

四十四

Before Liberation

Tianjin had “Concessions”

Europeans, Russians, Japanese
claimed possessions

the Astor Hotel

housed the Emperor Pu Yi

there was Kiessling for Borscht

Baozi, Gou Bu Li



Chapter 44 – Belt and (Silk) Road

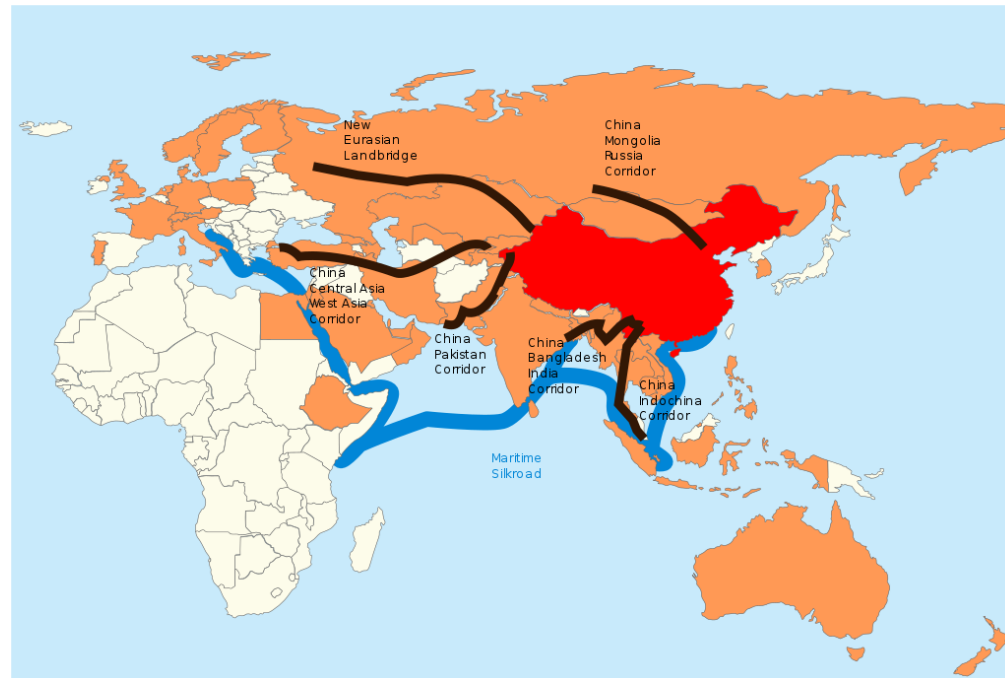
In a recent interview, 90 something year old Norman Lear suggested the two words ‘over’ and ‘next’ were key to his focus on what really matters. It’s easy to live in the glory of what was and what ‘should’ have been. The 19th and early 20th centuries were not China’s finest hour. From being one of the most advanced nations in the world in the Han Dynasty (200 years either side of the death of Christ), and experiencing its **golden age** of literature and art during the Tang Dynasty from the 7th thru the 10th century CE, by the 1840’s, China had become a decaying relic of its former greatness. As Europeans, Japanese, and Russians gained a hold in cities like Tianjin, each of these concessions attempted to make these places reflect their own cultures. I often wondered as I strolled along the Bund in Shanghai or Yingkou Road in the former British Concession in Tianjin where Harry Liu lived, how Chinese felt about these relics of the past. Did they mourn the loss of iconic foreign architecture from the Concession Era, or did they welcome more the distinctly modern creations by Chinese architects?

Although Chinese silk has been in Rome since at least the 1st century BCE, and in Egypt 1,000 years before that, there never was one “Silk Road.” The term, “Silk Road” actually referred to several ways that Chinese goods made their way from Asia to Europe. Most started in the old Chinese capital of Chang An which is very near the present day city of Xi’An, located east of the geographical center of China. In the same way Ohio is considered to be a part of the mid-west in the USA, Xi’An is said to be in western China. From Xi’An there was a northern and a southern route to get to Kashgar in the far west. From there the route continued through Tehran and Baghdad to Constantinople or Cairo.



It's easy for a foreigner to get caught up in China's past, be it 20 years ago leading students up China's east coast, or 2,500 years ago, when Confucius, Laozi, and Gautama Buddha walked this Earth at the same time. In the ancient past, the Silk road spread not only goods, but Chinese culture across western Asia into Europe. But people in today's China don't live in the ancient past. They live in a very future driven present. They live in Norman Lear's "next."

Tianjin is the closest port to Beijing. Located on the Bohai Sea, it has been a northern center for foreign trade in China since the Qing Dynasty, and today stands as the opening northern port of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, meeting up with the Eastern Land Silk Road, both a part of the "Belt and Road", which is one of the most important 21st century economic initiatives in the world today.



The "Belt and Road Initiative" aka "One Belt, One Road" (一带一路 Yī Dài Yī Lù) was first unveiled to the world by President Xi Jinping in October 2013 in Kazakhstan. A few weeks later, Premier Li Keqiang promulgated China's vision to "help promote the

economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development.”

We would be naïve to think that altruism plays much of a role at all in the multi-trillion dollar Belt and Road Initiative. It's designed to make it easier for the world to trade with China and for China to trade with the rest of the world.

At a **national** level, China would like to lessen the wealth gaps between the underdeveloped hinterlands and rust belt with the east coast of China. By upscaling China's status as a global leader, it would further enhance pride and love for the Mother Country.

At an **international** level, there is a desire to create new markets for China; to allow easier access to raw materials which China will continue to need; to find ways to reuse and repurpose surplus goods, equipment, and factories as China repositions itself as a more eco-friendly producer and manufacturer of goods; to create future customers for some of its new technological innovations AND to further develop its posture and position as a global economic leader.

Like the Silk Road of the past, the **Belt** is not a single path; it is actually six land corridors all starting in China:

- 1) The first corridor extends north into Mongolia and Russia.
- 2) The second east from China through to Europe. In mid-March 2019, Italy announced that it would join the Belt and Road Initiative, becoming the first European country to sign on. By Dec of 2023, 17 countries from the European Union had joined in.
- 3) Central China & the West Asia Corridor make up the third corridor; the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, linking China with the Caspian Sea is up and running.
- 4) In the Pakistan Corridor, China has helped build seaports, highways and high-speed railways.
- 5) There is a China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Corridor.
- 6) At the time of my writing about this, the final corridor is the China-Indochina Corridor. In Cambodia, between 65 and 80% of all the energy projects across the board are Chinese invested, built, or owned.

The **Road** refers to a maritime sea route extending from China through Indonesia, India, East Africa, Egypt, into the Mediterranean and into Europe. According to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, as of May 2022, seven countries in South America participate in the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.