

## 1 **Visual narratives: the Belt and Road Initiative in Xinjiang**

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## 2 **Today's agenda**

- Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
- Zhao Zhao
- Liu Yujia
- Conclusion

## 3 **The BRI (*yi dai yi lu*, 一带一路)**

- 2013: President Xi announces this initiative while visiting Kazakhstan and Indonesia
- Policy ultimately driven by economic gain (Summers 2016)
- It revives previous economic strategies (i.e., the Great Western Development Strategy in 1999)
- It redistributes capital among China's regions and overcomes industrial overproduction and overcapacity

## 4 **Besides the economic gain**

The BRI provides cultural and historical value, promoting connectivity:

- 2014: Chang'an-Tianshan corridor as UNESCO World Heritage site
- 2020: Silk Road Week at China National Silk Museum (state-owned), Hangzhou
- Belt and Road Film week as part of Shanghai International Film Festival

## 5 **Why the BRI, visual arts and Xinjiang?**

1. The BRI reflects the changing global power relations
2. Few studies from the field of visual arts
3. Very few non-official artworks directly linked to the BRI/New Silk Road
4. Xinjiang plays a key economic role for China at the expense of its socio-cultural heritage

## 6 **Re-imagining the BRI through visual arts**

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## 7 **Re-imagining the BRI through visual arts**

## 8 **Zhao Zhao 赵赵**

- b. 1982, Xinjiang
- Han Chinese
- His grandfather was sent to Xinjiang to work
- He grew up in the same village as Ai Weiwei
- Trained in oil painting
- Video assistant of Ai Weiwei (2004-2011)

## 9 **Zhao and Xinjiang**

- *Project Taklamakan* (2015)
- *Lighter* (2015)
- *Knife* (2009-16)
- *Suit* (2016)
- *Chinese Garden* (2020)

10  **Project Taklamakan (2015)**

A fridge full of Xinjiang beers in the middle of the Taklamakan Desert

11  **A critical analysis**

- *Project Taklamakan* looks like a prank
- However, it is highly conceptual
- This is clear from the:
  1. inherent contradictions
  2. site-specificity
  3. interest in process and medium

12  **1. Inherent contradictions**

- Team of 30 men
- Cost of 2 million yuan: fridge, several power transformers, and 100km long cable
- They drove 4000 km
- They underwent inspection by local authorities
- They connected the fridge to the house of a Uighur family in the village
- The entire journey and installation took 23 days

13  **'It was like it never happened, like science fiction, some big budget film, but also very crude, very tiny, very grey' (Cui 2016, 22)**14  **2. Site-Specificity**

- The fridge was connected to a house in Lunnan village
- Lunnan, Luntain county, is a key oil production site in the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang
- Starting point for the First West-East Gas Pipeline Project

15  **3. Process**

- The work was exhibited at Tang Contemporary Art space, Beijing:
  - Cables cut into sections and tied into bundles
  - Solid, unmovable piece
- The sight of the installation could not be overlooked

16  **'a perfect metaphor for the expansion of the Han Chinese into this region, bringing with them an imperative of modernisation' (Pollack 2016, 61)**17  **'Installing that long cable, interacting with the Uyghur family, finding funding for the project, and passing the strict government inspections became ways to actively participate and intervene in society'**

(Cui 2016, 26)

18  **Liu Yujia 刘雨佳**

- Born in 1981 in Chengdu, Sichuan
- Han Chinese
- She explores the tension and overlaps between reality and fiction through moving images

19  **Liu's work since 2016**

- Interest in the concept of borders:
  - through the notion of the beach
  - and more recently, in an actual border area

- Here, I will focus on *Black Ocean* (2016)

## 20 **Black Ocean (2016)**

- *Black Ocean* refers to the rich oil reserves in the region of Xinjiang
- Liu's film was shot in Karamay
  - One of the richest oil fields in northwest China
  - Close to the border with Kazakhstan

## 21 **Black Ocean (2016)**

The film represents the temporal and geographical indefiniteness of the BRI

## 22 **Surrealist elements in Liu's video**

- The video is not surrealist
- However, it contains surrealist elements:
  1. The suspension of time
  2. Uncanny visual composition
  3. Reference to a 'primitive society'

## 23 **1. Temporal overlaps**

- On the one hand, she shoots present-day Xinjiang
- On the other, the dialogue reports some of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan's conversation
- She creates a continuous loop between two temporalities

## 24 **1. Temporal overlaps**

- Images have a kind of texture and softness, like a patina
- The patina embodies that place's 'memory and archive[s] the multiple traces left by the touch of weather, people and history' (Diaconu 2011)

## 25 **2. Visual composition**

- As the storyteller, Liu amplifies the effect of what seldom occurs in real life by reproducing the uncanny in the everyday (Freud 1919, 18)

## 26 **3. Primitive society**

- Machine vs Desert
- The human figures are 'only shadows and signs, functional beings operating drilling platform, machines and vehicles, of no significance' (Liu, n.d., 124)

## 27 **Comparative analysis**

### 1 SIMILARITIES

- Both works depict the BRI as undefined and ambiguous
- They are indirectly and subtly intervening in Xinjiang
- They are very site-specific
- They highlight contradictions
- They provide not so celebratory visual narratives

### 2 DIFFERENCES

- Different aesthetic and artistic approaches
- Zhao deploys irony and focuses on medium and process
- Liu's work develops through temporal overlaps, granular images and slow narration
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## 28 **Ambiguity around the BRI**

- The official discourse repositions China at the centre of the world

- It recuperates a 'timeless and ahistorical' narrative, 'a return to an imagined natural state of affairs, when China was a major global economy' (Summers, 2020, 810)
- Spatially, the BRI stretches into an 'imagined geography' (Summers, 2020, 811)
- No official map of the BRI (Naris and Agnew 2019)

29  **Overall, artists reimagine the discourse around the BRI as operating in the interstices between reality and imagination, concrete and abstract, past and present**

30  **Thanks!**

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