15 Khorgos

The making of an equal twin on the Sino-Kazakh border

Verena La Mela

ICBC Khorgos, international twin city

Kazakhstan is characterized by hectares of barren steppe. Approaching the Sino-Kazakh border in its south-eastern corner, the unbuilt landscape suddenly changes from sandy steppe and occasional corn field to a labyrinth of high-rise buildings. The urban center, constituting the International Center of Boundary Cooperation (ICBC Khorgos[1]), sits right on the border, advertised as a joint economic and cultural project by the Kazakh and Chinese governments. Its physical appearance, however, suggests the contrary, indicating the coalescence of two sides with a barbed wire border fence in between, demarcating the different national territory. Passing from one side to the other is possible only through a large gate spanning the open main square. The ICBC Khorgos is a gigantic trading estate with long-term aspirations to become more than that (Figure 15.1). There are facilities for people to stay, eat, trade and buy. Efforts to add features of genuine urbanity, like a permanent population, are planned for the future.

In 2005 the then Chinese president, Hu Jintao, and Kazakhstan's first president Nursultan Nazarbaev signed an agreement to establish ICBC Khorgos, thereby fostering mutual economic cooperation. ICBC Khorgos straddles the border and is administered as a free-trade zone (FTZ). Visitors from any country as of 2019 may stay up to 30 days without a Chinese or Kazakh visa and purchase tax-free goods. Until 2013, when ICBC Khorgos began, there was just a non-descript border village named Khorgos on the Kazakh side with an estimated several hundred inhabitants. The adjacent settlement on the Chinese side, Huo'erguosi, was granted city status in 2014 when ICBC Khorgos emerged.[2] It now has a population of some 85,000.

ICBC Khorgos qualifies as an international twin city as its two parts physically melt into each other. There is, however, a remarkable feature to it which leaves most visitors puzzled upon arrival: the economy and infrastructure on the Chinese side far exceed that on the Kazakh side in terms of size, number and capacity. Thus, ICBC Khorgos is not typical of internal twin cities 'often merging and becoming indistinguishable' (Garrard and Mikhailova 2019: 3) but does exemplify both internal and cross-border pairs in its dominant-subordinate relationship (Garrard and Mikhailova 2019: 16). ICBC Khorgos's construction

DOI: 10.4324/9781003102526-19

Figure 15.1 Khorgos poster in a suburb of Zharkent with the slogan 'Two countries – one goal' (economic cooperation).

Source: Photo by Verena La Mela, 2017.

formally aimed to establish two equal parts; eight years after its foundation, the two separate entities remain visible and the gap seemingly widens. With 217 hectares,[3] the Kazakh side is notably smaller than the Chinese (343 hectares). This inequality is also reflected in the distribution of shopping centres and the speed of construction: much faster on the Chinese side (cf. Chien and Woodworth 2018). During the first years of my research, the Kazakh side featured just one half-finished building, an ever-locked welcome center plus a couple of yurts. This humble scenery stood against the impressive backdrop of six large multi-storey shopping malls on the Chinese side.

China sports several twin cities along its bordered lands, like Heihe/Blagoveshchensk on the Sino-Russian border (cf. Mikhailova et al. 2019; Saxer and Zhang 2017) or Zhuhai/Macao on China's east coast. However, none match Khorgos in scope and connectivity. Khorgos, globally speaking, connects China with Central Asia and is the main logistical transit land corridor between Asia and Europe. The difference between its two sides, however, is striking: compared to the commercially busy Chinese side with its high-rise buildings, the sleepy and flat Kazakh side looks underdeveloped. As of 2019, there were no visible efforts to emulate Chinese-side development levels. In fact, I observed a puzzling absence of what Taussig called mimesis or imitation (Taussig 1993), a concept Billé (2017) appropriated to describe the competing development of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe. That is to say, underdevelopment is an idea only emerging alongside the term development (Esteva 2010: 2). In this chapter, I explore the

case of ICBC Khorgos to show how development and interdependence produced a dominant-subordinate twin.

