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Visualizing China's Belt and Road Initiative on RT (Russia Today): from infrastructural project to human development

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ABSTRACT

This paper comprises original research on China's use of bilateral media cooperation to mediate its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Building upon the literature on strategic narratives, aesthetic power and the Silk Road as a foreign policy concept, we present a detailed case study of the visual imagery of the "Silk Road" documentary collaboration between China's and Russia's state-owned international broadcasters, China Radio International and RT (formerly Russia Today). We employ a visual methodology to interrogate the formation and projection of multimodal (visual, textual and oral) narratives about China's infrastructural activities along this metaphorical new "Silk Road". We examine how the Silk Road series gives sense to China's BRI, the relative weighting of Chinese and Russian strategic narratives about the BRI, and how power is distributed in this Chinese-Russian media partnership. Our analysis reveals that in repackaging visual imagery that applies nostalgia to the history of core places and technologizes their future, the series projects a pre-curated Chinese visual narrative that emplots the BRI as human and cultural development. Russian regional strategic narratives are marginalized. China is applying its aesthetic power to Russian journalists and politicians; RT obtains some commercial benefits, but the Russian state's aesthetic power is ceded to China.

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Introduction

Visual images have significant potential to frame relationships and debates in global politics because they can rapidly convey symbolic information to casual audiences, engaged journalists, and wider elites. They are also easier than text-based information to share transnationally among diverse audiences with varied cultural and educational starting points. Such images can not only shape how people think about and respond to particular global developments (Shim

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2013, 23), but in influencing wider political relationships and debates, they also frame the policy possibilities deemed appropriate (Bleiker 2015, 874). It is therefore unsurprising that in an age of almost ubiquitous internet use, governments across the globe increasingly pursue strategies that allow them to visually communicate internationally online.

The economically well-established Western liberal democracies have been engaged in international television broadcasting initiatives since at least the nineties, often building on successful radio operations.¹ However, the past two decades have seen the establishment of various new broadcasting outlets sponsored by less economically established or “rising” powers, often with an explicit counter-hegemonic remit.² Online and social media, rather than traditional broadcasting, provide the centerpiece of these networks' dissemination strategies (Eisa et al. 2017), enabling them to maximize their potential global reach, on a free-to-access basis.

Within this context, this paper presents original research on how China uses international broadcasting collaborations to produce and project visual strategic narratives supporting key policy priorities that their target audiences are supposed to relate to. After providing a general overview of China's international broadcasting collaborations across various regions, we provide an in-depth empirical case study of how such collaboration has been applied to what is arguably China's most significant foreign policy initiative in modern times – the multinational infrastructural and economic cooperation project known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially launched as a plan to construct a Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, it can be seen as the “umbrella project” for China's new economic statecraft, within which almost all other major international policies are supposed to be framed” (Xin 2016). This umbrella draws together initiatives across 70 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas, and is broadly organized around six “growth corridors”. More than that, it also represents a “going out” strategy in which not only money and goods, but also ideas start to travel on a transnational level” (Pieper 2018, 218), allowing China to present a preferred vision of itself and its policies to the world.

Initial regional frictions over the BRI surrounded its potential overlap with the Russian-sponsored integrative initiative, the Eurasian Union (EAEU). While this was notionally solved with a 2015 joint declaration of coordination between the two institutions (Xin 2016), it has been mitigated in reality by the EAEU's internal issues and declining geopolitical relevance. Subsequent sources of resistance to the BRI have come from within target states, which demonstrate mixed understandings and low levels of trust toward the project (Reed and Hille 2019; Stanway 2019; Garcia-Herrera and Jianwei 2019; Matura 2018; van Noort and Colley 2021). The Chinese authorities have taken such skepticism seriously and have actively attempted to bring public opinion around (Rolland 2019). This has included putting to use resources built up as part of a sustained program to

advance China's international communication power since 2009 (De Bao 2016). These "going out" media plans boosted the international presence of China's "Big Four", comprising CGTN (formerly CCTV), China Radio International, Xinhua News Agency and the China Daily newspaper (Shambaugh 2010). As President Xi Jinping argued in 2014: "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

Soft power can be taken in its simplest form as the power of attraction (Nye 2004), and the Chinese Communist Party and the government together oversee China's media engagements and soft power strategies (Edney 2012). Soft power is "inherently relational" in its contingency on audience reception (Feklyunina 2016, 775), and China's approach to foreign policy under Xi has therefore emphasized the value of ideas of reform and revolution, as well as Chinese civilization, Chinese morality (Confucian values) and "artistic charm" – performed through calligraphy and poetry (Callahan 2016; Lee 2016). Consistently reiterating the interrelationship between new ideas, institutions, policies and projects (Callahan 2016; Zhou and Esteban 2018) Xi's leadership has mobilized the "charm" and attractiveness of China's civilization and cultural inheritance to help promote the "China Dream" – the values-informed development of Chinese society and economy – that is seen as lying at the heart of both Chinese unity at home, and its contribution to peace and development internationally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

Such ideas have featured prominently in China's official discourse around the BRI, in which narratives of the 5000-year civilizational history of China and the 2000-year history of the Silk Road have reinforced a depoliticized, historic, cultural legacy seen as shaping China's modern identity (van Noort 2022). Since 2015, the cultural component of this narrative formation has been reflected in the Chinese state's more active international public relations related to the BRI. A few studies have discussed the potential role of corporate public diplomacy as BRI promotion (Yang 2018) the employment of high-level economic diplomacy (Wang 2016), or cultural exchange and promotion at the institutional or individual level (Dave 2018; Nursha 2018; Song and Qiqi 2018; Sterling 2018; Winter 2019). Other studies, which vary significantly in their levels of detail, have examined how the BRI is represented internationally in various countries' print media, whether by domestic or Chinese outlets, or via comparisons of the two (Lin 2019; Zhang and Doreen 2017; He and Liu 2019; Xiao, Yue, and Jie 2019). Other studies assess how foreign states appropriate China's strategic narratives in their official government communications (van Noort and Colley 2021; van Noort, 2021a). Most recently, an increasing body of work has begun to recognize the importance of the visual component of China's strategic communication around the BRI, with studies emerging on maps/geographical imaginaries (Mayer 2018; Narins and Agnew 2019), on direct

outputs of digital visual communication (van Noort 2020a, 2021b), and on the “Silk Road” cultural imaginary (van Noort 2022). However, the ways in which these narratives are remediated for the wider audiences of international media outlets remain understudied, as do the ways in which target audiences coproduce meanings through their own interpretations. This is despite the fact that China has actively pursued international multimedia collaborations in recent years, and while these have often been characterized by a lack of transparency (Qing and Shifman 2015), the associated expenditure appears substantial (Farivar 2021). Despite having yet received no scholarly attention, these collaborations represent an important strand in the promotion strategy of the BRI and the “Chinese Dream” that underpins it.

