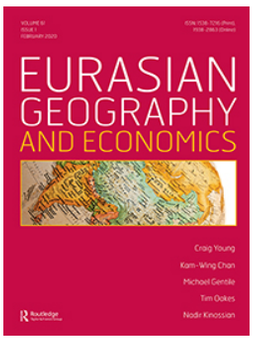

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Domesticating the Belt and Road: rural development, spatial politics, and animal geographies in Inner Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

China's Belt and Road Initiative has led to an efflorescence of interest in the heritage of the "Silk Road," both in China and abroad. In this article, I approach the BRI and its associated "Silk Road fever" ethnographically, discussing its effects on a particular region of China. What was once characterized in official discourse as a "remote border region" is now recovering its history of camel-based connectivity, and using this to imagine its future development. I situate this Silk Road discourse within the context of the politics of land, ethnicity, and the environment in a Chinese border region. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in this region, and analysis of local publications, the article shows how this discourse provides ethnic Mongol elites in the west of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region with resources to defend pastoralist livelihoods threatened by the state's recent grassland conservation policies. I thus show how the BRI's spatial imaginary is "domesticated" in a particular part of China, and shine a light on the spatial politics which this imaginary – and the nonhumans involved in it – affords.

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Introduction

According to many commentators both in China and abroad, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, promises to transform global geopolitics in the 21st century. While some laud the infrastructural investment and economic opportunities that the BRI offers,[1] others see it as a threat to the sovereignty of countries which lie across its path.[2] Some have noted the way in which the BRI has led to an efflorescence of interest in the heritage of the "Silk Road",[3] both in China and abroad, and in associated ideas of transcontinental trade and cultural contact (e.g. Winter 2016). However, this has hitherto been considered largely from a geopolitical perspective, as "heritage diplomacy". In this paper, I approach the BRI and its associated "Silk Road fever" ethnographically, discussing its relationship to the spatial politics of a particular region of China itself.

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I am interested here less in the BRI's infrastructural manifestations than in its incitement of the imagination, its positive valuation of transcontinental flows, and its recovery of historical spatialities. One of the central ideas of the reform era is that of China's "opening up" (*kaifang*) to the outside world. Until recently, however, this openness had a particular geographical orientation. The booming cities of China's coastal regions, with their historical connections to overseas Chinese capital, promised the quickest route out of Maoist isolation. The famous late 80s documentary *River Elegy* enjoined the Chinese to embrace "blue sea culture" (*lanhai wenhua*) and turn their backs on the sluggish Yellow River of the interior. Those who abandoned stable but unprofitable government employment for the risks and rewards of business were said to have "jumped into the sea" (*xia hai*) (Ong 1996). While the Open Up the West campaign (*Xibu Da Kaifa*), announced in 1999, sought to redirect attention back to China's interior, it did so by framing these regions as spaces of underdevelopment, requiring special measures to help them "catch up" with the rest of China (Latham 2016, 5). China's eastern seaboard was framed as the locus of development, its cities "twinned" with various regions of western China in order to aid in their development. The BRI, however, with its emphasis on continental connectivity across Eurasia, entails a shift in the spatiality of development in China, which Alessandro Rippa has referred to as "centralizing the borderlands" (Rippa 2017, 2).

In this paper I show how the BRI's spatial imaginaries articulate with rural development projects and local spatial politics in Alasha, a border region in western Inner Mongolia. Alasha is notorious across China for its desertified grasslands, which the dominant official discourse blames on overgrazing by livestock belonging to ethnic Mongols, for whom pastoralism is a central aspect of ethnic identity (Khan 1996). Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014, as well as shorter field trips in 2015 and 2017, and analysis of local publications, I describe the efforts of Mongol elites (officials and scientists) to deepen the marketization of camel husbandry in the region, which is referred to as "developing the camel industry" (*fazhan luotuo chanye*). I show how they use narratives of Silk Road connectivity to secure the support of the central government for transnational cooperation in animal science. In doing so, I argue, they help to transform the spatiality of a border region long defined by its peripherality. But rather than regarding such development initiatives simply as another instance of either the increasing "neoliberalization" of pastoralism in China (Yeh and Gaerrang 2011) or as "state-led development" which conflicts with local understandings of space (Makley 2018), I argue that these development initiatives must be seen, in the context of land use conflicts in Inner Mongolia, in part as *ethnopolitical* attempts on the part of minority officials and scientists to maintain Mongol traditions of extensive animal husbandry, which have been stigmatized by the state's conservation policies. In making this argument,

I seek to provide a more nuanced account of the ways in which landscapes in Inner Mongolia are "contested" (Humphrey 2001) by Mongols and the Han Chinese dominated state, one which moves beyond the dichotomous nomadic/sedentary analytic often applied in studies of this area (e.g. Lattimore 1940). Such an analytic tends to equate development schemes with the imposition of an agrarian spatiality on pastoral areas (Williams 2002). I also argue that the geographies of livestock, both symbolic and material, afford political strategies to minority elites in China who seek to defend officially stigmatized forms of land use. In the context of the BRI, these geographies provide resources with which to resist elements of the state environmentalism which has characterized the governance of China's pastoral regions in recent years. The Bactrian camel, that banal symbol of the "Silk Road", is thus shown to have unexpected political effects.