The origin of the name Khorgos is unclear. The PR version of ICBC Khorgos suggests that 'Khorgas' means 'camel station' in Mongolian, an idea fitting well into the 'New Silk Road' narrative. A native Mongolian speaker I consulted confirmed the existence of a Mongolian word 'khorgo', meaning '(animal) shelter,' A native Kazakh-speaking colleague, however, suggested it is more likely a Russified version of the Kazakh word 'qorgaw' meaning 'to defend' (correspondingly, Khorgos is referred to as Qorgas or Khorgas in Kazakh and other Turkic languages). This could also make sense given that Khorgos was a military border post during Soviet times. This conjecture, though, has been vehemently denied by ICBC staff I approached with this idea. In fact, all we know for certain is that the border river and the adjacent village are also named Khorgos.

ICBC Khorgos should not be confused with what people in Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries generally refer to as 'Khorgos,' a rather ambiguous designation indicating any of the following places: (1) the railway station Altynköl which opened in 2011, functioning as the main drop-off point for shoppers visiting ICBC Khorgos; (2) a dry port logistical hub attached to the railway station where shipping containers are forwarded between East Asia and Europe and also reloaded on to wagons operating on a different railway gauge; (3) another Special Economic Zone called 'Khorgos Eastern Gate'; (4) a new settlement, Nurkent, constructed particularly for migrant workers involved in constructions in and around Khorgos. All these places lie within a radius of around 20 km of ICBC Khorgos and can be considered part of its larger infrastructure.

ICBC Khorgos is a cross-border twin, viewed with love by its initiators and ambivalence by local Kazakhstanis; still a baby with a short biography. Can it live up to its promise and expectations? Its champions promise 'a huge new city of the future' and 'a city of dreams' [4] with, amongst other things, an international university, a cultural theme park, entertainment and sports complexes. Infrastructure promises evoke expectations (Anand et al. 2018). Local populations, however, are often disappointed by the gap between planners' promises and what seems likely in a foreseeable future. Media reports extensively covered the glamorous aspects of ICBC, while pointing out the disparity.

The material here is based on observing Khorgos's development during ethnographic field research during 2016–2019 for my doctorate. This was mainly conducted in south-eastern Kazakhstan with occasional trips into China. My main field site was the small border town of Zharkent, a mainly Uyghur settlement, 30 km from ICBC Khorgos. Living in Zharkent allowed me to observe and document social and economic change among the local Uyghur population induced by the large-scale infrastructural development around them. Two research assistants worked in ICBC Khorgos: Rollan in the administration, and Sasha as a customs broker (all names anonymized). Both worked in Khorgos for many years and shared their knowledge of internal structures and border procedures. Data also emerged from informal conversations and unstructured interviews with people who had visited Khorgos.

A brief history of Khorgos and its setting

From any angle, Khorgos is an outpost in the vast steppe-land around the Ili River, far from any political centre. An account of its Soviet military history mentions a fortress in the village of Khorgos along the trade route Kuldhza-Zharkent which turned into two border watchtowers in 1924 (*Administration of the Army of the Krasnoznamennogo Eastern Border Division of the KGB of the USSR 1984*, 3). Under the USSR, Khorgos was an important military border post. In the 21st century, it was crafted into one of several pioneering joint economic hubs of two historical opponents. From Kazakhstan's former capital, Almaty, a stretch of the new Western Europe–Western China highway leads 300 km through steppe and desert to Khorgos. Driving 600 km further on leads to Urumqi, capital of the Chinese province Xinjiang. The flat transboundary corridor is framed by the Dzhungarian Mountains in the north and the Tianshan range further south; in between flows the mighty Ili River originating in the Chinese Tianshan Mountains and winding across the border into Kazakhstan's Lake Balkhash. Social and economic exchange occurred here long before the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a China-induced mega-construction and investment project reviving and enlarging old networks of the overland and maritime Silk Roads. Khorgos's strategic geopolitical and economic position at the crossroads of the BRI turned it into its flagship in Central Asia. China's government advertises Khorgos as a 'benchmark and model example project'.[5]

In the last century, border demarcations and people – Uyghurs and other Muslims inhabiting the Sino-Soviet borderlands – were moved back and forth, wedged between the Russian and Qing Empires and later the Republic of China. Cross-border flows of people, goods and ideas ceased (at least officially) from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s, a period when China-USSR relations were at an historical low. For people on both sides of the border, the Sino-Soviet split was traumatizing, particularly for those with border-divided families. Only in the late 1980s and through the 1990s when the border opened, my interlocutors reminisced, were Uyghur businessmen able to revitalize their contacts in China.

