviet legacy hotels remain the most iconic accommodation. Hence, such claims tend to be overblown when compared with top tourist facilities in destinations with a well-developed tourism industry. However, the potential is there, as the structures in Silk Road Samarkand are new and aim high to fulfil their potential in the Central Asian market. According to the Russian-language Uzbek news company *kun.uz* (2022a), during the SCO gathering, Putin's delegation stayed in the Samarkand Regency Amir Temur, while Xi's delegation stayed in the nearby five-star Silk Road by Minyoun Hotel. The delegations from Kazakhstan and Türkiye as well as representatives of five international organisations stayed in the adjacent four-star Savitsky Plaza.

We do not know the reasons behind the allocation of different hotels to different delegations, but it is not difficult to understand why Xi's delegation would stay in the Silk Road by Minyoun, which is a Chinese brand. The Minyoun Chinese hospitality group has two hotels in this complex: the other is the four-star Lia! by Minyoun Stars of Ulugbek, the name of which is inspired by Mirzo Ulugbek, the ruler of ancient Samarkand, who also was a famous astronomer and mathematician. It was reported by *kun.uz* (2022a) that the leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and some international organisations stayed at this hotel.

The Chinese Government and Chinese companies have been important drivers of investment in Silk Road Samarkand under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, while we know that it cost more than 500 million USD to develop this project, little information is available about specific Chinese investments. According to the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute (2020), China's Silk Road Fund and the National Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Foreign Economic Activity Joint Stock Company signed a credit facility agreement in April 2020. This deal enabled the Silk Road Fund to lend money to the National Bank of Uzbekistan to construct a tourism complex in Samarkand.



A Silk Road Hotel

Figure 3: Lobby of the Samarkand Regency Amir Temur Hotel, where President Putin's delegation stayed during the SCO meeting in September 2022.
Source: Julie Yu-Wen Chen.

Based on the very limited information that can be found online, it appears that China's involvement in the construction of Silk Road Samarkand is rather indirect, mostly through financing. Although we could not find interviewees working on the building of the Eternal City willing to confirm China's further involvement, two anonymous informants talked about the rumour among locals that 'the Chinese are building it', which likely arose from the fact that locals could see Chinese-looking workers and engineers during the construction process. One informant suggested these kinds of rumours are allowed to circulate to show a good image of China or that the Chinese are contributing positively to the development of Samarkand. But there is an uncrossable line so that when I wished to investigate further, I received no answers.

Before China's involvement, there had been little investment in Uzbek tourist infrastructure since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The sector tended to be dominated by traditional guesthouses (Rad 2022), but there was nothing that catered to top-level diplomatic and business travellers beyond official hosting residences. Silk Road Samarkand fills this gap in the market by attracting local and Chinese investors (Rad 2022).

Silk Road Samarkand is not within the boundaries of the historical city, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site—something that has restricted the city's development. Instead, the project used 260 hectares along a Soviet-era rowing canal on the edge of the urban area. When standing inside any of the hotels in the complex, one can see the canal with its newly planted trees. The international convention centre and 11-hectare 'Eternal City' built to showcase Uzbek history and culture are both in the complex. Business and diplomatic travellers with insufficient time

to visit the historical city of Samarkand and other parts of Uzbekistan can get a quick taste of the country in this artificially built miniature city just outside their hotel. For heads of state concerned about the safety of visiting the congested streets and mosques of urban Samarkand, and their limited evacuation routes, being at the edge of the city is also a practical solution. Of course, if visitors do wish to visit the historical city centre, it is only 20 minutes away by car.

Silk Road Samarkand as a Product of Sino-Uzbek Cooperation

While Chinese investment and political backing are evident in the creation of Silk Road Samarkand, the project also required the support of the Uzbek Government and local businesses. There is an increasing number of academic studies examining the localisation of BRI projects in host states (see, for instance, Bitabarova 2018; Pan et al. 2019; de L.T. Oliveira et al. 2020; Sidaway et al. 2020; Chen 2022; Franceschini and Loubere 2022). Even in countries in the Global South, where most BRI projects are located, Chinese actors—who are generally assumed to be more powerful, with better financial and operational capacity—must still negotiate with local partners to achieve their goals. As such, while Chinese engagement abroad is often seen in asymmetrical relationships, here, both sides are interdependent and negotiation is normal (Womack 2016).