After providing a general overview of China’s international media collaborations, this paper provides in-depth empirical analysis of a particularly salient one of these international multimedia collaborations – a five episode “Silk Road” documentary series produced through collaboration between the Chinese and Russian international broadcasters, China Radio International (CRI) and RT (formerly Russia Today) (Russia Today 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e). The paper also interrogates how the series’ meaning is coproduced by the participants that made up its immediate – elite – audience. Neither Russia nor China can control the wider meaning or reception of the images among international media audiences, so an audience-focused study would be valuable to ascertain whether and why target audiences accept or reject the narratives of the Silk Road Series, to further illuminate the social and political significance of this international media collaboration. While a worthy object for future study, audience analysis remains beyond the remit of the present paper.

On one hand, the Silk Road series exemplifies China’s pursuit of cultural soft power in the domestic and international political contexts, with the push of Chinese civilization and Silk Road narratives. Yet it also conforms to principles of Chinese foreign policy that have a significant historic pedigree. The first is Mao Zedong’s strategy of “making the foreign serve China” (famous example: Snow 1937), which posits that by inviting foreign journalists to experience a curated visit of the country, their reports will be more credible and positive. The second, more recent, strategy of “borrowing a boat to go out to the ocean” (Brady 2015; Lim and Bergin 2018) describes the process of disseminating government-approved content in foreign media to enhance the legitimacy of the narratives. China pursues the two strategies simultaneously with the international multimedia collaboration of CRI and RT.

While the Russian side’s role in the collaboration builds on longstanding Soviet practices of communicating with foreign audiences (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2022, 22–3), for China, it reflects an increased openness to international media collaboration since the 1990s (Yecies, Keane, and Flew 2016). This has supported an active promotion of China’s image that has closely tracked the country’s economic resurgence (Breslin 2011, 5–7). The disparities in

the two state sponsors' international media experience, economic and political weight, raise interesting questions about how this influences the collaborative process, content and strategic outcomes of the documentary.

Given that both CRI and RT are intended to represent their sponsor states' perspectives to the world, our analysis of the CRI-RT co-created visual product provides important new insights into the fulfillment of cooperative soft power messaging. The following analysis interrogates the relative weighting of Chinese and Russian strategic narratives about the BRI; the ways in which the Silk Road series gives sense to China's BRI; and the extent to which this Chinese-Russian media partnership brings strategic benefits for the different states, broadcasters and journalists involved. In addition to the empirical contribution, this paper adds a theoretical contribution to the study of visual politics, strategic narratives, aesthetic power, and the Silk Road as a foreign policy discourse by explaining how the collaborative process and visual content of documentaries are strategized in political communication.

Theoretical framework

Strategic narratives and aesthetic power

International relations are increasingly influenced by the practice of strategic communication. Following the narrative turn in IR studies, "strategic narratives" are theorized as a "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). Strategic narratives contribute to short- and long-term goals, including "[a]genda setting, legitimation, diverting attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity, and mobilization" (ibid, 8). This is possible because narratives create expectations and guide meaning-making by explaining the "who, what, when, where and why" (Burke 1962). The communication process of strategic narratives involves the formation of content, the projection of mixed media and audience reception (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013; Mitchell 2005). This is a complex and uncertain process because the international environment is "filled with multiple narratives – competing and overlapping, epochal and issue-specific" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 102).

Strategic narrative scholarship mainly investigates verbal and written communication. This paper contributes to the emerging debate about visuality and strategic narratives (Chatterje-Doodly and Crilley 2019; Crilley 2015; O'Loughlin et al. 2011; Swimelar 2018; van Noort 2017, 2020b), which has developed in response to the unprecedented spread of visual communication in the digital age. There are four key attributes enabling images to convey strategic narratives effectively: they can visualize cause and effect; "make important claims about power"; authenticate what an actor claims; and elicit an emotional response in

audiences (Swimelar 2018, 182). In fact, images of strategically important topics derive their power precisely from how far audiences feel emotional or “affective investment” in the identities portrayed on screen, which enable them to identify with one account over another (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020; Solomon 2014). So, while visuals are deployed to support the communication of strategic narratives, they can also complicate and undermine strategic narratives. This may be due to internal visual inconsistencies, visual-verbal contradictions, and the inability of political actors to control the meaning or reception of the image in the new media ecology (Swimelar 2018; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013).

Aesthetic power

For effective visual communication of particular strategic narratives, the aesthetic power of the images used is crucial. Aesthetic power operates in the same way as cosmetic makeup; to empower, to beautify or to improve a self-identity. As such, it constitutes an important component of any soft power strategy (Solomon 2014). So, as political actors attempt to create a desirable Self in international relations, they “utilize resources to apply a cosmetic image to the operations of power” (Steele 2010, 25, 2008). These aesthetic constructions are intended to create “a more secure environment for a community or Self (a ‘show of force’ or ‘demonstration of will’)” (Steele 2010, 27). In the case under study, the aesthetic construction relates to China’s self-concept and foreign policies. The resources utilized for this purpose are the financial and human investments in the Chinese-Russian state-owned international media collaboration around the BRI. Since aesthetic power is shaped over generations and via technological developments (Steele 2010, 62), it undergoes a continuous process of development.

Steele considers the psychological, imaginative and rhythmic strata of aesthetic power, of which the rhythmic stratum is of specific importance to this paper. In this conceptualization, power is projected “through the routines agents perform that attend to their senses of Self” (Steele 2010, 36). This might involve displays of the mundane (e.g. commuting), or equally, extraordinary events, in the case of spectacles (e.g. air shows in Steele 2010). In this paper, we consider routine processes both in the production of content (what is shown) and in the dissemination process (how, when and where content is shown), outlining how this rhythmic content and repetitive act cultivate aesthetic power. Our analysis of the Silk Road series demonstrates how routines of the mundane, through a melody of cranes, construction sites, residential buildings and human faces, generate aesthetic power in the present. In parallel, visuals of cultural heritage sites and tourist experiences contribute to extraordinary imaginaries of the past, while inferring continuity and also progression.