For many Chinese and Kazakhstani Uyghurs, the 1990s were the heyday of the open Khorgos border. According to Alim, a 50-something Almaty lawyer, some businessmen profited from the early border trade, facilitated by relatives in China:

> Chinese goods were cheap and we had problems obtaining goods. That's how the first people got rich in Panfilov [Zharkent's former name]. Their relatives in China would send goods to them. They had well-equipped warehouses in Panfilov and they would sell the goods in the bazaar. At that time Panfilov was a closed town because it was a border region.

Alim described the beginnings of trade in Khorgos, recalling an early 1990s scene when Uyghur traders met on the border bridge spanning the Khorgos River, exchanging goods from their trucks. The image of trucks parked on the bridge is important because it later developed into the idea of founding a FTZ in

Khorgos. Political chaos characterized the early years after the USSR collapsed. Uyghurs got the chance to profit from the open border through cooperation with cross-border kin. However, they lost their advantageous position with the border's increasing formalization in the 2000s. Border infrastructure emerged, and subsequent procedural formalization made informal cross-border interaction difficult, instead regulating it through more controlled border-passing procedures.

As mentioned, what is currently designated Khorgos is a conglomeration of geographical names and administrative entities, economic institutions and infrastructure projects. Basically, Khorgos is a tiny border village on Kazakh territory. It is also a border city in China where it is given its Chinese name *Huo'erguosi* (Chinese phonetic notation for Khorgos). According to Rollan, the Chinese part of ICBC Khorgos is administered by the Huo'erguosi city council exercising considerable autonomy from Beijing. On the Kazakh side, the main shareholder is the railway company *Kazakhstan Temir Zholy*. Khorgos is also the name of the river, nowadays dammed north of Khorgos, demarcating the Sino-Kazakh border.

The larger setting also includes the brand new four-lane highway connecting Almaty and Urumqi. The highway's quality matches Chinese roads and is remarkable compared to other, poorer-quality Kazakhstan highways. The international border crossing on China's side was originally inside the city of Huo'erguosi, visually almost glued to ICBC Khorgos. On the Kazakh side, the old border had been inside Khorgos village, its lack of grandeur starkly contrasting with that on China's side and accessible only to village inhabitants and business permit holders.[6] In 2018, an impressive new border post was erected on the recently built highway circumventing the older Khorgos institutions, though connecting them through a distributor road.

Alongside what is already constructed, Khorgos also constitutes a vision, hope and promise (see Anand et al. 2018). Politicians, construction engineers and architects deploy the narrative of a 'second Dubai' to illustrate their ambitions for Khorgos, involving its development into one large settlement reaching as far as Zharkent. Kairat, a planning engineer responsible for developing Khorgos, told me Khorgos would eventually get an international airport. As of 2020, neither an airport nor a 'second Dubai' has materialized, but construction proceeds little by little.

Visual appearance of Khorgos today

A taxi driver brings me and three other passengers from Zharkent to the border. The handles of a foldable pushcart stretching across our laps nearly hit my face whenever we confront a pothole or the driver swerves to avoid a crash. The pushcart is Mahira's, a shuttle-trader (cf. Mukhina 2009) in ICBC Khorgos. She goes there regularly for cheap goods, reselling them at a profit on the local bazaar.

Arriving at the parking lot in front of the shiny new customs building painted in Kazakh blue, we pay the driver 500 Tenge (c1.20 USD) without any receipt and proceed through the crowd to passport control. Shuttle-traders queue with occasional tourists in front of one open booth (from an estimated ten) where my passport gets stamped and the shuttle-traders show their identity cards. I

then must buy an expensive ticket (c3.60 USD) for an obligatory shuttle bus driving me another 5 km to the shopping complexes, the FTZ's core. The whole procedure of buying and scanning the shuttle-bus ticket is new. Rollan described the procedure as being introduced to limit the shuttle-trade the Kazakh state considers illegal.