"We in this remote border region . . . "

Alasha Banner was established in 1697, after Hoshuud Mongols, fleeing upheaval in what is now Xinjiang, submitted to the Qing and were settled on the arid plateau to the west of the Yellow River bend. In 1730, the garrison town of Dingyuanying (today's Bayanhot) was established in Alasha, one of a series of forts that were established around this time by the Qing on the Inner Asian steppe (Perdue 2005, 233). Its name (literally "Garrison to Pacify Remote Lands") emphasized Alasha's peripherality.

On October 1 1949 the establishment of the People's Republic of China was announced by Mao Zedong in Beijing. That same day, the Alasha banner authorities sent a congratulatory telegram to Chairman Mao which declared: "We in this remote border region (*yaoyuan de bianjiang*) have heard the news of the birth of the People's Republic of China … we rejoice greatly … [and] respectfully invite you to come and inspect [the banner]" (AZQZ, 35). Here we see how Alasha's incorporation into the People's Republic of China is bound up with a declaration of its peripherality. Alasha is portrayed as a space awaiting the projection of power by the center, through a spatial technology of rule – the inspection tour – which Chinese emperors have historically employed (Perdue 2005). In the rest of this section, I want to consider the discourses and practices through which Alasha came to be consolidated as a "remote border region" in the years following the establishment of the PRC.

In the mid 1950s, Alasha was selected as the site of an investigation into the "social history" (*shehui lishi*) of the Mongol nationality. Similar investigations were being carried out into minority nationalities across China, as the Communists sought to make legible the heterogeneity of the peoples now under their control. Alasha was chosen because it was thought to be the most conservative of all the regions of Inner Mongolia. The report of the investigation noted that certain "feudal" (*fengjian*) social relations still existed in the banner

(MSLD, 46), and it was reported that the "socialist consciousness" of ordinary herders was still weak (Shi 2001, 95).

Memoirs of officials describe the Alasha of this period as a particularly "backward" area, where the legacies of "feudalism" meant that the transportation of goods and people was fraught with difficulty. In the words of one official, "all transportation was done by camel, which was an obstacle to economic development" (Shi 2001, 235). During my fieldwork I heard several similar characterizations from Mongols originally from eastern Inner Mongolia, whose higher levels of education meant that they were sent to Alasha after 1949 to work as doctors, teachers and officials. Alasha was conceived as both spatially and temporally remote, its herders hidden in their "nests of sand" (Shi 2001, 166), still encumbered by the shackles of feudalist consciousness. In 1963 the Inner Mongolian CCP designated Alasha Left Banner a "remote, purely pastoralist banner (*chun muqu*)", thereby entitling it to subsidies (AZQZ, 48). It is worth emphasizing the way in which pastoralism collocates with remoteness in this spatial classification. Today Alasha is still officially classified as an "impoverished, remote region" (*jianku bianyuan diqu*).

Alasha, which is today divided into three banners,[4] is also one of the last remaining "leagues" (*meng*; Mongolian: *aimag*) in Inner Mongolia. This term, unique to Inner Mongolia and equivalent to "prefecture" (*zhou*) elsewhere in China, is a legacy of Qing administration. It has been replaced by the standard term "municipality" (*shi*) in many parts of Inner Mongolia, a "rectification of names" which reflects official desire for urbanization and development (Bulag 2002). That Alasha has not yet become a municipality is suggestive of its comparative "backwardness".

State environmentalism and its discontents

By the early 2000s, however, Alasha had begun to intrude upon the very center of Chinese state power, Beijing, through its unruly environment. It became notorious as the source of the sandstorms which menaced northern China and beyond with increasing intensity (Zee 2019). In 2002 Alasha League began to implement a policy known as "Remove Livestock, Restore Grassland" (*tuimu huancao*) (RLRG), which has also been implemented in other pastoral areas of western China, in the wake of the Open Up the West campaign (Yeh 2005). This has involved the introduction of strict stocking limits and grazing bans, and the fencing off of pastureland where desert shrubs grow, known as "public benefit forests" (*gongyilin*). Herders have also been encouraged to move into new settlements and cities, a policy known as "ecological migration" (*shengtai yimin*) (Nakawo, Konagaya, and Chimedyn 2010). Those who reduce their herd size, or get rid of their herd entirely, are eligible to receive environmental subsidies from the state, though these are not enough to provide a living in the city and herders must thus look for employment. While many

younger herders have moved to the city, their parents often remain on the grasslands, since they lack employment prospects.