Steele explains that aesthetic power “becomes vulnerable when its aesthetic vision becomes over-pristine” (Steele 2010, 41). In other words, the power of strategic narratives is disrupted when the visuals look “too good to be true”. In masking social realities, aesthetic power is therefore potentially vulnerable when confronted with counternarratives. Yet, counternarratives naturally arise to fill the “gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent” (Bleiker 2001, 512). So, our analysis will show how the visuals of the Silk Road series associate infrastructure projects with dreams of prosperity and hope, while political conflict and unrest in the Chinese province of Xinjiang – the site of many important Silk Road oasis towns – are visually ignored. This, then, exemplifies Chinese agency in manipulating their aesthetic image to ensure, as Xi envisioned, that the Chinese people (and foreign audiences indirectly) have “a correct concept of history, national viewpoint, state outlook and cultural perspective” (Xi 2014).

Silk road as a foreign policy discourse

Since aesthetic power is used to create an attractive self in international relations, it is open to historical statecraft – meaning “the systematic application of representations of the past (real or imagined) in order to frame and legitimize foreign policy, naturalize a certain image or role of a country, and stabilize collective identities on national, regional and global levels (‘communalization’)” (Mayer 2018, 1222). Communicating narratives about the Silk Road is a form of historical statecraft. Not only China but also Japan, South Korea, India, and the US have used the history of the Silk Road in their foreign policy discourse – predominantly in their Central Asia policy (Dadabaev 2018a, 2018b; Laruelle 2015). The “Silk Road” terminology coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late nineteenth century (Richthofen 1877) is deployed in foreign policy discourses in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries due to its association with “regional trade networks, cultures of diplomacy, and the harmonious relations that come from the free movement of ideas, people, technologies, and goods” (Winter 2019, 10). There is no authentic Silk Road; instead, people are faced with the “invented and the reinvented” Silk Road (Chin 2013, 194). As our analysis of the Silk Road series shows, selective representations of the Silk Road history boost China’s aesthetic power.

The Silk Road as a foreign policy discourse can support political objectives such as agenda setting and legitimation. In this case, the Chinese authorities seek to discipline China-centric Silk Road narratives that support their identity-narrative as a “good neighbor, good friend, and good partner” (van Noort 2022), and their order-narrative of inclusive globalization. China’s Silk Road narratives evoke nostalgia for the past (van Noort 2022; Benabdallah 2021; Thorsten 2005; Fasslabend 2015). Specifically, China’s communication romanticizes famous travelers of the Silk Road (van Noort 2022), presents a geographical imagination

of the Silk Road that places China at the center of regional and continental connectivity (Winter 2020), and celebrates the exchange of goods, ideas, and knowledge along the Silk Road (for more details, see Hansen 2012; Frankopan 2015). At the same time, China smooths over historical episodes of the Silk Road that would undermine this aesthetically appealing representation of the past (for instance, treasure hunters along the Silk Road in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Hopkirk 1980). Thus, states can discursively use the Silk Road in their communication to contrive a positive image of the past as well as themselves.

There is soft power in history and heritage, because “they provide the symbolic and discursive framing around which relationships are woven together” (Winter 2019, 132). The Silk Road as a foreign policy discourse is not only useful to China in dealing with modern Eurasia (Frankopan 2015), it has narrative currency beyond its “original” geography. With Xi Jinping referring to a Silk Road “spirit” (Xinhua 2017) which assumedly can be restored and rejuvenated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2019), the positive values and qualities associated with the Silk Road history are broadly applicable. Now, any country can potentially co-opt China’s Silk Road narratives while it legitimizes its policy choice to join the BRI (van Noort and Colley 2021). Moreover, the association of the BRI with the revived Silk Road softens China’s infrastructural activities and ambition to become a global technological power that have perpetuated both hope and fear (see “Made in China 2025 strategy”, Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). As the case study analysis will show, the Silk Road discourse is visually deployed to give meaning to China’s behaviors in the past, present and the future.

Overall, visual politics is an intricate process of masking, beautifying, and reiterating, intended to advance a country’s aesthetic power.

Case study and approach

In this article, we present a rigorous analysis of the production, content and dissemination of a five-part documentary series produced collaboratively by the state-owned international broadcasters, RT and China Radio International (CRI), in 2017.³ Documentaries aim to capture reality and inform the public, using fact-finding journalism. Nonetheless, documenting reality is a subjective practice, shaped by an organization’s norms, values, ideas and interests, which – explicitly or implicitly – inform the work’s content, format and manner of dissemination. The collaboration of these two state broadcasters on the series indicates that its visual narratives of the Silk Road are broadly compatible with one or both states’ strategic objectives toward international audiences, but reveals little about the immediate concerns of journalists involved, nor the series’ production dynamics. To interrogate the formation and projection of multimodal (visual, textual and oral) narratives about China’s infrastructural activities along this

metaphorical new “Silk Road”, we apply a critical visual methodology focusing on “constitutive questions of meaning construction, production and performance” (Kirkpatrick 2015, 205; see also Bleiker 2018; Gillespie and Toynebe 2006; Hansen 2006).

Building on the work of Gillian Rose (2016) and Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), we suggest that there are three broad strands of relevance when analyzing these visual images: their formation; projection; and reception. “Formation” combines both the background to the production of an image (including strategic objectives behind it), with the social aspects surrounding its production, for instance, “the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices” relevant to the image’s formation (Rose 2016, 26). The following section of the paper therefore opens with a discussion of the circumstances of the Silk Road series’ formation.

“Projection” refers to the nature of the image itself, and the methods for its circulation. This includes an image’s technological and compositional attributes – “specific material qualities”, such as “content, colour and spatial organization” (Rose 2016, 25), as well as its formatting and fit with specific circulation/dissemination technologies and platforms. We adopt a rigorous multi-modal manual approach in order to simultaneously address two forms of visual information (written text; still and moving images) and two forms of audio accompaniment (audio commentary; audio soundtracks) projecting strategic narratives of the BRI. We pay particular attention (after Hansen 2006, 73–83) to three key aspects of the Silk Road series’ representations: temporal moment/s; subject/s of discourse; and event/s. Automated sentiment analysis techniques are not suited to assessing such an intricate combination of attributes (Poria et al. 2017, 874), making manual analysis critical for uncovering the chains of implied causes, consequences and agency contained within a strategic narrative that may be split across different parts of the videos or the series as a whole (Chatterje-Dooddy and Crilley 2019), as well as the ways in which these factors supposedly entail implications for future policymaking.

Together, this package of analytical techniques enables us to interrogate rigorously the ways in which this Chinese-Russian media collaboration projected the “facts” about the (New) Silk Road: the representation of significant moments in the Silk Road story; the subjects around which the story centered; the events portrayed as meaningful in the ways in which the story played out; and the likely future implications. An interrogation of the precise audiences consuming this series, as well as of their “reception” or interpretive co-production of the meaning of these visual images, merits further study in order to ascertain the success of such projection strategies. It is, however, beyond the remit of this particular paper.