On the shuttle bus we drive through a long stretch of no man's land, passing the bridge Alim mentioned earlier spanning the wide Khorgos River bed. My mobile-phone network provider sends me a 'Welcome to China' message. On the horizon the vista of ICBC Khorgos emerges like a mirage, looking otherworldly, contrasting with the surrounding unbuilt area. In both countries, space is aplenty; but since China started its 'Open Up the West' campaign around 2000, the Chinese state began overtly showing its physical presence in western-border areas. This also gets manifested in the exclusively Chinese mobile-phone network coverage inside the whole ICBC Khorgos. The sheer number and size of buildings on the Chinese side is overwhelming. Meanwhile, on Kazakhstan's side of the zone, there is one flat shopping mall framed by four trudging clay camels. Behind them, the tips of three blue yurts. That is about it.

The camels serve as 'metaphor for connection and trade' (Winter 2020, 2), part of a Silk Road narrative China seeks to establish along the BRI. A 'geo-cultural Silk Road' (ibid.) displays Chinese power along the BRI under the pretext of 'Chinese civilization' (ibid.). We pass a construction site (a new shopping center on the Kazakh side) and reach ICBC Khorgos's core, a central square, where I and the shuttle-traders leave the bus. The crowd of shuttle-traders immediately rushes to the FTZ's Chinese side. Signs point out the zone's inner boundary. A large open arch marks the different national territories extended by a militarized barbed-wire fence demarcating the border. The arch actually comprises two towers shaped like the ancient Chinese ritual cauldron, the Ding, simultaneously symbolizing the letter 'H' indicating 'harmony' (see Figure 15.2).[7] This symbolism, referring to ancient Chinese history, was appropriated by the Chinese side with no equivalent for Kazakhstan's past. Once through the arch, I am clearly in an entirely different economic, cultural and political space. A threateningly red sign warns against taking pictures. People arriving from Khorgos's Kazakh side need a security check and x-ray of their belongings. Not the other way round, though. People in Zharkent said this was to single out long-bearded men and veiled women suspected of being extremists in China.

Physically entering Chinese territory also entails a different sensorial landscape. Visual differences are the most striking: six large shopping complexes, several warehouses, offices, banks, restaurants, hotels and several buildings under construction. A two-lane highway has taxis and buses operating. However, sound contrasts are also important. China greets me with pervading Chinese pop music blasting from loudspeakers. Only a few metres further on, a chorus of pitched Chinese and Russian voices adds more: advertisements (always maximally loud) for fur sold in the multi-storey shopping complex in front of me. Uyghur and Dungan noodle stalls temptingly smelling of Chinese spices and smoked meat make me hungry.

Figure 15.2 ICBC Khorgos's central square with the two towers shaped like the ancient Chinese ritual cauldron – the Ding, with the Kazakh shopping mall 'Samruk' in the background.

Source: Photo by Verena La Mela, 2017.

While I am standing forlornly on a large square in the open, I wonder which shopping center to enter first. The Kazakh choice is simple: there is only one shopping mall. I decide to start with the 'Golden Port,' whose name is boldly written in Russian and Chinese. To enter, I must pass yet another security control, typical for most Chinese shopping malls in Xinjiang these days. 'Samruk', the lonely Kazakh shopping mall, can be accessed without trouble or security checks. Inside the Golden Port, the smell of cheap Chinese plastic I know too well from my research in China is all-pervasive. One source is a shoe shop run by a Han-Chinese man from a city in China's northeast. Another is a shop selling plastic bags run by a Han-Chinese woman claiming to be from an eastern Chinese city.

The Han-Chinese shop owners, comprising most sellers beside the occasional Uyghurs, seldom speak Kazakh or Russian and thus hire Chinese Kazakhs (bilingual Kazakhs born and raised in China, and one of China's 55 recognized ethnic minorities) to communicate with Kazakh-speaking customers. Sometimes, these shop owners do speak Russian, particularly if coming from China's north-east, close to the Russian border. Paradoxically, in the one shopping center on the Kazakh side, the situation is similar because most shops in the mall (advertised as Kazakh) are nevertheless run by Han-Chinese. I remember Rollan once saying: 'I think through the economic project [ICBC Khorgos] people can actually know about China because now a lot of people [Kazakhstanis] think of China

like a country who wants to "eat" Kazakhstan'. Chinese intentions are uncertain because Chinese investments on the Kazakh side rather seem to reinforce the contrary view and deepen the friction.