When Uzbekistan declared independence in 1991, its first president, Islam Karimov (in office until his death in 2016), sought to securitise the government and consolidate his grip on power. The country had few interactions with other countries in the region or the wider international community. This does not mean there was no international cooperation in Karimov's era; rather, strict security measures were in place when forging international cooperation, such as supporting the United States' War on Terror in Afghanistan with a military base. As Uzbekistan is part of the ancient Silk Road, the Uzbek Government under Karimov had already tried to use that banner to attract foreign investment and infrastructure projects to boost its modernisation agenda. For example, in 1994, Karimov met Chinese prime minister Li Peng in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, to promote the idea of building transportation infrastructure between China and Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan. In the early days, however, there were tight restrictions on visas and entry into the country, as well as on money exchange and the use of international credit cards, which made Uzbekistan less accessible to the outside world, including by tourists and investors. The country also had a dark human rights record, which acted as a deterrent to many visitors (Aris 2023). It was not until Shavkat Mirziyoyev's government (in office since 2016) that the country began to liberalise and open to investors and tourists. Since Mirziyoyev came to office, Uzbekistan has addressed most issues related to human rights—in particular, by abolishing the practice of children picking cotton and signing several International Labour Organization

protocols (Aris 2023). Visa-free travel is now available to citizens from more than 80 countries, and digital payments and withdrawals are widely accessible. The efforts to enhance transportation infrastructure, particularly the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan trainline, are also seemingly coming to fruition with full feasibility assessments about to be completed after three decades of discussions, although exact funding sources remain uncertain (The Economist 2022; Torogeldi and Chynybaeva 2023).

As Dadabaev (2022) argues, Mirziyoyev has largely de-securitised Uzbekistan’s cooperation with the outside world. Projects are created to serve practical needs rather than political or symbolic ends, with implications focusing primarily on economic development, higher youth employment participation, engagement with the international community, international investment from both the East and the West, and escaping the middle-income trap (Dadabaev 2022). Mirziyoyev’s regime also allows foreign ownership (mostly through joint ventures), promotes entrepreneurship, and has simplified bureaucratic procedures (Popławski 2023). These measures have provided a surge of external partners for Uzbekistan and raised investor confidence.

Russia and China continue to be important sources of investment and tourism—a trend that is set to continue with the abolition of entry visas for nationals from the two countries. Since the beginning of the Ukraine War in February 2022, there has been a notable surge in Russian citizens opening small and medium-sized businesses in Uzbekistan (kun.uz 2022b). One could even argue that China plays a more important role for Uzbekistan than Russia as Uzbek leaders intend to decrease the country’s historically rooted overreliance on Russia. This can also be seen in the growth of diversified businesses and investment from Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and even Japan, France, Finland, and South Korea (Jivraj 2023; USAID 2023). In this context, large-scale projects from China are welcomed, as are those from other nations (Chen and Günther 2016). That said, Chinese leaders and state officials are frequent visitors to Uzbekistan and Chinese investment is among the top five in the country, according to 2021 government statistics (Table 1). The frequency of such visits facilitates the development of cooperative projects in Uzbekistan (Dadabaev 2022).

Country	Investment
China	2.2 billion USD
Russia	2.1 billion USD
Türkiye	1.18 billion USD
Germany	800.7 million USD
South Korea	137.4 million USD

Table 1: Top-five investor countries in Uzbekistan.

Source: Investment Promotion Agency Under the Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan ([Website Link](#))

Silk Road Samarkand arose out of this context. As a Sino-Uzbek and international cooperative project, there is a mixture of Chinese, Uzbek, and international influences and objectives at play in the development. Even though information on investors and their contributions is not readily accessible, the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute (2020) report gives us a hint of the extent of Chinese involvement. China, however, is only one contributor. The builder of the complex is a company called Enter Engineering, which is one of the largest engineering, procurement, and construction contractors in Uzbekistan. Enter Engineering's wider expertise includes construction of oil, gas, chemical, energy, and civil engineering projects in Russia and Central Asia. As noted earlier, locals have observed Chinese-looking workers and engineers on the construction site, although the level of Chinese knowhow and labour involved is unknown.

The localisation of the project is also manifested in the construction of the Eternal City, which was designed by Bobur Ismoilov, a famous contemporary Uzbek artist. In the next section, I discuss how the Eternal City and the Silk Road Samarkand project are good examples of Uzbekistan's efforts to showcase its cultural power and how the projects also tap into Chinese geo-cultural ambitions. Geo-cultural power will be defined below.