In order to respond to the growing Chinese appetite for meat and dairy products, official discourse stresses the importance of "modernized" and "intensive" forms of animal husbandry (Shapiro 2016, 98), in preference to "traditional" extensive pastoralism. In January 2014 President Xi Jinping visited Inner Mongolia where he gave a speech which called for "bans on grazing but not on raising [livestock]" (*jinmu bu jinyang*) (Yu 2014). He talked of the need to replace "natural" or "open" grazing (*tianran fangmu*) with the raising of livestock in barns (Li 2014). Such intensification, however, is currently considered uneconomical in the case of the camel, given the amount of fodder that would be required for these large animals.

Several scholars have argued that this state environmentalism is "a form of internal territorialization, a method of governing an unruly minority population" (Yeh 2009, 892; see also Yeh and Coggins 2014). The anthropologist Dee Mack Williams (2002) has interpreted it in terms of a clash of spatial identities: that of the agrarian, Han Chinese dominated state, and that of the nomadic Mongols (see also Humphrey 2001). The former is characterized by the trope of the enclosure: city walls, courtyard homes, and enclosed fields of crops; the uncultivated unenclosed steppe is denigrated as "wasteland" (*huang*). Meanwhile, mobility across open steppe, and "expansive spatial orientation" (Williams 2002, 67) are seen to define Mongol spatiality. According to this interpretation, the state's recent policies of grassland management are not merely instances of ecological modernization, but are in fact influenced by longstanding Han Chinese cultural perceptions of landscape. Rather than focusing on the difference between Han Chinese and Mongol spatial identities, however, this paper instead describes the productive articulation of Mongol spatialities in Alasha with the official spatial imaginary represented by the BRI.

Some recent analyses suggest that the Chinese state's environmental policies have succeeded in producing environmental subjects among the Mongols, as pastoralists come to subscribe to the state's vision of "ecological construction" (*shengtai jianshe*) through intensive tree planting as a way of "greening" the environment and combatting the desertification of the grasslands (Jiang 2006). However, while talk of "ecology" (*shengtai*) was certainly common in Alasha, many Mongols, rural and urban alike, disagreed with the state's vision of grassland management. They regarded these grassland conservation policies as an attack on the Mongol way of life, which is closely associated with pastoralism (Khan 1996). They told me that these policies represented the unsuitable application of Han Chinese agrarian modes of thinking onto spaces suited only to pastoralism. They questioned the desirability of intensive, stall-based animal agriculture on economic and environmental grounds. Rather than overgrazing, they placed the blame for the degradation of the environment on other

modes of land use, including the conversion of pastureland to agriculture and mining activity.

Even those Mongols who work, or have worked, as state officials can be deeply critical of these grassland management policies. When I first interviewed Danzan,[5] a retired head of the Alasha League Bureau of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, we began by talking about the history of Alasha, about which he was particularly knowledgeable, having served as secretary to the last prince of Alasha when he was in his teens. After half an hour Danzan interrupted one of my questions and demanded, "when are you going to ask me about the stocking limits?" He then proceeded to give a long, angry account of the wrongheadedness of this policy. "I'm a member of the Communist Party", he said, "but this policy does not suit pastoral regions!" He said that the blame for desertification had been wrongly placed on livestock. Instead, the problem was the result of the end of "nomadism" (Mongolian: *nüüdellen maljih*), which had been brought about by the allocation of pastures to individual households. He told me that "nomadism is an integral part of the Mongol nationality", and that it was the best method of "ecological protection" (*baohu shengtai*). He claimed that the "Mongol nationality is the most environmentally-friendly (*zui huanbao*)". As Stevan Harrell has argued, minority nationality cadres in China are far from being "stooges for the majority" (2007, 226). Here we can see clearly how ethnic subjectivity is combined with the discursive tropes of "green governmentality" (Yeh 2009) to enable a defense of a spatial identity and mode of land use ("nomadism") long stigmatized in official discourse (cf. Baranovitch 2016).

Over the last two decades, a group of Mongol elites in Alasha, including Danzan, all either serving or retired officials, have focused their efforts to maintain extensive animal husbandry on the domestic Bactrian camel, the species of livestock which has come to be a key symbol of Alasha. The number of camels in Alasha declined steeply in the 1990s and early 2000s. This decline was officially ascribed to the marketization of pastoral production, since cashmere goats were far more lucrative, and the persistent drought (e.g. AZQZ, 290–291); however, many Mongols also blamed the decline on the state's grassland management policies. In 2005 several of these retired officials founded the Alasha Inner Mongolia Society for the Conservation of Camels, Ecology and the Environment, popularly known as the "Alasha Camel Society" (*Alashan Luotuo Xiehui*). The name of this organization is significant, since it yokes together the conservation of camels with the conservation of the grasslands. Indeed, in collaboration with Han Chinese scientists, this organization has sought to show that camels are in fact a vital part of the grassland ecosystem whose absence causes further degradation (Liu 2012). The Alasha Camel Society has also collaborated with Mongol biologists at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University to establish the Inner Mongolia Camel Society, and the Camel Research Society. Partly as a result of these efforts, in the case of the camel the local government has relaxed the strict stocking limits and grazing bans that

apply to other livestock.[6] In 2012 Alasha was officially awarded the title of "China's Camel Country" (*Zhongguo Luotuo zhi Xiang*) by the central Bureau of Agriculture.

