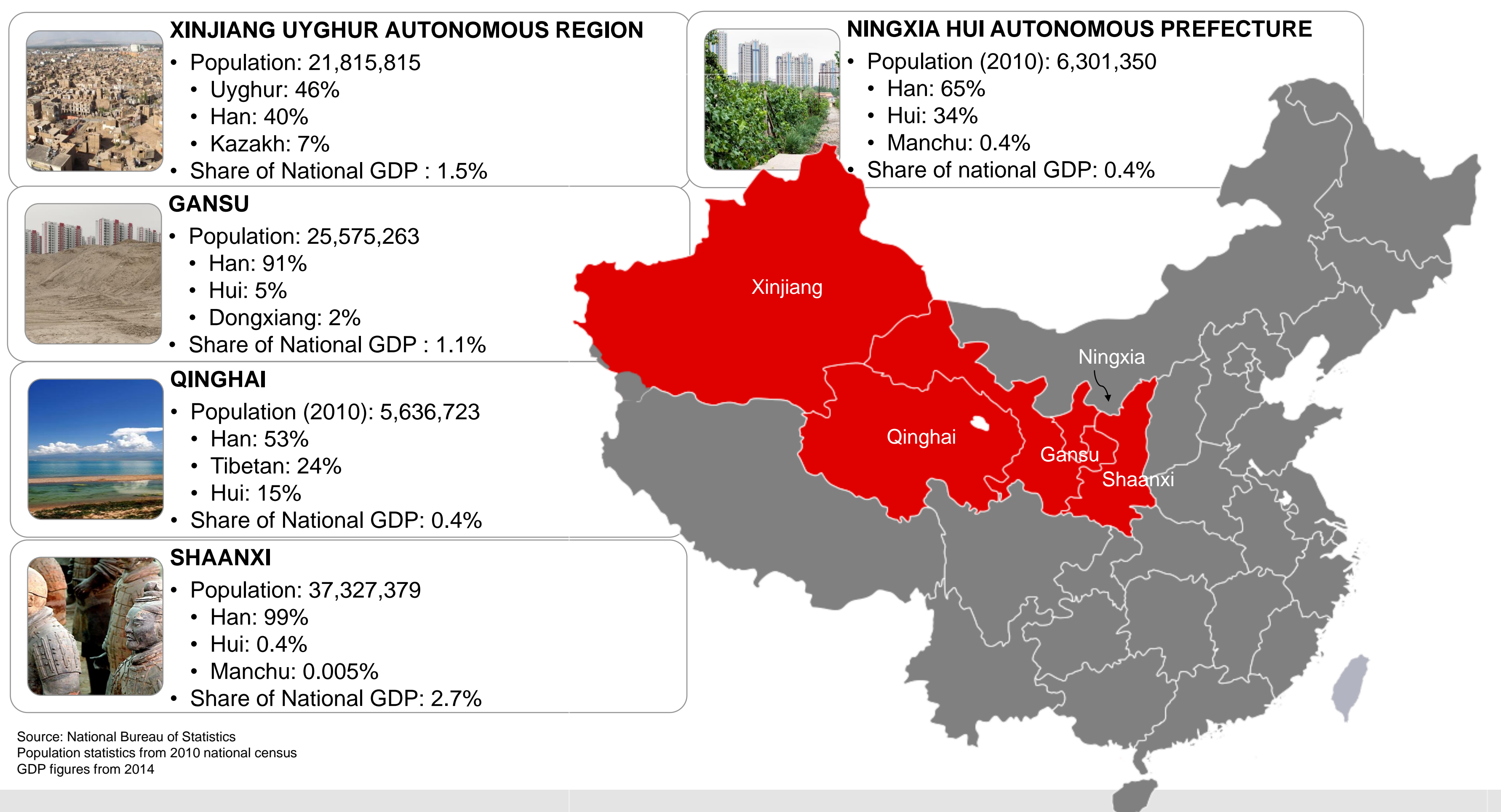


# Opening Up the Northwest: Reimagining the Modern Chinese Frontier

## The Northwest

Northwest China is comprised of the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai as well as the autonomous regions of Ningxia and Xinjiang. The region consists of 32% of China's surface area, stretching over deserts, grasslands, mountain ranges, glaciers, and plateaus. Although the Northwest contains only 7% of China's population and 12% of its arable land, it is rich in natural resources such as iron and fossil fuels. Xinjiang alone contains 40% of the country's coal reserves and 20% of its oil and natural gas. Though resource-rich, the Northwest is far behind the east coast in terms of economic growth and development. In 2014, the GDP of the Northwest accounted for only 6% of the national GDP. In comparison, the GDP of Guangdong, the richest coastal province, was 11% of the national GDP. The Northwest is culturally and ethnically diverse. While Shaanxi is the "cradle of Chinese civilization," the far western territories of Xinjiang and Qinghai were only incorporated into the Chinese empire in the eighteenth century, when the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) conquered Inner Asia. The Northwest is thus home to significant populations of ethnic minorities, including the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Hui.



## The Western Development Program, 2000 – present

### Description

- Economic reform focused on the east coast in 1980s and 1990s, leading to an economic boom but widening regional inequality
