Xinjiang’s largest cities have undergone a series of redevelopment programs over the last decade. The westerly autonomous region in China is inextricably connected to the romantic narrative of the Silk Road, a narrative that is used to legitimize the destruction and gentrification of historic urban centres. Xinjiang’s heritage is being managed to build transboundary economic relations with Central Asia, assimilate the Uyghur population into the Chinese nation, and secure the region against perceived threats to the state. This can be seen in particular at Kashgar, the westernmost city of China, where the buildings of the historic town centre have been bulldozed, and their Uyghur residents moved to the outskirts of the city.

Heritage is about selectivity and power; it is used to assert local, national and international interests. Ancient sites become muddled between ideas of authenticity and depictions of an ‘accurate’ past. Layers of history are removed and forgotten, whilst others are highlighted for their evocative or marketable values, and placed within broader and more extending narratives that are unrelated to the entire history of the site. Urban heritage consists of material ‘anchors’ and references to an idealized past that are conceptualized in different ways by different stakeholders. Moorings to the past, spatial markers of identity, and feelings of “belonging to” or “owning” a place are processes that can be managed to secure loyalty and assimilate people into imagined communities, as well as to evoke ideas of shared heritage that bridges nations and cultures. When abused, these real effects are involved: spatial selection and emotional banishment from the environment with which their identity was formed, and values that are shifted according to non-local aspirations and nationalist agendas.

Urban heritage is a single field of relations that should not be divided into tangible and intangible. Like a Mobius strip, these frequently applied dichotomies are illusory; heritage cannot be preserved when the tangible materiality of the city and its intangible human actors are detached from one another. A focus on material culture might disregard the performative or experiential dimensions of urban heritage, whilst a focus on ‘intangible’ rituals and action risks ignoring the material context that frames and enables them. Neither action nor the historic environment in which they take place can be separated or artificially generated.

Despite theoretically discarding a separation of tangible and intangible, each are frequently demarcated, privatized, and commodified for their economic or narrative value. It seems that when a “heritage asset” is noticed and defined it is only a matter of time before it becomes isolated as a resource to be used and abused. This is selective; only some heritage is noticed – let alone protected – when urban sites are developed or modernized, at the expense of that which is regarded as insignificant and discarded as rubbish.

The Silk Road as a heritage discourse

The Silk Road is a discursive process, not a clearly demarcated entity with a single fixed location, time, or material presence. However, it is frequently relied upon as a narrative that is fixed, linear, and representational of people, places, and traditions. This narrative is used to frame diplomatic, economic, and heritage dialogues between and within modernizing nation states.

This has occurred in particular within new states that have appeared in Central Asia. Their sudden sovereignty following the collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in a flurry of cultural heritage property claims and the formation of new national identities, selectively drawing upon the deep history of the lands they control. A “renaisance” of New Silk Road schemes has emerged in Eurasian states, aimed at “reviving” ancient markets between their countries.

Xinjiang is of great economic and strategic value for China, with enormous borders linking the country with the growing markets of six neighbouring states. China has therefore been keen to collaborate with these countries through strategies focused on exploiting the economic and diplomatic potential of their shared Silk Road heritage, such as Xi Jinping’s ‘One Belt and One Road’ (yī dào yī li). China draws heavily upon a Silk Road narrative to do this, advocating its location as an “important trunk road where the economic, political and cultural exchanges between the Orient and the West were taking place”, where “friendly exchanges” and “national amalgamation” occurred, and which connected the “friendship of China and Eurasia”. The Silk Road has a capacity to evoke Orientalistic imagery and ideas that have been used to legitimise development in the areas through which it passed.

UNESCO has long been invested in the Silk Road’s heritage discourse, from the Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values between 1957 and 1966 to the continuing designation of transboundary Silk Road World Heritage properties. From the mid-1980s, China has sought to collaborate with UNESCO by expressing their shared interest in promoting unity and preserving diversity. The Chinese approach to safeguarding urban heritage appears to hold similar values for the social dimension of historic urban contexts that are expressed in UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011). The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China, China’s heritage policy that was adopted in 2015, draws heavily upon Australia’s Burn’s Charter by placing an emphasis on the recognition of ethnic and religious heritage, and by claiming to approach heritage sites as cultural landscapes with a living heritage that is worth protecting.

Yet the state fails when it comes to implementation at the local level. In Xinjiang, we see a dearth of community involvement in urban development projects, and the intrinsic ‘friendly exchanges’ that are believed to exist along the Silk Road are largely absent. Far from being unifying, Xinjiang’s heritage is dissonant; it involves a lack of agreement and inconsistency of interests.
Kashgar

The above processes can be seen in Kashgar, a city that was an important node along the Silk Road, one of the oldest and best-preserved Islamic cities in the world, and a potential candidate for World Heritage status.4 Since 2009, in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake the previous year, the Old City has been systematically demolished and rebuilt as part of the Kashgar Dangerous House Reform program. The government maintain that they are modernizing the Old Town, protecting its allegedly flimsy structures from future earthquake, improving the infrastructure, and installing electricity.5 In addition, Kashgar is modelled to become the Special Economic Zone of the West, based on Shenzhen. Around 65,000 buildings have been demolished, to be replaced with a new and modern city. This development follows strategies created according to close social relations between family and Han settlers are being built. Luxury apartments for international investors and Han settlers are being built. Tourism has played a role in developing a heritage industry in Xinjiang, though so far it is based on presenting selected places that are enjoyed by Han visitors to the city. Marketing heritage is not intrinsically bad, and has been seen across the world to bring great benefits to local communities that are involved. An approach has been taken where development is managed by the local population and allows them to guide how their city develops in response to change according to their marketable value, their ways of life, or their future aspirational. Interference with the long-term practices of China’s minority groups will result in the disruption of longstanding ideas of ownership, inheritance, and authenticity, leading to still further construct. Transformations to urban sites must respect—offend and destroy—the existing practices and values of local communities. The divide between ‘authentic’ or ‘traditional’ material structures and the vernacular context that makes them real, must stop. There is no one single homogeneous Uyghur, Han, or Chinese identity in Xinjiang, nor is there a single, linear Silk Road narrative. The Silk Road was a constantly changing and infinitely describable process, yet it has been isolated from the world-information through imposition of national ideologies and association with a homogenizing narrative.

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References
3. Many theories used in this essay were drawn from lectures and a masterclass with Prof. Michael Herzfeld at Leiden University, 6-8 October 2015.

Below: Destruction of historic buildings in Kashgar, Xinjiang, China. Photo by Marc van der Chippe (Nick).