Rural development projects as ethno-spatial politics

Having secured this exceptional status for the camel, the energies of those involved in the Alasha Camel Society have more recently been directed at "developing the camel industry". In 2009 they founded a marketing cooperative which in 2015 had around 500 members spread across Alasha. According to Danzan, the Alasha Camel Cooperative was responsible for the increase in the price which pastoralists received for camel hair from Y20 per kilo in 2009 to Y50 in 2013, since they could bypass the small-scale itinerant traders to whom they had previously sold. The cooperative has also capitalized on the increasing demand in China for "green" (*lüse*) or "organic" (*youji*) foods, following numerous food safety scandals (Klein 2015). A booklet produced by the cooperative explicitly links the organic status of camel products to the traditional manner in which camels are herded. Camels are not kept in pens or given fodder; instead they are allowed to roam freely on the steppe throughout the year, eating only what grows there naturally. Camel products can thus be portrayed more "natural" and "green" than other livestock products.

Camel husbandry is presented as superior to the model of intensive livestock production promoted by the central government. According to Danzan, rearing animals in pens was bad because it involved giving animals fodder which had been treated with chemicals and fertilizers. Grazing in the open countryside (Mongolian: *hödöö*), however, was "completely natural". The word "natural" (*tianran*) was used here in a positive light, to suggest freedom from pollution, in contrast to the term's usage by Xi Jinping when he called for a move away from "natural grazing", where "natural" implies "backward". Here we can see how the state's emphasis on the "modernization" of pastoralism through intensification is countered through reference to the discourse of food safety and "green" foods which has become increasingly prevalent in China in recent years.

Mongol herders traditionally milked camels for domestic consumption, but until very recently the commercial production of camel milk in China was limited to Xinjiang. Demand for camel milk has increased rapidly in recent years, however, following reports that it can be used to treat diabetes. These claims have been repeated in Chinese-language books aimed at a general readership, written by the Mongol scientists at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University. Several camel dairy cooperatives have been established in Alasha in recent years. In Mandal *sumu*[7] in the east of Alasha Right Banner, a local man who had just graduated from university established such a cooperative in 2015. This involved 14 households, which together had over 1,000 camels, pooling

their pastureland, as well as incorporating land from herders with no camels who had given up herding because of the grazing bans.

This kind of formalized pooling of pastureland builds on existing informal practices: despite the privatization of the grassland, camel herders do not chase off camels belonging to other herders from their own (unfenced) pastureland, knowing that this will be reciprocated. The cooperative thus involves a form of collective land management that bucks the trend toward privatization, initiated by the Household Responsibility System. This same cooperative has also established a sanatorium, where diabetes sufferers come to stay for several weeks, living on a diet of camel milk products.

In early 2017 the Inner Mongolia Desert God Biotechnology Company began production in a large complex on the outskirts of Badan Jarain, the only town in Alasha Right Banner. This company was established by a Han Chinese businessman from Zhejiang, who also owns a camel dairy business in Xinjiang, and it produces a range of camel milk products (see Figure 1). Mongol scientists have assisted in their development. Indeed, the CEO of this company is listed as one of the coauthors, together with scientists at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University, on several of the books extolling the health benefits of camel milk (Jirimutu et al. 2014). This factory is supplied with camel milk by the cooperatives mentioned above.

Livestock production has also been utilized as a vehicle for rural development in other parts of China's western regions. Scholars have argued that the

Figure 1. A stall displaying camel milk products produced by the Inner Mongolia Desert God Biotechnology Company.

commercialization of yak meat production in Tibetan areas of Sichuan is an instance of "neoliberalization", which goes hand in hand with stocking limits, since a high off-take rate is required for development of the yak industry (Kabzung and Yeh 2016). I wish to argue something slightly different, and suggest that such analyses risk exaggerating the internal coherence of Chinese state environmentalism and developmentalism. The increasing commercialization of camel milk production in Alasha has been accompanied by a reassertion of the importance of extensive animal husbandry to the region. It works against the logic of state environmentalism and its livestock reduction policies. As Yeh and Gaerrang note in a different article, Tibetan herders have used market-oriented practices in order to maintain livestock production, which is central to their *drokpa* (pastoralist) identity. Yeh and Gaerrang use this example to argue that "new logics of rule [neoliberal governmentality] negotiate with sedimented cultural identities and deep-rooted pastoral practices" (2011, 171). I argue, similarly, that the Mongol scientists and officials involved in the development of the camel industry do so not only in accordance with the prevailing logic of marketization, but also as a way of defending pastoralist modes of land use against state environmentalism and enclosure.