- Program to increase economic development in the Northwest (including Inner Mongolia) and the Southwest (Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet)
- Massive investment in infrastructure

### Objectives

- Reduce regional inequality and ensure national unity
  - State, private, and foreign investment in transportation, energy, communication, and urban infrastructure
  - Increase funding for higher education and research and development
  - Encourage development of service and high-tech sectors
- Stimulate the national economy
  - 1997 Asian Financial Crisis caused drop in exports
- Improve the environment and improve access to natural resources
  - Control desertification and soil erosion

### Results?

- Largely regarded as failure
- Slight decrease in regional inequality
- Environmental degradation due to expansion of resource extraction and heavy industry
  - Water-intensive industries like textiles and mining stressed scarce water supplies

### Urbanization

- Urbanization is a major part of China's strategy to raise living standards and move towards a consumption-driven economy.
- The central government plans to move 400 million people into cities over the next decade.
- Official narratives of progress fail to capture the realities of chronic unemployment and forced displacement of villagers and ethnic minorities
  - Qiyang, Shaanxi: villagers resisted relocations by moving back into their old houses, prompting government policy of demolishing old homes when the farmers move out.



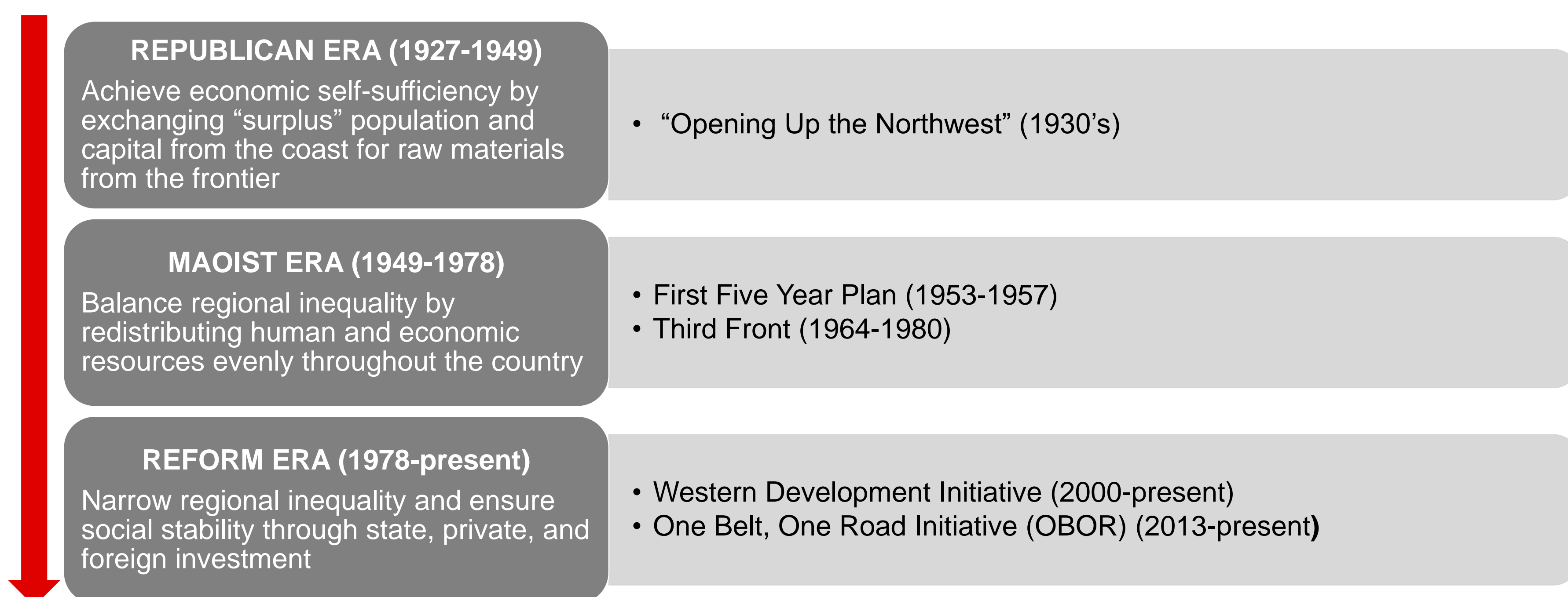
The Lanzhou New Area in Gansu, constructed under the Western Development Program, is one of dozens of new cities being built to house new urbanites  
Source: Gilles Sabrie, *The Washington Post*