Inside the Golden Port, I hear the steady sound of a humming device resembling a vacuum cleaner, placed in front of every shop. It sucks the air out of packages, thus reducing their size ready for export. The wrapping of bundles is a deafening whirling sound. As of 2019, the rule was that individual traders, like the shuttle-traders, were allowed to import only a maximum of 50 kg per person, and packages could not exceed 60 x 40 x 20 cm. At Kazakh customs, packages are weighed, then pulled through an opening in a fence: if it fits into the hole, it passes; if not, the trader is in trouble. So the 'vacuumers' are crucial equipment for everyone.

The Kazakh side is silent. The absence of ear-piercing noise in the (basically) Chinese shopping complex on the Kazakh side can be explained because different products are sold. Textiles, like linen, clothes and fur, are particularly popular with Kazakhstani customers visiting the malls on the Chinese side. They are easy to vacuumize, making them exportable in large quantities. Other products flowing through the border into Kazakhstan include Korean cosmetics, car parts, camping equipment, electrical appliances, electronics, crockery, jewellery and accessories, toys, household goods, tobacco and Chinese medicine. In the Kazakh-Chinese direction flow products associated with natural and chemical-free production, like honey and dairy products. Also on sale are European cosmetics and chocolate, plus alcohol (like Georgian wine or Russian vodka).

Apart from shuttle-traders, there are few other customers in ICBC Khorgos, and entire floors of the shopping malls are empty. The territory seems oversized for the amount of people visiting daily during opening hours: 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. After browsing through nearly empty shopping malls dispersed across the Chinese side for the whole day, I journey back to Kazakh customs control. The first challenge is to enter one of the buses filled close to bursting with shuttle-traders. For double the cost of a bus ticket, I find a taxi which drives me back the 5 km to the customs building. We pass a long queue of nearly 20 shuttle buses with engines turned off. The passengers squat stoically on the roadside smoking and waiting for their turn to move towards the checkpost. My taxi driver, however, waves at an official and is through without waiting or security check.

We are back to the blue Kazakh customs building, where a knot of people with their goods fights for a place in the non-existent queue in front of passport control. I recognize Mahira, the shuttle-trader I met earlier in the shared taxi. She waves me over. I climb over bundles of packages. She smiles at the customs officer, who seems to know her very well, and he opens a door in his fence for me to reach the passport booth. The shoving continues where the traders get their goods weighed and registered on their ID cards. I finally reach the exit, glancing back at the opening in the fence through which the bundles in the last regulatory procedure need to fit. Visitors entering and exiting from the Kazakh side often complained about the 'disorder' caused by shuttle-traders at Kazakh customs, giving an impression of an uncivilized and thus less-developed place.

An unbalanced growth

Much of the infrastructure surrounding our daily lives is invisible to untrained eyes: underground and undersea cables, water pipes, drains, wireless communication and so on. Khorgos, however, is an infrastructure project meant to be seen (cf. Larkin 2013). This reveals its unbalanced growth. Appel et al. write that 'attention to infrastructure makes visible the world as both already structured and always in formation' (Appel et al. 2015). In ICBC Khorgos, pre-existing political, economic and social structures became visible during its formation as a global economic and cultural hub. The story of Khorgos's emergence, however, is a contested narrative. Rollan explains:

> [The] ICBC was a Kazakh idea, it was in 2002 when [Kazakhstan's] president came to China and suggested a free-trade zone in Khorgos. This was not ICBC; he just suggested a *free trade zone*, and then in 2004 [the] governments of China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement to create ICBC. And then in 2005 they signed an agreement for operating [it]. And this was before One Belt One Road … So ICBC [actually] helped China to create this Silk Road program. … Because ICBC was very early, in 2002. At that time no one talked about [the] Silk Road or anything.

Even though Khorgos is associated with China's BRI, it is considered a Kazakh project in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's self-sustaining role in the BRI was also reflected in the answers of my Kazakhstani interlocutors whom I asked: 'Who built the highway [between Almaty and Khorgos]?' Unanimously, people answered that it was Kazakhstan helped by a bunch of foreign companies. They stressed China was not involved.

Upon construction in 2012, ICBC Khorgos was divided into Chinese and Kazakh parts separated by a large square with an open arch. This internal division was visible from the beginning, even though official rhetoric spoke of a joint project, as this observation from my research assistant reveals:

> Our two parts always say ICBC doesn't need to [be] separate[d] into [a] Kazakh and Chinese side. It's one single project. … Last week the mayor of Khorgos city said that ICBC is neither a Chinese nor a Kazakh project, it's *our* project. So we are like one family.