Rather than seeing development, then, merely as "a set of practices that tries to accomplish rule by creating governable subjects and governable spaces" (Yeh and Coggins 2014, 13), we need to account for the ways in which the discourse of development articulates with the ethnic subjectivities and spatial identities to produce new political strategies for maintaining particular spatial practices (extensive animal husbandry) which are at odds with other logics of rule ("green governmentality"). In the next section I show how the development of the camel industry has been linked to the discourse of the BRI, and thus the revival of older spatial identities.

Placing Alasha on the silk road, old and new

Alasha's Mongol elites have also seized on the opportunity provided by the "Silk Road fever", which has accompanied the rolling out of the BRI, to revive the histories of the camel caravans which once traversed Alasha, thereby representing Alasha not as a "remote border region" but as a central "node" on the "Silk Road", old and new. If camels once stood for Alasha's backwardness and remoteness, they now symbolize its historical connectivity which is currently being revived. Thus, rather than seeing pastoral politics as defined solely by a dichotomy between a sedentary (Han Chinese) state spatiality, and Mongol "nomadic" space, we can see how the idea of "Silk Road" connectivity is part of the state's spatial rebranding of its western regions which articulates productively with local Mongol social memory. This in turn provides discursive resources for the defense of pastoralist land use in the region.

In 2015, the Vice Chairman of the Alasha League People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC) toured the region, tracing the "camel routes" (*tuodao*) which once traversed it. These were the routes taken by camel caravans across the vast expanses of desert in the region, before the development of road and railway infrastructure, which began, fitfully, only in the mid 20th century. Camels were being used for caravan transportation well into the 1980s. In a short magazine article published in 2016 (Wang 2016), this official pays particular attention to the route which ran from Suiyuan (today's Hohhot) in the east to Xinjiang in west, through the north of Alasha. The recently completed Beijing to Xinjiang Expressway now follows this route in part. He argues that the camel routes in Alasha should be considered as part of the "ancient Silk Road", and that "Silk Road Culture" is intimately connected to Alasha. Rather than being a "remote border region", he claims that "Alasha was a vital hub on the ancient Silk Road". Such ideas are now echoed in the displays of local museums (see Figure 2).

The Alasha PPCC has recently published several books connecting Alasha's camel heritage to the Silk Road, including a collection of oral histories of caravans (Liu 2017). This book argues that "even though Alasha is only three hundred years old, it has a fine tradition of camel husbandry and camel culture; both now and in the past, Silk Road culture, based on caravan routes and caravan men, has been intimately connected with Alasha" (Geni 2017). Here we can see how the celebration of camel husbandry is woven into Silk Road discourse.

Figure 2. A map in a local museum purporting to show the routes taken by Alasha caravans on the "Silk Road".

Figure 3. Historical reenactment at a "camel festival" in Alasha: this animal is loaded with sacks as if it were about to join a caravan.

In 2017 another collection of articles in both Chinese and Mongolian, entitled *The Silk Road Camel Bell* (*Silu Tuoling*) was published by the Alasha League PPCC (Batuchulu and Siqinbielige 2017). It was edited by Batchuluu, a retired Mongol cadre from the west of Alasha who had once served as the deputy head of Alasha League, and the chairman of the Alasha League PPCC. Many of the articles stress the important role that Alasha and its camels played on the "Silk Road". We are told, for example, that Alasha's geographical location meant that it became the "vital node" (*zhongyao jiedian*) connecting the "Hexi Corridor Silk Road" and "Grassland Silk Road" (Tang 2017, 210).[8] One piece proposes that the local government seize the "historic opportunity" (*lishi jiyu*) provided by the BRI and exploit Alasha's status as a "vital node on the Silk Road" to establish Silk Road-themed tourism (Batuchulu 2017, 93). This would involve tourists following the route of an old "camel route" from east to west across Alasha. The author imagines this tourist route as an aspect of Alasha's "opening up to the north", becoming part of the economic corridor linking China, Mongolia and Russia (Batuchulu 2017, 94). Here ancient and contemporary connectivity are seen to merge: by following the alleged route of the "ancient Silk Road" through Alasha, tourists would also be instantiating the new corridor linking China and its neighboring countries to the north.

Batchuluu's introduction explicitly links the flourishing of camel husbandry in the region to the BRI. He points out that the "camel industry" in China lacks "raw

material",[9] which is plentiful in countries along the "New Silk Road". Employing the official discourse of the BRI, he calls on the Chinese camel industry to seek "mutually beneficial cooperation" (*huli hezuo*) with these countries. The BRI is said to provide the camel industry with a unique "development opportunity".