Our final concern is to ascertain the strategic value of this Chinese-Russian media partnership to the states, broadcasters and journalists involved. We address this question by situating our analysis of the series itself alongside an interrogation of the political circumstances of its production, to which we now turn.

Formation and projection of visual narratives of the silk road

A country like China could never be summarized in a series of 30-minute films or in any number of books. Travelers have to see China with their own eyes to properly experience and appreciate this unique land. There is no other way to truly know and love this mystery of the country. But perhaps this brief introduction may inspire others to explore it for themselves. (Ep. 5, min. 25-26)

Formation: media strategy and the BRI

The conditions of the formation of the Silk Road series are complex. As previously noted, the BRI concept had become the guiding principle for organizing Chinese economic strategy, yet buy-in to the many of the project's initiatives by publics and media in target states has been mixed (van Noort 2021; Reed and Hille 2019; Stanway 2019; Garcia-Herrera and Jianwei 2019; Matura 2018). The production of the "Silk Road" documentary series was informed by these strategic concerns, in the context of longstanding Russian (formerly Soviet) media support for foreign policy activities, paired with the dramatic recent rise in Chinese online and broadcast initiatives intended to engage and build connections with overseas publics.

Perhaps the most overtly promotional of these contemporary co-productions is the "Hello China" program, a collaboration between China Radio International and a Chinese-founded international media and trade facilitation company, GB Times, beginning in 2011. This commenced with the production of a series of online shorts intended to introduce Chinese language and culture to international audiences.⁴ The vast number of video shorts released in sequential fashion contributed to the rhythmic aesthetic power of the "Hello China" program, which has been further bolstered with the expansion of the initiative over multiple cycles. These cycles have seen the production of various multi-media outputs including a book, DVD and online cultural resources about China, launched in languages including Bulgarian (Xinhua 2015) as well as English. China's approach to outward-facing media resources had therefore taken on a well-established rhythm before attention turned directly to the promotion of the BRI.

With this as the general context, it is significant that the announcement of strategic coordination between China's BRI and the Russian-sponsored EAEU, in 2015, coincided with the year of the inaugural China–Russia media forum. Subsequently repeated as an annual event, and followed with the officially designated Year of Russia–China Media Communication of 2016–17 (which coincided with the fourth cycle of "Hello China"), this period witnessed increased media cooperation between China and Russia. Such cooperation was supported at the highest levels, as demonstrated by the 2017 agreement between Presidents Putin and Xi on the establishment of a Russian-language (Chinese subtitled) channel produced in collaboration by Russia's state-owned Channel 1 and CCTV, and broadcast via satellite in China.⁵

The coincidence of the inaugural media forum with the announcement of institutional BRI-EAEU strategic coordination provided a logical opening for media collaboration around these integrative projects, and Russia's then Deputy Minister of Telecom and Mass Communications, Alexey Volin, vocally advocated for Russian-Chinese media cooperation in order to promote the integration of BRI and EAEU (McIntyre 2015). In the end, a collaborative media forum and associated promotional trip was organized, enabling Russian journalists to travel the route of the new Silk Road. A resounding success as far as volume of outputs is concerned, this initiative of "20 days and 4000 km inspired more than 200 articles, essays, news stories, and even a documentary series" (ep. 5, min. 26.30). This documentary series not only emblemized Sino-Russian media collaboration at this crucial juncture but also precipitated an agreement on substantially increased Russian-Chinese media collaboration the following year (RIA Novosti 2018), intended to allow the two sides to "tell each other's stories well" (Drinhausen and Solonina 2020). It is precisely this highly significant documentary series – the Silk Road Series – that provides the original empirical material for our investigation.

This five-episode series was released in 2017, and includes episodes dedicated to various elements of the new Silk Road, including its infrastructure, language and economy. The closing credits to each episode give special thanks to the respective Embassies of Russia and China in each other's country, and to both countries' departments of state with responsibility for the mass media. This indicates both states' formal buy-in to the documentary collaboration at the highest levels. Yet, there are some interesting asymmetries apparent in the two sides' involvement in the practical formation of the series. These asymmetries reveal China's communication strategies of "making the foreign serve China" and "borrowing a boat to go out to the ocean" in action.

At first glance, the Silk Road documentary series appears as an RT production. Its narrator is RTD's (RT Documentary channel) regular voice actor, several of the writers and production staff have worked on other programs and series' released by RT and its parent company, TV-Novosti,⁶ and it was disseminated under the RTD logo on the Russian network's web- and YouTube channels.

However, several of the featured journalists – including the main presenter, Russian journalist, Anna Allabert – work for CRI, and the title sequences for each video in the Silk Road series prominently display the “Hello China” logo. The narrative of the series’ production given in the finished product is of a collaboratively organized initiative bringing together Russian and Chinese journalists to experience for themselves the developments along the new Silk Road. Yet, the copyright for the series rests solely with China Radio International (CRI).

While there is no public information about the financial framework of this co-production, or China’s international broadcasting operation as a whole, the latest FARA filings for TV operations in the USA (with China in first place) indicate that China’s budget for international media collaborations likely exceeds Russia’s (Farivar 2021). That being the case, the project looks as much like a Chinese commission as a genuine collaboration.

What is more, despite the long form of these documentaries, they make clear visual and stylistic references to the original “Hello China” shorts released back in 2011/12, that reflect the political leadership’s vision of China’s artistic charm. These include opening sequences that pair traditional Chinese music with the gradual appearance of calligraphy. Such similarities notwithstanding, the individual episodes of the series have their own stylistic particularities. These include imagery weighted toward particular symbols (industry, speed and scale in the infrastructure and economy episodes; folk and traditionalized culture images in the episodes dedicated to language, tourism and history) as well as individualized color palettes per episode. Yet, despite these particularities, there are some striking themes that recur across the series, in which a clear strategic narrative of the Silk Road project, and its positive impact on target communities, is projected through visual imagery.

The following section of the paper interrogates the projection in further detail. Nonetheless, it is worth noting at this early stage that the visual characteristics of the Silk Road series correspond to China’s approach to cultural soft power, which predates the introduction of the BRI, while the specific strategic narratives projected in the Silk Road series bear clear resemblance to earlier Chinese formal messaging around the BRI. Indeed, the finished product takes on the characteristics of an advertorial commissioned for the Chinese state, outsourced for strategic reasons to a Russian crew who as foreigners “serve China”.