China's Geo-Cultural Ambitions and Silk Road Samarkand

Tim Winter (2019, 2021, 2023) has written widely on China's geo-cultural power in recent years. The kernel of his argument is that initiatives such as the BRI are instruments not just to revive the ancient Silk Road in the human imagination, but—shockingly—to produce history and a new historiography. It is not just culture that can be imagined in multiple sites and scales along the Silk Road; there is also a 'geographical' element in which mapmaking of the Silk Road and other relevant geography allows China and Central Asian countries to claim they have a shared history and heritage. This kind of geo-cultural imaginary also privileges transboundary concepts, such as the transoceanic nature of the Maritime Silk Road or the transcontinental Silk Road Economic Belt that crosses continents (Winter 2019). Hence, it is not enough to look at the construction of the railways, tourist facilities, museums, exhibitions, and so on as driven purely by the geopolitical or geo-economic motives of China and Central Asian states. There is an additional layer—the geo-cultural layer—of interest for both China and Central Asia to demonstrate this kind of shared history.

This serves China's ambition to place itself as the eastern limit of the Silk Road geographically while also creating a narrative of China's long history and civilisation with other countries along the constructed Silk Road. There is, then, again a link between 'geography' and culture. The promotion of such a narrative is not purely to cement China's place in history, but also to consolidate a China-centred world view among Chinese citizens.



Into the Eternal City

Figure 4: A bridge leading to one of the entrances to the Eternal City. Source: Julie Yu-Wen Chen.

For the Central Asian states that gained independence in the 1990s and are still trying to consolidate their state-building, China's support in these transportation and tourist infrastructure projects is not just economically and politically important for their modernisation efforts. The capacity to join forces with China to search for and generate narratives about claimed continuity of their peoples and nations beyond current statehood is also vital (Roselle et al. 2014; Chen and Günther 2016). Here, China's interests match local interests well.

Uzbekistan offers multiple sites for researchers to observe this kind of geo-cultural power at work, in tandem with other Chinese geopolitical and geo-economic influences. The Eternal City is officially branded as a historical ethnographic park (Figure 4). Its Instagram account, for example, claims the Eternal City is a 'unique ethnographic park in Uzbekistan'. It simulates a medieval Uzbek town with a unique mix of Parthian, Hellenistic, and Islamic cultures. It aims to give visitors a taste of the variety of Uzbekistan's history, land, and people. The official website of Silk Road Samarkand explains that visitors can feel as though they are walking the streets of various historical Uzbek cities, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Ferghana, Tashkent, Khwarazm, and Khiva (Silk Road Samarkand n.d.). Moreover, the website boasts that tourists can try culinary dishes from different eras and regions of Uzbekistan in the miniature city.

While the Eternal City appears to be an effort to introduce Uzbekistan and its culture to tourists, one must ask how reviving and promoting Uzbek culture benefits China. Again, Tim Winter's (2021, 2023) work on China's geo-cultural power is very useful here. The key to understanding this is to interpret the park not just as a revival of Uzbek culture. Rather, by promoting Uzbek culture, we come to see the larger picture of a shared history and heritage along the constructed Silk Road of which China is also a part.

Winter observes the efforts of not just China and Central Asian countries, but also UNESCO, Japan, and South Korea to use the imaginary of the ancient Silk Road to evoke a historical discourse in which territories, peoples, cultures, and civilisations collide and connect. It tends to romanticise a past that humankind might have shared, conjuring an imagined coexistence and peaceful interactions between cultures, peoples, and powers along the vaguely conceived Silk Road. Conversely, the negative parts of the past—such as plague, war, and famine—tend to be downplayed.

There is a powerful but less tangible geographical, cultural, and political element behind these infrastructure projects that empowers China and Central Asian states to express their histories, enabling a new kind of historiography. This was one of the predominant themes at the C5+1 China–Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an, the eastern starting point of the ancient Silk Road, in May 2023. It taps into China's contemporary interest in manifesting its civilisational power—a power that is rooted in its long history and ability to absorb many cultures into its *tianxia* (literally, 'all under heaven') centrality while still radiating out to form peaceful relations with others (Yan 2011). Various Chinese intellectuals and elites, such as Weiwei Zhang (2011) of Fudan University, have argued that China is a civilisational state and has civilisational power—in contrast with the United States, which has a shorter history than China and has only state power and seeks to maximise that. In this Sinocised world order, China expects many practices in the international system to be more in line with Chinese culture, values, norms, and practices, rather than with the Western or US-led world order (Barabantseva 2009; Callahan 2007; Swain 2013).