Silk Road discourse is not confined to officials. On a recent visit to Alasha, I found that herders' social memory of pre-Liberation connectivity was articulated using this emerging Silk Road discourse. During my initial period of fieldwork from 2013–2014, I had often heard about the importance of caravan trade to the livelihoods of my informants' parents and grandparents. Men would spend the winter months transporting salt by camel, from the lakes in the middle of Alasha's deserts to the trading entrepôts on the banks of the Yellow River, or in neighboring provinces (see Figure 3). People also talked of the long-distance routes which ran through Alasha, which they referred to as "yellow roads" (Mongolian: *shar zam*).[10]

Particularly salient in their memories was the north-south route which ran from Ih Hüree (today's Ulaanbaatar) down through Alasha, eventually continuing on to Lhasa. One herder in his 60s told me how his own father and grandfather traveling to Ih Hüree by camel along the "Khalkha Road" (Mongolian: *Halh Zam*). Others remembered stories about wily mendicant lamas, ingenuous Khalkha traders, and Comintern agents who traveled along this road. Now, I found that all these "yellow roads" were being referred to as part of the "Silk Road" (Mongolian: *Torgon Zam*). Another example of the popularization of Silk Road discourse comes from a recent news item on the Chinese website sohu.com, describing an Alasha Mongol who traveled with a caravan of 136 camels from Xi'an through Gansu and Xinjiang and into Kazakhstan. In doing so he was said to be "following the Silk Road" (Sohu 2017).

This Silk Road discourse, then, has allowed local Mongols to link social memory of participation in camel caravans to the contemporary political zeitgeist. Rather than being exemplary of Alasha's remoteness and backwardness, merely an "obstacle" to economic development in the words of the official cited above, camel caravans are now seen to prefigure the connectivity which is celebrated at a national level. Often regarded as an archetype of peripherality in the 20th century, the space of Alasha itself is being reimagined as one whose past and future is characterized by openness to the outside world, a "crossroads" and a "central staging post" (Mongolian: *töviin örtöö*), to use but two of the terms which now circulate in Alasha. Here we can see the way in which the vision of the BRI articulates with local social memory to transform conceptions of history and geography, while also providing discursive resources which Mongol elites can use to defend Mongol traditions of animal husbandry.

Development in China, as elsewhere, is a project of both spatial and temporal transformation. The discourse of development is bound up with urbanization, leading to what has been termed the "spectralization of the rural" (Yan 2003), as young people escape the countryside in pursuit of the modern subjectivities

supposedly afforded by cities. What we see in contemporary Alasha, however, is the way in which the connectivity of the past is being used to model that of the future; development, in this vein, is not imagined as urbanization, but as a *reopening* of historical trade routes which once made Alasha a "node", despite its rurality.

Practicing "mutually beneficial cooperation" along the New Silk Road

In addition to the above discursive framings, Alasha has now begun to be produced as a space of transnational connectivity through practices of scientific collaboration and academic knowledge exchange. In September 2017 an international conference was held in Alasha Right Banner, with the theme *The Belt and Road: Camel Science, Industry, and Culture*. If Alasha League has long been seen as peripheral to the rest of China, Alasha Right Banner, with its vast deserts, tiny population and distance from Bayanhot, the capital of the league, is Alasha's periphery. It is therefore striking that it was chosen to host this conference, which was attended by over 50 foreign scientists from more than 20 different countries. I was told that the banner government had provided significant funding, as it sought to boost the "camel industry", upon which the future of the regional economy was increasingly seen to rely.

According to the organizers, a group of Mongol scientists at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University, the BRI theme had resulted in additional funding from the central government. The opening day of the conference began with a lengthy series of speeches from various local and regional officials. Many of these remarked that the camel was the symbol of the "ancient Silk Road", with some commenting proudly that 2,000 years ago their ancestors, riding camels, had established the Silk Road "connecting Asia, Europe and Africa". The conference, one speech told us, was about "strengthening scientific cooperation and exchange along the Belt and Road". Another declared that "innovation and development in the camel industry mean that the ancient camel will become a cutting-edge industry". An official report of the conference described the historical role of the camel in promoting "cultural and commercial exchange between East and West", before adding that "we believe that the camel, thanks to its unique biology and valuable products, will continue to be of great service as our country establishes the Silk Road Economic Belt".[11]

Over the course of the next two days, we listened to and discussed papers given by scientists from Italy, France, Austria, Kuwait, Oman, Morocco, Ethiopia, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, India, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China. Conference participants were taken on excursions to the camel dairy cooperative and sanatorium described above, where they were treated to a demonstration of mechanized milking, as well as to the factory of the Inner Mongolia Desert God Biotechnology Company, where they were offered samples of numerous

products, before being given a gift box containing a variety of beauty products made out of camel milk.

The hosting of this international conference in tiny Badan Jarain shows how the BRI can work to destabilize the spatial hierarchies characteristic of China, granting an unprecedented prominence to previously "remote" places. Many of the scientists did not even visit China's capital, flying directly from the Middle East to Yinchuan, the capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, on a route opened in 2016 by the airline Emirates, before traveling by car to Badan Jarain. Such spatial practices involved in the itinerary of these foreign experts, I suggest, worked to disrupt the "vertical encompassment" which Gupta and Ferguson (2002) argue is characteristic of modern state spatiality.