Projection: strategic narratives of the past, present and future

Past

Aesthetic power is used to beautify and discipline strategic narratives of the past. The documentary series celebrates specific periods of Silk Road development (related to the Han and Tang Dynasties, which have also been celebrated in social media productions by CGTN and Xinhua News Agency, see van Noort 2022). The programs apply nostalgia to the history of the Silk Road, and they

romanticize Chinese culture and artistic charm. With the aid of aerial shots and close up caravan shots, the series reimagines the transportation of goods from the East to the West in ancient times (ep. 1, min. 4; ep. 5, min. 20.29). The visualization of the challenging conditions of camel transport across the barren dessert – with regards the excessive exposure to the sunlight and saddle discomfort – support the historical re-imagination (ep. 3, min. 1.56). The movement of people and trade to and from China are visually represented with camels on maps (ep. 3, min. 13.19) and information chyrons are superimposed with camels walking in caravan (ep. 1, min. 3.46). There are several references to the travels of Marco Polo – one of the most known Silk Road travelers; when a Russian journalist is riding a camel, and when visiting the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, China (ep. 1, min. 4; ep. 5, min. 17.45). The Chinese cities of Urumqi, Khasgar and Xi'an are visually mapped and linked with a red line to Almaty, Khiva, Bukhara, Teheran, Baghdad and Damascus (ep. 4, min. 13.08). Images of camels, desserts and heritage cities, as well as reference to the Travels of Marco Polo characterize the Silk Road past; its history is beautified and disciplined.

The visuals demonstrate the association of China's self-identity with civilization and Silk Road narratives. The opening imagery of each of the episodes emphasizes the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture; people are practicing Tai Chi/Chi Gung, paper fans are opening and closing, and there are long shots of traditional Chinese architecture (e.g. ep. 5). Visuals of the historic Silk Road juxtapose this timeless presentation of China. The Chinese city of Xi'an – the capital city of the Han and Tang Dynasties – is presented as the starting point of the Silk Road (ep. 1, min. 7.02), and characterized as the cradle of Chinese civilization (ep. 5, min. 6.46). Aerial shots of the city walls of Xi'an symbolize civilization and safety. The gate of Yangguan is another city that prospered during the historic Silk Road, due to its place as "China's first ever customs house" (ep. 1, min. 21.39). The Yangguan gate also symbolizes civilization by visually dividing "safe" China with the dangerous "beyond". Together, these visuals positively report on China as a continuous civilization and a positive force for trade.

The Silk Road series supports the view that this ancient trading route can still be experienced. In addition to camel riding, China's "[m]any invaluable world contributions still draw tourists" (ep. 3, min. 1.07). These contributions refer to the Chinese invention of paper, the compass and gunpowder. The videos celebrate Chinese culture (e.g. visual imagery of costumed Chinese opera singers in ep. 3, min. 3.01). Moreover, journalistic testimonials about the art of tea and acupuncture are used to legitimize the view that China is "worth coming to" (episode 3, min. 16.56 and 19.35). Before, it was merchants who experienced the ancient Silk Road, but "today it is tourists who blaze trails between exotic destinations" (ep. 3, min. 3.20). In reporting a visit to the Terracotta warriors, the Russian CRI presenter, Allabert, makes clear that this experience is

something that dreams are made of: “I’ve long dreamed of coming here and now here I am” (ep. 3, min. 5.54). Positive experiences of the ancient Silk Road make Russian journalists wish that they could stay longer in China (ep. 5, min. 16.28), and they promote the Silk Road tourism experience for a wider audience, since “every foreign visitor will cherish their own personal China” (ep. 5, min. 1.18). Therefore, the series suggest that a China-centric Silk Road can still be experienced today.

The series selectively represents history by positioning China, with the aid of maps, at the heart of a peaceful Silk Road (ep. 3, min. 13.19). One of the episodes explains that it is Chinese custom to write up their own history, and this is “why the past is always in harmony with the present” (ep. 3, min. 1.05). The series prioritizes the positive spillover effects of the Silk Road, while ignoring specific historical factors and human involvement. The documentaries suggest that the Silk Road “suddenly vanished in the middle ages” (ep. 5, min. 2.04), but China’s BRI offers a cultural renaissance, breathing “new life into the ancient trading route” (ep. 5, min. 2.24). Spaces and societies between China and the West are for the most part ignored in the series. The space in-between is visually reimagined with barren deserts and memories of “nomadic tribal lands” (ep. 1, min. 24.55). Thus, the series exemplify China’s historical statecraft; representations of the past are used to legitimize the BRI, and frame China as a peaceful trading country. This is possible due to “historical narrative ‘cherry picking’ and ‘decoupling’” (van Noort 2022) and highlighting a convenient and compelling plot.

Taken together, the Silk Road series presents a “cosmetic image” (Steele 2010, 25) of the historic Silk Road to improve the self-identity of China and legitimize the BRI. Aside from the presence of the Russian journalists, the series present a China-centric version of the Silk Road.

Present

The series brings the “spirit” of the Silk Road into the present by putting a human face to China’s infrastructure initiative, and linking it to the attainment of people’s dreams. One of the episodes explains that the “new economic belt is more than just an image building international project for China”, its “main goal is to improve the standard of living for ordinary people” (ep. 4, min. 15.26 and 15.31). The visual imagery associates human development with economic progress (ep. 2, min. 7.01). An interview with an Urumqi entrepreneur in a bazaar – who embraced the opportunities generated by the BRI – reinforces this message (ep. 2, min. 13.24). The personal narratives of this entrepreneur and other such “heroes” humanize the BRI (ep. 2, min. 11.30). An on-screen interview with a Lanzhou business executive voices: “One Belt One Road Initiative has dramatically altered my career and my life” (ep. 2, min. 22.59). With a great smile, he describes how construction has broadened his horizons (ep. 2, min. 23.03). Thus, with prosperity as a key theme, the *New Silk Road* is about dreaming and having dreams come true.

The series communicates infrastructure projects in an aesthetically-appealing manner. For transportation, glossy images of the successful opening of the Lanzhou-Hamburg route (ep. 2, min. 5.43) demonstrate dreams about cross-continental rail transport coming true, and close-ups and drone footage of airports and railways (ep. 2, min. 8.12) in Lanzhou visually convey the narrative that China's BRI is rejuvenating historic transport hubs. Lanzhou itself is considered "a living symbol of China's developmental leap" (ep. 5, min. 14.32), which is gradually turning into a "futuristic city with particular Chinese aspects to its development" (ep. 5, min. 4.40). Living conditions in modern China are positively visualized using aerial shots of tall residential buildings (ep. 2, min. 0.54); China is a continuous "construction site" (ep. 2, min. 1.17; ep. 4, min. 14.39), and it is this unimpeded infrastructure development that makes human development possible.

