

Köken Ergun

How I Became a Geopolitical Artist

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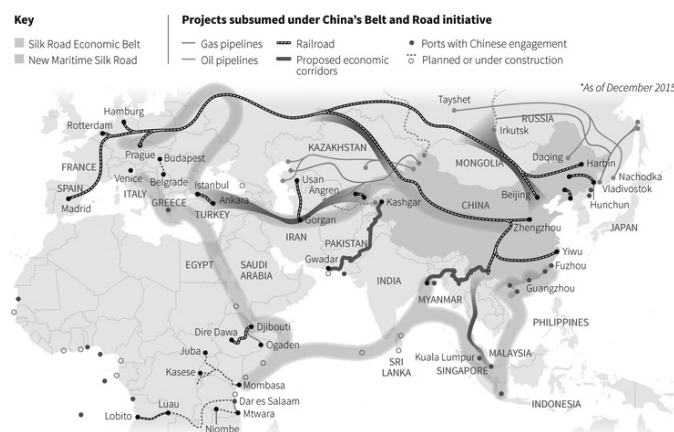
I have a Turkish passport. I can't enter China on a visitor's visa. I could, if I was eligible for a business visa. My electrician goes to Nanjing twice a year. He is in the neon business. He jokes that I could take his place, if I am so eager to go there! He sees through me: I have been dying to visit China ever since I knew myself. This feeling intensified after I started doing research on the Belt and Road Initiative. At first, I didn't understand why Turkish passport holders are unable to get a visitor's visa for China, while Chinese tourists can enter Turkey freely. Then something in my daily routine helped me understand.

There is a small restaurant in my neighbourhood run by a wonderful Kurdish woman. When I am too busy or lazy to cross the street, I call her for delivery. Her delivery man was slender and soft spoken, with a deep sadness in his eyes. Each time he brought a delivery, we used to chat on my doorstep. He had a slight accent. In a country like Turkey, with people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, it wasn't easy to guess which region he could be from – if he was from here. I never asked, because I don't normally like the knowledge of someone's place of origin to get in the way of conversations. One day, he appeared distressed. Handing me my food, he asked if I could lend him some money. It was to send it back to his country. Then, I guessed he could be from Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, since these are two of the major emigration countries supplying Turkey's domestic and service labour sector. He told me he was from Xinjiang. I asked him what happened. He said his family was in trouble back home. He escaped to Istanbul years ago. Until now, he had been feeling safe here, but things started to change. He was afraid. I didn't have any cash at home, so I said I will help him next time he comes. After closing the door, I went back to my daily research about the Belt and Road Initiative, unaware of its connections to his situation and my inability to enter China.

The next day, having prepared some cash to give to him, I placed my lunch order. When I opened the door, it was another man. I asked him what happened with my usual delivery man. He said he didn't show up for work this morning and wouldn't answer their calls. I never saw him again... Later, I began realising that most foreign delivery men working in Istanbul were Uyghurs. Gradually, I would understand the relationship between their presence here and the project I had been working on, as well as the sudden disappearance of my delivery man.

China and Turkey had started by being partners for the Belt and Road Initiative: China's attempt to expand its influence abroad by building a network of trade corridors towards Western markets. Turkey was initially announced as the central geography for one of these corridors: the

so-called "Middle Corridor". This was where the land "Belt" from China to Europe was going to pass through, while the sea route would be symbolised by the "Road", short for the Maritime Silk Road. The Middle Corridor was conceived as a network of railroads, highways and other trade infrastructure projects to link China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Anatolia and Europe (Tekla Aslanishvili's film in this exhibition, *A State in a State* deals with the railroads of the Middle Corridor). Another Belt and Road project was CPEC, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, designed to create access for Chinese exports to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan, bypassing the Malacca Strait – the



Projection for the Belt and Road Initiative, showing the Middle Corridor and CPEC in relation to Xinjiang Province.

longer and geopolitically tense route. CPEC would also facilitate an alternative route for China's oil imports. By allowing China to use its territories for this corridor, Pakistan would get massive infrastructure investments and other benefits in return.