In their discussion of emergent "translocal" social formations in China, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein describe the various "switching points" in contemporary China, which "serve as the connection between the domestic and the transnational" (Oakes and Schein 2006, 27). In Oakes and Schein's account, these "switching points" appear to be largely concentrated in southern China, long known for its economic vibrancy and connections with overseas Chinese communities. I am arguing that in the era of the "New Silk Road", the camel has allowed once archetypally remote, western, Alasha to serve as such a switching point. This in turn allows Mongol scientists and officials who seek to defend pastoralism against the state's grassland conservation policies to find international partners in a manner which is acceptable to the state. In doing so, they contribute to the transformation of Alasha into a space of international "exchange" (*jiaoliu*), reprising what is now portrayed, in public culture, as its historical role.

Animal geographies

How does the camel "allow" Alasha to serve as a switching point for the transnational? In addition to being a potentially valuable source of commodities, I argue that the camel has particular semiotic affordances in the age of the BRI, owing to the history of its use as a pack animal along trans-Eurasian trade routes. By comparison, horses, for example, are too closely tied to the Mongol nationality, which in China is often represented as the "horseback nationality" (Bulag 2010, 195).[12] And while horses can represent a certain kind of transnationalism, this is a potentially dangerous one, involving the ethnic ties between Mongols in China and those across the international border in Mongolia. During the Cultural Revolution, the horse statue on top of the Inner Mongolian Museum was taken down on the grounds that it was facing in the direction of the Mongolian People's Republic, and was thus seen to betray the Inner Mongols' alleged desire to be united with their Mongolian brethren to the north (Khan 1996, 146; Bulag 2010, 195).

But the camel is not merely a "symbol" of the ancient Silk Road. Its contemporary geographical distribution means that the "scientific cooperation and exchange" which it affords takes on the pan-Eurasian dimensions of the BRI. It is unlikely that a similar conference on cattle science, for example, would involve a scientific community the geographical distribution of whose members would so closely mirror the geography of the New Silk Road. Let us compare this to Douglas Rogers' (2012) work on oil and gas corporations in contemporary Russia. He shows how the differing material properties of oil and gas shaped the social and cultural projects which energy companies sponsored in the Perm Region. So, for example, the fact that oil deposits are located deep underground was evoked in the Lukoil corporation's sponsoring of cultural heritage projects which referred to the "depth" of local culture. What I want to suggest is something analogous to Rogers' observation: the camel's ecological attachment to the arid drylands of Eurasia helps to lend a particular shape to the scientific community which studies this animal, a shape which in turn maps felicitously onto the geography of the BRI and its associated rhetoric of transnational connectivity.

Another useful comparison is with the geographer Maan Barua's observation (2016, 732–733) that that the effectiveness of elephants as rallying points for conservation movements is in part due to their "megafaunal ecologies", in particular their "large spatial requirements", which afford conservation organizations the opportunity to maintain biodiversity over a large area. These insights from more-than-human geography can be applied to the case of the camel and its role in the environmental politics of Alasha. The distribution of camels across the Eurasian drylands, in a pattern which echoes the New Silk Road, allows Mongol scientists and officials who seek to defend pastoralism against the state's grassland conservation policies to collaborate across borders in a manner which is congruent with the geopolitics of the central state. In doing so, they contribute to the transformation of Alasha into a space of international "exchange", reprising what is now seen to have been its historical role.

Like the elephant, the domestic camel also has "large spatial requirements". Among the Mongols the camel, like the horse, is classed as a "long-legged" (Mongolian: *urt hültei*) animal, which is thus pastured at a greater distance from the household than the "short-legged" (Mongolian: *bogino hültei*) sheep and goats. It is the exemplary "free-range" animal. Unlike sheep and goats, camels are almost never kept in a pen next to the household; instead they spend most of their time roaming freely on the steppe. Their large fodder requirements make the kind of intensive stall-based rearing encouraged by the state for other livestock prohibitively expensive in an arid region such as Alasha. In most parts of Alasha, the area across which camels roam every day is greater than that allotted to individual household pastures, necessitating the kind of pastureland pooling which I have described above. The camel is thus an animal whose

movements run counter to the policy of pastureland privatization and stall-based animal agriculture; they are, in the words of one of the founders of the Alasha Camel Society, a particularly "nomadic" (*youmu*) animal.

We can thus identify two distinct spatialities with which the camel is involved in contemporary Alasha. One of these is the network of trans-Gobi, and, more broadly, trans-Eurasian, routes which have come to be known as the "Silk Road"; the other is its free-range browsing which "resists" (Philo and Wilbert 2000) the enclosure of pastureland. These two particular spatialities embodied in a single, charismatic species of livestock thus help to enable the defense of a stigmatized form of land use (extensive animal husbandry) in a border region of Inner Mongolia to be articulated with the state's geopolitical vision for 21st century China.

Conclusion

The anthropologist Zhou (2013, 249) has described the "changing spatial and temporal perceptions" in Tengchong, Yunnan, that accompanied the recent revival of the Stilwell Road linking China, Burma, and India. He shows how this part of Yunnan was once associated with "remoteness and dead ends" (Zhou 2013, 252), particularly following the Sino-Vietnamese border clashes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. With the opening of this new road, however, "local history [has been] reinterpreted or reinvented to harmonize with the policy initiatives" (2013, 252), leading to a flourishing of interest in the "Southern Silk Road". Zhou highlights the role played by local policy makers and cultural elites.