## State-Led Economic Development in the Northwest

### Context

In the early imperial period, Chang'an (modern Xi'an, Shaanxi) was the capital of thirteen dynasties and the eastern end of the Silk Road. However, after the Tang dynasty (618-907), the political and economic centres of the Chinese empire shifted to the south and the east. By the twentieth-century, government officials and intellectuals from the coast identified the Northwest with backwardness, poverty, and isolation.

Throughout the twentieth-century, the Northwest has been the target of state-led development campaigns to address regional disparities between the coast and the interior and to strengthen the national economy. Officials and intellectuals have turned their attention to the Northwest in response to global economic crises, social instability, and external security threats.



### My Research

My research this summer was on state-led economic development campaigns in the twenty-first century, namely the Western Development Program and the One Road, One Belt Initiative.

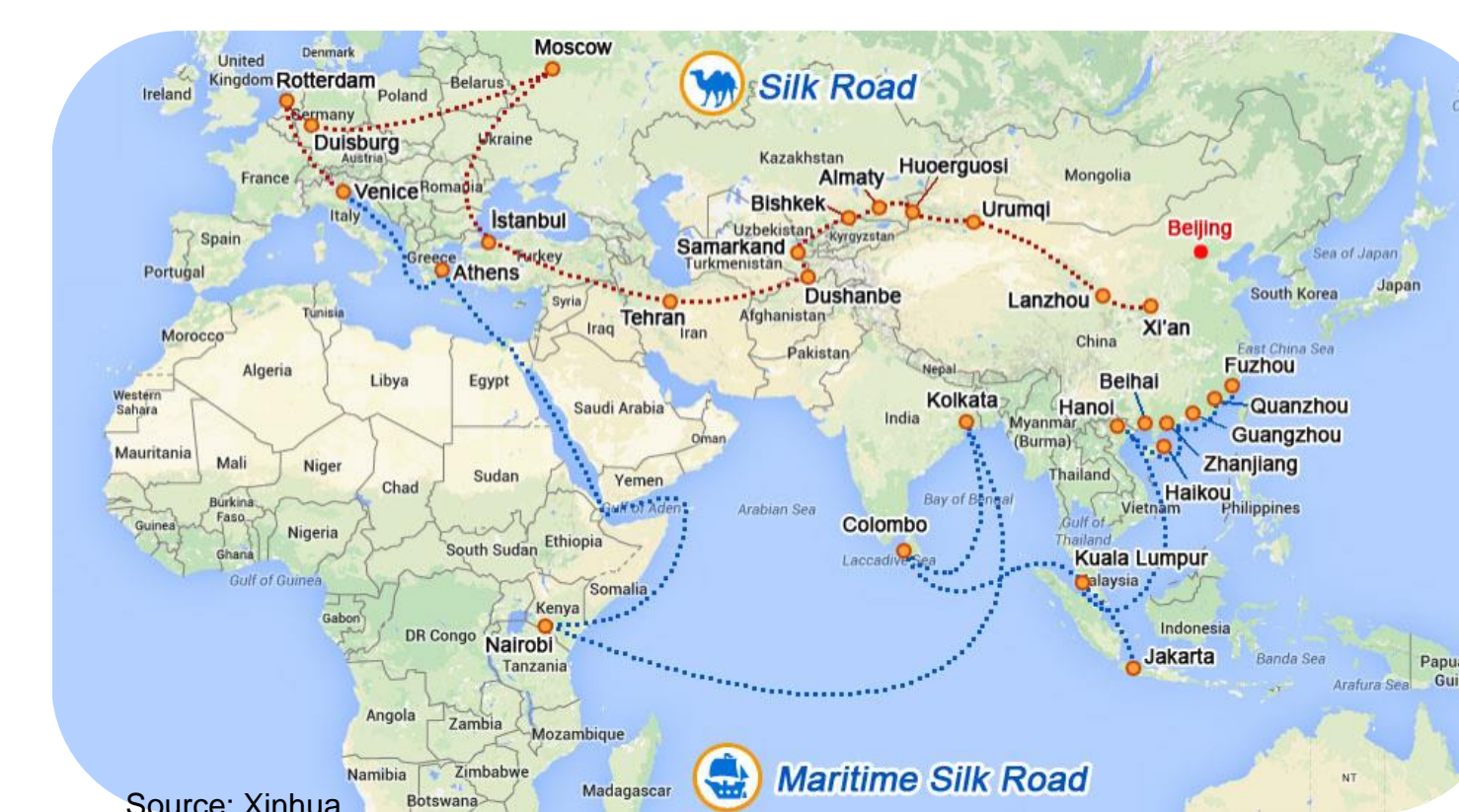
I was particularly interested in:

- Environmental consequences
- The divergence between official narratives of development and peoples' lived experiences
- How the state mobilized support for these campaigns.

## One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), 2013 – present

### Description

- Global economic initiative to increase trade with countries along historic Silk Road through massive investment in domestic and international infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, pipelines, and ports.
- China claims that the OBOR will link 65 countries and 4.4 billion people



### Objectives

- Boost economic development in the Northwest and ensure social stability in Xinjiang
  - Central government hopes that creating jobs and raising living standards will create stability in Xinjiang, where terrorist attacks killed almost 500 people between 2010 to 2014