Technological developments are visually narrated with reference to a Chinese quality control operations, assessing goods aimed at the Russian market (ep. 4, min. 7.43). Here, Allabert's guided tour of a testing facility alternates images of a shiny new modern office space; images of scientists/technicians in face masks and lab coats undertaking experiments with test tubes, computers, microscopes and other high-tech equipment; and robotics in motion (ep. 4, min. 5.55). The subtitles indicate the huge number of quality control protocols that the business has developed. More progress is to be expected with China's "openness to new technology, new quality levels and new partners" (ep. 4, min. 11.42). The visual narrative of the Silk Road project, then, uses aesthetically-appealing images of infrastructural developments to convey a journey to a better future. The speeded-up time-lapse footage of modern China – in industrial areas – reinforces a progressive Silk Road narrative combining high-tech infrastructure projects with human connectivity and development (ep. 2, min. 5.08). These images of modernity and progress are in contrast with the images of the durable city walls of the historic Silk Road.

China's BRI is associated with important roles for waypoints along the trading route. The city of Xi'an, for example, is portrayed as playing an important role in the New Silk Road, by hosting the Silk Road Museum. The mobius strip statue in front of the museum suggests connectivity and time travel (ep. 1, min. 7.28); modern Xi'an remains a spectacle to the eye, hosting lively and colorful street scenes. Therefore, strategic narratives of the present build on those of the past with Silk Road nostalgia and the "charm" of China's civilization giving meaning to both periods.

The role of several new duty-free towns in China is also explored. One of these is Horgos (also named Khorgos), which sits on the border of China and Kazakhstan. With the revival of the Silk Road, the city of Horgos is transformed into a "mecca for entrepreneurs" (episode 4, min. 18.08) and international buyers are welcomed (ep. 4, min. 20). Visuals progress from panoramic shots of underdeveloped and nondescript areas to the increased presence of adverts

in Russian, to internal shots of a shopping center, where there are lots of bright lights and Russian script (ep. 5, min. 24.39). Scenes of customers and bus tours from Kazakhstan reinforce the commercial value of these duty-free towns (ep. 4, min. 19.12). The visual imagery of these cities updates the trading dimension of the Silk Road for a modern age.

The Chinese city of Horgos is situated in the tumultuous province of Xinjiang. The documentaries frame the BRI as a positive development for the Xinjiang province (episode 4, min. 15.59). The visual reports of Western China imply an inclusive approach to culturally diverse contexts, ignoring the province's violent recent history, the ways in which the ruling Party's own discourses have exacerbated ethnic tensions there, and the Uyghur internment camps they have subsequently constructed (Tobin 2020). The province is described as three times the size of France (ep. 2, min. 18.45), and hosting Chinese and Turkic peoples (ep. 2, min. 19.03). One of the episodes explains that the city of Urumqi, situated in Xinjiang, means "beautiful pasture" (ep. 3, min. 17.49). The craftsmanship of an Urumqi entrepreneur is visually admired (by zooming in; ep. 2, min. 20.18). In an interview, the well-dressed bazaar salesman explains that "[t]hings used to be worse, but now life is looking up" (ep. 2, min. 20.28). The Silk Road series obscures local contestations to Chinese developments by means of aesthetic power – artistic charm matched with human dreams. The series thus creates ambiguity and a vulnerable identity-narrative of China in the process.

While Russia is visually neglected in the strategic narratives of the past, the present is shaped by supportive communication of Sino-Russian relations. The series narrate that during the historic Silk Road, "Russia was not one of China's partners," but in the twenty-first century, everything has changed (ep. 4, min. 13.11), and "trust between the two countries has reached a special level" (ep. 4, min. 15.11). This sense of trust is supported both by their joint development of an innovation park, and the media collaboration to which China is fully committed: "Our cooperation with Russian media has a solid foundation" (ep. 5, min. 3.34). A logo of a uniformed panda bear and brown bear, who are holding a camera and pencil (ep. 1, min. 15.26), subtly suggests the friendliness underpinning the media collaboration. The two bears, representing the governments of China and Russia, are holding hands and are smiling. Visual reports of the "China and Russia on the Silk Road" press tour opening ceremony support the logo by suggesting a collaborative environment (ep. 3, min. 2.25). The on-screen brief interview with Andrey Denisov, Russian Ambassador to China, reinforces the countries' strategic partnership (ep. 5, min. 2.41).

The development of a joint innovation park in Xi'an, considered "the Chinese Skolkovo" (ep. 5, min. 10.10), further exemplifies this strategic partnership and sense of trust. A Russian aircraft company is expected to open an office at Xi'an's innovation park (ep. 4, min. 9.25). It is assumed that this innovation park will see "Russian and Chinese companies work side by side" and future employees are promised "comfortable working conditions and a good standard of living" (ep. 4,

min. 9.10 and 9.19). Brief aerial shots of the innovation park, including cranes, glass and concrete buildings, visually support the voiceover. The Silk Road series hints at a benign China, with comments such as “we help Russian companies” (ep. 4, min. 9.58). Taken together, the visual and verbal texts suggest a special place for Russia among the countries affiliated with China’s initiative (ep. 5, min. 3.20), and supports China’s ambitions to become an infrastructure and standards-setting power (van Noort 2022).

The Silk Road series historicizes China’s rise through a selected history of regional trade, and to a lesser extent, China’s recent socialist history. China’s success is explained in relation to the market economy reforms in the year 1992, due to which the series suggests “[m]illions of dreams came true” (ep. 4, min. 4.55). China’s “leap forward” (ep. 4, min. 4.34) is visually supported by juxtaposing 30-year-old footage of China with modern-day visuals of technological and urban progress, illustrating that from a predominantly agricultural economy, “socialist China has built up a market economy from scratch” (ep. 4, min 3.59). The Silk Road series thus tries to reconcile China’s ancient and recent histories by appealing to the traditions of Chinese civilization, reform and revolution.

Future

Strategic narratives of the future are interrelated with the present. The series uses personal stories to explain the continuous benefits of the BRI: “Every granddad can tell their grandchild that they are living in the future” (ep. 2, min. 1.44). A Lanzhou town-planner anticipates that “industry will develop and people will have affluent and peaceful lives” (ep. 2, min. 23.39). Strategic narratives of the future are visually supported with aerial shots of rejuvenated Silk Road cities and construction sites. In other words, infrastructure development will continue to shape and benefit the lives of ordinary people in the foreseeable future.