I have documented a similar case in which local elites have sought to make local history "harmonize" with broader state policies, transforming what was once a region defined by its remoteness, as they seek to develop camel husbandry in the age of the BRI. No doubt this can partly be explained by the economic and professional rewards that the officials and scientists involved can thereby accrue. But such development initiatives must also be understood in the context of longstanding conflicts over land use in Inner Mongolia, and the spatialized ethnic identities at stake.

Rather than reading the "contested landscapes" (Bender and Winer 2001) of Inner Mongolia merely in binary terms of nomadic Mongol in opposition to agrarian Chinese, here we can see how local elites have harmonized social memory of camel caravans among local Alasha Mongols with the official spatial representations characteristic of the BRI. This is done partly in defense of spatial practices (extensive, open-range animal husbandry) which have been stigmatized by the state's recent grassland management policies. The BRI thus articulates with ethnopolitical projects which work *against* the main technologies of state territorialization in pastoral regions (enclosure, stocking limits, grazing bans). This articulation is made possible by the particular semiotic affordances of the camel (the Silk Road's "ship of the desert"), and by its distinctive

materiality (its large size and extensive browsing range). This is thus a politics which relies in part upon the behavior and ecology of a particular species of animal.

The BRI is bound up with a particular spatial imaginary, conjuring up images of past and future trans-continental connectivity through countless graphics, maps and diagrams. Within China, I have suggested, this spatial imaginary is one that can be put to use by marginalized subjects in order to reimagine their place within China and the world. But it is also one that offers the potential to counter one of the central technologies of state territorialization in China's border regions: the transformation of land use in the interests of "stabilizing" the environment. Such potential is, partly, a product of the material and symbolic geographies of a particular animal. This represents an emergent mode of politics which cannot be captured by simplistic notions of subaltern resistance. It is one I have tried to grasp instead with the idea of "domesticating the Belt and Road". I thus attempt to highlight at once the appropriation and utilization of the state's spatial imaginary by Mongols in Alasha, but also the ways in which this is dependent upon the particularities of the dometic Bactrian camel.

The limits of this politics must, however, be acknowledged. In 2017 I returned to the herding household where I had lived between 2013 and 2014. The number of camels had increased significantly, from around 20 to more than 50, which the head of the household ascribed to the favorable policies toward camels. However, their browsing range had been significantly constricted by the nearby construction of the Beijing to Xinjiang Expressway, an important infrastructural manifestation of the BRI. In addition, stocking limits were being applied to sheep and goats ever more strictly, meaning that the household's middle-aged son has had to abandon pastoralism for a more precarious livelihood as a meat trader. Such cases are testament to the continued challenges facing those who seek to maintain pastoralist lifeways in contemporary China.

Notes

1. https://www.economist.com/news/business/21725810-general-electric-got-23bn-orders-infrastructure-project-last-year-western-firms.
2. http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/on-BRI-us-backs-india-says-it-crosses-disputed-territory-jim-mattis/articleshow/60,932,827.cms.
3. The notion of the "Silk Road" is a relatively recent one, and singularizes what were a variety of routes and trails across central Eurasia. The German version of this term (*die Siedenstrasse*) was coined in 1877 by the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, as a way of "discursively naturaliz[ing] industrialization's global processes", according to Chin (2013, 197).
4. Alasha Left Banner, Alasha Right Banner, and Ezene Banner.
5. This is a pseudonym.
6. A recent draft document explains that because of the local importance of camels in Alasha, herders in areas targeted for grazing bans are allowed to keep 60 camels

without having their stock-reduction subsidies affected. This exemption does not apply to any other kind of livestock. See here: http://www.alszq.gov.cn/zwgk/tzgg/201611/t20161125_28024.html.

7. In Inner Mongolian pastoral regions, the administrative unit *sumu* (from the Mongolian *sum*) is equivalent to *xiang* elsewhere in China.
8. These writers use "Grassland Silk Road" (*caoyuan sichou zhi lu*) to refer to the route that ran through the Gobi, roughly parallel to the Hexi Corridor, which is more commonly associated with the Silk Road.
9. This possibly refers to improved stock, suitable for dairy farming.
10. Some people suggested that these routes were "yellow" because of the mendicant Buddhist lamas who traveled on them, since Tibetan Buddhism is commonly referred to by local Mongols as the "yellow religion". ("Yellow religion" can also be used more specifically to denote the Gelug school, in contradistinction to the Nyingma (or "red religion") school, for example). Others, however, dismissed this and said that they were "yellow" from the color of the earth once the grass had been worn away by generations of camels.
11. http://www.china-camel.com/index.php?s=/articles/1270.html.
12. What is more, there are now very few horses left in Alasha, due to prolonged drought in the region.

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