Nevertheless, the internal division became even more obvious, when Xinjiang's political situation deteriorated in 2017 and the province faced serious tightening of security controls, especially targeting Muslim ethnic minorities. Back then, China erected an internal security checkpost to control visitors coming from the Kazakh side. Establishing this checkpost came with the emergence of re-education camps in Xinjiang (which Chinese state rhetoric calls 'vocational education and training centers') into which Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in China were put under the pretext of susceptibility to extremism.

The Chinese and Kazakh sides of ICBC Khorgos were, at the point of research and writing, an unequal twin. Whereas one showed itself in stunning outfits, the other seemed to lag behind the fashion trends its sibling set. Most international media writing about Khorgos noticed this inequality. Why are the two parts perceived as unequal? Only in the shadow of Chinese magnificence, the Kazakh side appears much less glamorous, showing comparisons are always relative. It reveals that the all-pervasive nature of a Chinese 'propaganda of success' added by Western reports downgrades the Kazakh sibling to seeming 'less developed'. In fact, only through this powerful contrast does the Kazakh side look dull. The construction of this unequal relationship forces Kazakhstanis to seek reasons and explanations. ICBC Khorgos Vice-President Sakengali Nurtazin in a news article from 2014 legitimized the situation: 'The Chinese are ahead of us because their government has closer ties to their businesses' (Trilling 2014). In other words, China is displayed as more experienced in implementing business-related procedures. The quote shows that inherent parts of the political system are blamed for being unable to keep up to speed.

The unequal administrative relations and cooperation with the respective governments are also expressed in terms of autonomy. The Chinese side's streamlined administrative structure allows them to make decisions and implement new projects quickly. The Kazakh side seemingly depends on longer communication paths with Nur-Sultan (until 2019, Astana). In the beginning, and indeed now, incentives to invest in the Kazakh side were low. Thus, the Kazakhstani administration decided to turn it into a separate Special Economic Zone, independent from SEZ 'Khorgos Eastern Gate,' Rollan illustrates the slow procedure: 'We worked very hard to change Kazakh legislation because ICBC is very special. They went to our government and said that ICBC needs specific laws for the management. And it took a lot of time [three years],'

The unequal rise of Khorgos also shapes local Kazakhstani peoples' perceptions about China. The exponential growth of infrastructure on the Chinese side and encroachment into Kazakh territory are viewed with suspicion by local people who fear an acquisition of Kazakh property by Han-Chinese. Already, the threat of losing territory may create feelings of loss (Billé 2014). Fears of surrendering territory to the Chinese were often expressed by my Kazakhstani interlocutors. For most, however, the relationship with China was ambivalent because many traders depended on trade with China.

Conclusion

ICBC Khorgos is branded as a symbol of 'cross-border cooperation'. Spatial, administrative and economic differences, nevertheless, are manifold. Inequality, however, characterizes most twin cities and, as such, deserves being looked upon as less idiosyncratic. Remarkable, however, are the two distinct ways of representing ICBC Khorgos in the two countries. China makes it part of its New Silk Road narrative, while Kazakhstan stresses that it had the idea first to create a free trade zone and, in this way, initiated its representation as a node of the New Silk Road. Khorgos is celebrated by international media as the wunderkind of

the BRI, thus nurturing China's BRI propaganda of success while Kazakhstan is represented as the underdeveloped part. The visual disparities do not go either unnoticed or uncommented. Such painful comparisons provoke Kazakh justifications blaming political and economic differences. Meanwhile, high expectations among local people were induced by Kazakhstani media and state propaganda, which then produced disappointment because hardly any of the promises materialized up to the point of writing in 2021. The 'second Dubai' remains a dream, and perhaps will remain an infrastructure promise ever awaiting realization (Anand et al. 2018), even though some are optimistic, pointing out the birth of modern Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan's capital.