China’s BRI is explained as “one of the world’s largest development strategies” (ep. 4, min. 12.46), in which infrastructure projects are strategized to achieve a better world. China’s careful planning is explained with reference to the ancient Chinese game, Go, images of which appear on screen. In this game, which is assumedly as old as the historic Silk Road (ep. 4, min. 12.54) “each move is carefully considered” (ep. 4, min. 12.42). So, when a Chinese economist builds on this analogy by predicting that China’s economy will soon rise from number two to number one in the world (ep. 4, min. 6.40 and 6.36), he explicitly links China’s strategic traditions of the past with its infrastructural plans for the future. China’s commitment to planning and strategy is further visually supported with the metaphor of traditional calligraphy: “Chinese artists say, before putting brush to canvas, define where the sky and earth will go” (ep. 3, min. 0.50). The game of Go alludes to the ancient Chinese culture and the art of calligraphy uses

artistic charm to reinforce the economist's message. The narrative explains the BRI as a well-thought-out Chinese project that builds on the best of the past to guide China and its Silk Road partners into a prosperous future.

Discussion

Empirical contribution

The Silk Road documentary series produced collaboratively by CRI and RT provides an instructive case study into the opportunities and limits of visual communication of strategic narratives for domestic and international publics and journalist audiences. The promotional trip around which it was organized provided a large group of Russian and Chinese journalists – a primary audience for the project – with a tailored experience of this infrastructural work-in-progress, giving them the raw material from which to cascade a wide range of press outputs for their international audiences. The international multimedia collaboration of CRI and RT exemplifies how the strategies of “making the foreign serve China” and “borrowing a boat to go out to the ocean” are operationalized. Despite appearances, the Russian journalists serve China by broadcasting Chinese government-approved narratives about the BRI and China on Russian media channels, thereby enhancing their legitimacy.

Given that the ability to communicate strategic narratives about China, the BRI, and the initiative's supposed impact on the international order more generally is contingent on their aesthetic power, it is worth noting the extent to which this organized tour itself worked to beautify China's self-concept for the journalists taking part, by exposing them to cultural experiences (episodes 1, 3), historical reenactments (episode 1), ancient natural and architectural wonders (episode 1) and technological marvels (episode 4). Many of the recurrent themes in the Silk Road documentaries' portrayal of the region derived directly from these curated experiences, which beautify and discipline strategic narratives of the past. A combination of civilizational narratives and Silk Road narratives are used to highlight Chinese culture and artistic charm, and to recount trade and connectivity during the Han and Tang Dynasties (which are perceived as the “golden ages” due to the unification and expansion of the Chinese empire, see Keay 2009). These communication practices discipline imaginations of the region's history in ways acceptable to Chinese authorities, and palatable to international audiences. At the same time, it promotes China's traditional culture and artistic charm and enhances national culture soft power, consistent with China's soft power strategy.

In projecting visual narratives of the present, the series relates China's infrastructure initiative in terms of human dreams, and stresses the linkages between the current infrastructural project with the potential betterment of life for ordinary people. Thus, smiling advocates of multiculturalism and artisanal

products of indigenous ethnic groups were situated in the context of a marketplace (episode 2), while other people made use of newly constructed bridges, buildings, offices and laboratories (episodes 2, 4), or happily immersed themselves in sites of consumer capitalism (episode 4), all set in the wider context of fast-moving vibrant cityscapes (episodes 2, 5). The series' visual projection of the future builds both upon the romanticized images of the past, and the technologized images of the present. According to this account, the BRI will revitalize this old trading route (episode 5), elevate the Chinese economy to the top position in the world (episode 4), and through this, bring benefits to ordinary people (episode 2), including foreign tourists (episode 5).

The Silk Road documentary series thus translates China's official strategic narratives of the BRI into a visually stimulating, aesthetically pleasing and engaging format. This concrete representation of the peaceful and multilateral nature of China's rise (Laruelle 2018; van Noort 2022) demonstrates the potential of media productions to imbue states with the aesthetic power to portray their self-identity and, subsequently, policy activities, in the most attractive manner possible for journalists, politicians, and domestic and international audiences. The vulnerability of this aesthetic vision was to some extent mitigated by its ostensible production out of an immersive cultural program, rather than as something explicitly political. However, the media collaboration was political – sanctioned and supported at the highest levels of both the Chinese and Russian states within a context of wider strategic media collaborations between the two countries' state-funded international broadcasters. The project received practical support from their respective embassies and media ministries, as well as the vocal backing of members of their political elites. Their subscription to the sense of the project is not incidental.

Yet, despite the equitable partnership indicated by the supporting rhetoric, the production of the Silk Road series, and the strategic narratives projected through it clearly reflect the "asymmetric partnership" between China and Russia (Kaczmarek 2016). In production terms, while the setup of the series was collaborative, RT undertook most of the labor, whereas CRI (through its journalists' contributions) shaped the tone, and solely retained the copyright. In projection terms, the form in which the content was delivered was clearly situated within a preexisting pattern of media activity established by China Radio International. The previous "Hello China" cycles provide the natural reference point. Together with the curated experience of the journalists, this conditioned the final output, whose feel is of a commissioned advertorial.

What is more, the strategic narratives visually presented in the Silk Road series are unmistakably those of the Chinese state. Russia's vision for the EAEU was the harmonization of economic and humanitarian processes from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016), and its objective in cooperating with BRI is to leverage Chinese investment to develop the physical infrastructure necessary to facilitate such a

development (Timofeev, Lissovolik, and Filippova 2017, 65). Russia's vision of regional development can be seen as a historically informed reorganization of the post-Soviet space that buffers against globalization. China's vision, by contrast, is of a far more inclusive and flexible linking to the outside world that maximizes globalization's benefits (Kaczmarek 2017).

Moreover, the series mirrored the visual strategic narratives in China Global Television Network's (CGTN) digital media productions about the BRI because its content too revealed in nostalgia for a China-centric Silk Road history and framed China as an infrastructure and standards-setting power (van Noort 2022). Using similar compositions that contribute to China's self-image and a shared meaning of the BRI, the Silk Road series revealed selective representations of the past, artistic charm, references to ancient Chinese civilization, and political endorsements, and emphasized the shared economic benefits (i.e. joint innovation park in Xi'an). With China claiming that it "helps" Russian businesses, it frames itself in this cultural co-production as a "good neighbor, good friend, and good partner".