While outsiders may think the Eternal City is just a new tourist landmark in Samarkand, its geo-cultural symbolism cannot be ignored. For instance, the heads of states of several neighbouring countries have publicised their visits to the Eternal City—attention that would not have been given if it were simply a new tourist landmark. For example, a press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan (2022) announced that the

Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, within the framework of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation in the city of Samarkand of the Republic of Uzbekistan, took part in the planting ceremony and visited the Eternal City Cultural and Ethnographic Complex.



China's Restoration Project in Khiva

Figure 5: Poster written in Chinese and Russian that explains the China-sponsored restoration project in Khiva, showing images and a map of the sites that were to be restored. Source: Merja Kalliomäki.

Similarly, on the website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a press release noted: ‘On the sidelines of the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, First Lady of Azerbaijan Mehriban Aliyeva, First Lady of Uzbekistan Ziroatkhon Mirziyoyeva, First Lady of Türkiye Emine Erdogan, and wife of Hungarian Prime Minister Aniko Levai have visited the Eternal City historical-ethnographic complex’ (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev 2022). These two examples, first, show how the tourist complex has tried to meet the needs of top-tier business and diplomatic travellers, and second, project the importance of the geo-cultural symbolism of the Eternal City in the minds of regional leaders.

Winter (2023) noted that in April 2023, China spearheaded the formation of the Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia, which is a network for international cooperation on sharing experiences and conducting dialogues on cultural heritage preservation. Xi’an was chosen as the location for the founding of this alliance. Here again, the logic of the Silk Road narrative makes this choice understandable. Xi’an was an ancient Chinese imperial capital commonly believed to be the eastern departure point of the Silk Road. But China’s ambition is larger than this. China was restoring cultural and historical heritage in various parts of Asia even before this alliance came into being. For instance, in Samarkand, China was involved in the restoration of the ancient city by offering financial and technical support (kun. uz 2019). In 2014, China and Uzbekistan decided to cooperate to restore the ancient city of Khiva, with a focus on renovating Amir to’ra madrasasi, a religious academy, and Hasan Murad Qushbegi Mosque (Xinhua 2023) (Figure 4). The China Railway

Northwest Research Institute Company Limited, which offers engineering services, sent a professional cultural relic restoration team to Khiva to plan and then implement the restoration of the heritage site (People's Daily 2022). The Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage oversaw the restoration project, which was completed in 2019 (UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2021).

According to Winter (2023), the BRI did not initially pay much attention to culture and cultural heritage, but it is a decade since the BRI was announced by President Xi in Kazakhstan, and the ideas shaping it have evolved. Many projects have enriched the originally vague concept of the BRI. With the formation of the alliance in Xi'an in 2023, perhaps China can take tangible steps towards protecting cultural heritage sites as part of its expanding geo-cultural ambitions. This should prompt future researchers to study the geo-political and cultural ambitions of China manifested in BRI projects.

Conclusion

This essay uses Silk Road Samarkand, Central Asia's most ambitious tourism complex, to illuminate how China's BRI projects are positioned in localised political and social dynamics. Uzbekistan seeks to cooperate with China to modernise its tourist infrastructure. The Silk Road concept works well for both China and Central Asian countries. Symbolically, it is a strategic narrative that connects China with Central Asia from the past through the present and into the future. It also serves Central Asia's role as a caravanserai or middle trading region connecting Europe to ancient China. Conserving and showcasing Silk Road heritage strengthen the narrative of the need for Sino–Central Asian cooperation in the cultural, political, and economic domains. BRI projects—be they railways or tourist complexes such as Silk Road Samarkand—enable the reconstruction of this imagined past, allowing people in the present to see, experience, and reimagine their connected history. Accordingly, BRI projects cannot be seen only in economic and political terms; they should also be framed in terms of historical and cultural connectivity to expand China's geo-cultural ambitions. ●

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Merja Kalliomäki and Matthew Gray for commenting on earlier versions of this paper. This research is sponsored by the Intellectual History of China Studies project funded by the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan–Strait Relations, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University.