Billé impressively demonstrated, for the twin cities of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, the mutual imitation between the two sides and identified this practice as a process producing commensurability (Billé 2017, 35). Interestingly, such a process never got going between the Kazakh and the Chinese sides of ICBC Khorgos. The Kazakh side could not attract investments, and thus the Chinese government recently took over the investment role. The result is that the two sides look entirely different, with no visible Kazakh aspiration to outperform the Chinese side. The dominance of China's idea of a New Silk Road based on its long peaceful history – as interpreted by China – is visible in the arch and in the remarkable lack of Kazakh effort to demonstrate a counter-narrative. Rather, we see a fragmental compliance as represented in the clay camels on the Kazakh side. The size and number of shopping malls and the aspirations to construct vertical buildings forcefully show China's economic pre-eminence. The security checkpost is a political statement of China's ideological supremacy. All these visible markers make Kazakhstan look dull. Underdevelopment, however, is always relative to what is perceived/claimed to be development and, since the Kazakh side made no efforts to compete with the Chinese side, the question arises over whether the two sides are comparable at all. I cannot answer this question but conclude the chapter with the insight that as long as China is considered a reference point, Kazakhstan will have a difficult time keeping up.

Notes

1 In Kazakhstan, people refer to it by the abbreviation of its Russian name 'm-tse-pe-s'.
2 The State Council ratifies the establishment of Huo'erguosi City in Xinjiang, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-07/11/content_2715998.htm (accessed 08.03.2021)[In Chinese].
3 ICBC Khorgos website, http://www.mcps-khorgos.kz/en/project/geographical (accessed 06.06.2020).
4 Video presentation of JSC 'ICBC' Khorgos, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEeZrdQ6p6I (accessed 08.03.2021).
5 A summary of Huo'erguosi, http://www.xjhegs.gov.cn/zjka/hegsgk/sqjs.htm (accessed 08.03.2021) [In Chinese].
6 The permits resembled ID cards containing a note saying one was entitled to pass for business reasons only or as a village resident. Permits were received at local authorities. The dirt road to the village was locked by a barrier and military-controlled access.
7 This information was retrieved from the website of Khorgos Municipal People's Government (http://www.xjhegs.gov.cn/info/1166/17377.htm, accessed 16.06.2020) that has been under maintenance during the final stages of the chapter writing.

References

Anand, Nikhil, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (eds.). 2018. *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Appel, Hannah, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta. 2015. 'Introduction: The Infrastructure Toolbox', *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights* (blog). 2015. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-the-infrastructure-toolbox.

Billé, Franck. 2014. 'Territorial Phantom Pains (and Other Cartographic Anxieties)', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(1): 163–78. https://doi.org/10.1068/d20112.

Billé, Franck. 2017. 'Bright Lights across the River. Competing Modernities at China's Edge', In *The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations across China's Borders*, (eds.) Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang, 33–56. Asian Borderlands 2. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Chien, Shiuh-shen, and Max D. Woodworth. 2018. 'China's Urban Speed Machine: The Politics of Speed and Time in a Period of Rapid Urban Growth: China's Urban Speed Machine,' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42(4): 723–737. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12610.

Esteva, Gustavo. 2010. 'Development', In *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, (ed.) Wolfgang Sachs, 2nd ed, 1–23. London; New York: Zed Books.

Garrard, John, and Ekaterina Mikhailova, eds. 2019. *Twin Cities: Urban Communities, Borders and Relationships over Time. Global Urban Studies*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Larkin, Brian. 2013. 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327–343.

Mikhailova, Ekaterina, Chung-Tong Wu, and Ilya Chubarov. 2019. 'Blagoveshchensk and Heihe. (Un)Contested Twin Cities on the Sino-Russian Border?' In *Twin Cities: Urban Communities, Borders and Relationships over Time*, (eds.) John Garrard and Ekaterina Mikhailova, 288–300. Global Urban Studies. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

Mukhina, Irina. 2009. 'New Losses, New Opportunities: (Soviet) Women in the Shuttle Trade, 1987–1998', *Journal of Social History* 43(2): 341–359.

Saxer, Martin, and Juan Zhang, eds. 2017. *The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations across China's Borders*. Asian Borderlands 2. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Taussig, Michael T. 1993. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge.

Trilling, David. 2014. 'On China-Kazakhstan Border Lies a Lopsided Free-Trade Zone,' Eurasianet.

Winter, Tim. 2020. 'Geocultural Power: China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, January, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1718656.