The strategic narratives projected in the series therefore represent not a co-constructed regional vision, but China's carefully curated self-identity, partially reimagined and given credence through Russian eyes. While the series is compatible with both states' strategic interests in the broad sense, it represents a ceding to China of Russia's aesthetic power, and agency over the outwards projection of normative frameworks. However, the strategic interests of these states are clearly not always in perfect alignment with their respective international broadcasters, or the journalists employed by them. Notwithstanding this asymmetrical collaboration, journalists at both broadcasters undoubtedly benefited from the first-hand experiences and inspiration of their expenses-paid international trip; and RT gained from the collaboration the resources (financial, creative and practical) to produce a documentary series that subsequently aired on its own online and broadcast networks.

Theoretical contribution

This paper has sought to make a theoretical contribution to the study of visual politics, strategic narratives, aesthetic power and Silk Road as a foreign policy discourse by explaining how the production process and visual content of documentaries are strategized in political communication (Bleiker et al. 2018; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013; Steele 2010). Despite the emerging focus on international broadcasting operations, few scholars present detailed studies on the strategic but diverging benefits of media partnerships, and the development of documentaries specifically. This case study has demonstrated how the visual content and production process of a collaborative media project can advance the strategic narratives of one political actor. It has revealed how China's communication strategies of "making the foreign serve China" and

“borrowing a boat to go out to the ocean” are utilized to disseminate positive narratives of China and the BRI. Media collaborations such as these conceal the visual politics of documentaries, and their asymmetric benefits.

Given the curated cultural experiences of the journalists traveling along the Silk Road route, the media forum can be partly understood as the application of Chinese aesthetic power to a journalistic community that has potential to disseminate this aesthetic vision further over time, as well as to the political elite figures invested in the successful execution of the collaboration. Following the “cascade effects” of soft power initiatives (Entman 2003; Handley 2010), this media collaboration can be seen as an attempt by China to impact key influencers, both journalists and civil servants, who took part in the promotional trip. It is of no strategic concern that the external audience for this series is likely to be small, since the project’s overall impact is intended to come as much from the production process as from the completed documentary. The media collaboration encourages key influencers from Russia to cascade outputs to secondary audiences in the longer-term, thus producing conditions conducive for a longer-term positive impression. Notwithstanding the small audience, the airing of the documentaries is critical. According to Roselle, “Soft power assets are always on display. [...] Soft power assets can be promoted and publicized to target audiences for instrumental purposes – as in representational force or strategic narratives” (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014, 73).

The visualization of this media collaboration implies the ceding of narrative agency to Russia. Yet, this conceals the aesthetic power projected by China throughout the formation process, by curating the cultural experiences on which Russian journalists based their testimonies. The journalists’ visual, textual and oral appreciation of the ancient, the new, and the anticipated Silk Road therefore adds an affective element to what was essentially their reinterpretation of China’s pre-curated strategic narratives of the BRI. China’s continuous influence over the production process contained the visual reinterpretation of its strategic narratives. China derives further aesthetic power from the high-level performance of Sino-Russian cultural collaboration, which beautifies the BRI for the political elites engaged in the media forum, thus rendering it benign.

This aesthetic power is carried through into the projection of documentaries; they can beautify a policy (in this case the BRI), secure China’s self-concept, and reinforce its asymmetric partnership with Russia, built upon self-restraint and adaptation in response (Kaczmarek 2016). The extended format of documentaries renders them an effective format for performing rhythm in terms of process and visual content (both extraordinary and mundane). In this case, the melody of camels, cranes and human faces suggests a dynamic temporal and spatial disposition; the universality of these visual symbols suggests the wider geographical intentions of China’s infrastructure initiative. Yet, the aesthetic power of such documentaries remains vulnerable to the contrasting interpretations of alternative documentaries and other media forms.

The selective use of history creates further opportunities and limits for visual reinterpretation through documentaries. The case study analysis showed how China systematically applies representations of the Silk Road, while smoothing over inconvenient aspects. For instance, China's strategic narratives of the past fail to mention the ambivalent and often discriminatory relationship that the Chinese empire had with foreigners (Levathes 1994, 34; see also Keay 2009, 273). Such historical specificities complicate China's strategic narratives of the past that associate connectivity with trade and prosperity. At the same time, the series do not elaborate on Russia's Silk Road history despite the country's connection to its Northern branches (UNESCO, n.d.). By communicating China-centric Silk Road narratives and concealing contentious historical specificities, the documentaries reimagine historical narratives acceptable to China. Also, China's historical narratives that promote a memory of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019, article 4) better justify the buy-in of Russia to the BRI through its discursive ambiguity. This, then, explains Russia's cooperation in the production of essentially a Chinese-commissioned advertorial.

Conclusion

Media collaboration between state-funded international broadcasters can trouble many assumptions about the operations of soft power: such collaborations offer divergent benefits for the states, broadcasters, and journalists involved; they may be designed for the long-term influence of elite groups rather than immediate influence on the mass public; and even the appearance of partnership can mask a ceding of aesthetic power from one state to another.

The visual imagery of the RT/CRI Silk Road Series conveys Chinese, rather than Russian strategic narratives. China's approach to these series is not unexpected, as it is consistent with its soft power strategy and resembles other media productions. China's strategic narratives have been replicated throughout Chinese media outputs on the BRI. For example, China Global Television Network's (CGTN) 2019 three-part documentary on 'The New Silk Road'⁷ presents strikingly familiar visual imagery: drone footage of geographical expanses; planes, trains, barges and cranes; roads and bridges; shipping containers; globes and maps with illuminated transit routes; time-lapse footage of urban life; factory workers, consumers and tourists. If a picture is worth a thousand words, China's visual narratives of the BRI say: The BRI is about more than infrastructure. China is developing the world, connecting people and making dreams come true. Documentaries play a key role in projecting such political messages.

Notes

1. BBC World News (formerly BBC World Service Television), 1991; Euronews, 1993; France 24, 2006; DW-TV, 1992; language expansions in 2009.
2. Russia's RT (formerly Russia Today), 2005; Telesur (predominantly sponsored by Venezuela), 2005; China's CGTN (formerly CCTV), 2000; Iran's PressTV, 2007; Turkey's TRT World, 2015; Qatari Al Jazeera English, 2006.
3. Available to view online at: <https://rtd.rt.com/series/the-silk-road-series-discover-modern-China/>
4. Full archive of Hello China videos available here: <https://gbtimes.com/tag/Hello%20China%20video%20series>
5. The home page for this channel can be found at: <https://www.katyusha.tv/ru/about>
6. Writer Nikita Rudakov, Producer Gennady Govorukhin, and Senior Producer Andrey Blagodyrenko all have other credits with RTD.
7. Available to view on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQE56UAEmDs>

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