- Stimulate domestic economic growth
  - Diversify investments
  - Create new markets for Chinese goods
  - Utilize overcapacity in steel and construction sectors
- Ensure energy security
- Expand Chinese sphere of influence and counterbalance American dominance in the Pacific
  - Counter US-led trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)
  - Stabilize neighbouring countries against terrorism to prevent "spill over" into Xinjiang

The OBOR has two strands:

- The Silk Road Economic Belt** will connect China, Central Asia, and Europe by road and rail
- The Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road** will connect Chinese ports to ports in South, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe

### Mobilizing the Cultural Imagination

In order to mobilize domestic and international support for the OBOR, the Chinese government has invoked the glories of the ancient Silk Road

- Domestically, leaders recall the Silk Road as a time of peace, prosperity, and connectivity, when China was the centre of the world
- Internationally, the Chinese government emphasizes ancient East-West ties and shared prosperity



Marco Polo's camel caravan, 14th century drawing  
Source: Getty Images

"Shaanxi, my home province, is right at the starting point of the ancient Silk Road. As I stand here and look back at that episode of history, I could almost hear the camel bells echoing in the mountains and see the wisp of smoke rising from the desert."

Xi Jinping announcing the OBOR Initiative in Kazakhstan, 2013

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Jeremy Tai for giving me the opportunity to work on this project and the Arts Internship Office for their guidance and support. I am also grateful for the generous contribution of Ms. Jane Blackwell.

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