Both CPEC and the Middle Corridor directly affected the region where my delivery man came from. Xinjiang is the largest of China's territories and occupies almost the entire West of the country where both of these corridors have to pass through. As this previously neglected Muslim-majority province became a geopolitical focal point, the Chinese Communist Party's control over the region became tougher than before (a second Tibet?), with draconian measures like population replacement (Han in place of Uyghur), internment camps ("correctional facilities" as the CCP call it), as well as restrictions on religious freedom and language. Life for the indigenous Uyghur communities became unbearable, forcing millions of Uyghurs like my delivery man to emigrate.

Being a Muslim country, speaking almost the same language, and fast becoming a major immigration country in need of more foreign workforce, Turkey became the primary destination for these Uyghur exiles. The initial Turkish state policy was to welcome the “Uyghur Turks” or the “people of East Turkistan” as they would be called here – probably to help garner public support internally. In İstanbul, Islamist groups protested China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims, at times verbally abusing Chinese tourists, some of whom turned out to be Koreans, or attacking Chinese restaurants to beat up the kitchen staff, who all turned out to be Uyghurs! It reminds me of today’s American fascists attacking Israelis, mistaking them for Palestinians... Nevertheless, state support for exiles from Xinjiang continued. Many Uyghur dissidents who were no longer welcomed in Xinjiang by the Chinese authorities were given Turkish passports in this period. In an effort to stop these *persona non grata* with Turkish passports from re-entering the borders of China (mostly on a visitor’s visa), the CCP started a blanket ban on all Turkish passports, which in turn affected me. Gradually, China and Turkey’s relationship soured and the Middle Corridor was no longer in the works, although parts of the new rail network had already been built with Chinese investment. When I was carrying on my research on Belt and Road projects in one of the most unlikely spaces; Germany’s Duisburg (the world’s largest inland port, made with Chinese involvement), I asked a junior Chinese trade official working there why the Middle Corridor didn’t materialise. She said “We don’t trust your president”. I wouldn’t trust him either. But I knew that China-Turkey relations were more complex than that.

Erdoğan’s Turkey needed money. The economy was failing and public discontent was threatening his grip on power. They couldn’t be in a fight with such a mega power as China. They had to find a ‘middle’ way, so they started playing double-faced – like they always do. While still advocating for the rights of Muslims all around the world (same empty rhetoric they have been using for Palestine), they started negotiating with China to attract investment. As always, tourism is the investment with the fastest returns. So they made deals to attract Chinese tourists: China would send its tourists to Turkey, in return Turkish authorities would limit the movement and activities of Uyghurs in their country. Once a safe haven for Uyghurs, Turkey started becoming a less safe place for them. There were even rumours that Turkish intelligence services gave information to China about the whereabouts of some Uyghur dissidents, who later disappeared. Around this time, a new hotel opened in my neighborhood, called “Beijing Hotel”, boasting Chinese characters on its neon sign board. One morning, inside the İstanbul metro we realised that a new language was added to the signage: Mandarin Chinese. But the Chinese tourists never came, because a few weeks later the Covid-19 pandemic locked us all at home. Mandarin signage in the metro was removed and the Beijing Hotel changed its name. But the hot water fountains (a must for Chinese tourists) installed in İstanbul Airport at that time are still there.

Gradually, the Uyghurs were forgotten. There were no more protests from Islamist groups, no media coverage. Instead, one morning I saw something on TV that froze my blood. A channel linked to a political party with pro-Russian and pan-Turkic Eurasianist tendencies, that was in alliance with Erdoğan’s government, went to Xinjiang to cover the

infamous internment camps there. A clearly excited reporter proclaimed: “These facilities are a great opportunity to crush dissent. Turkey should do the same to its Kurdish population!”

I continued my research. In order to get a range of perspectives, I had to learn about global trade, trade corridors and global supply chains, not only from a critical approach (critical to capitalism), but also from a more Western liberal perspective. So I bought a subscription to *The Economist*, which has a special section focused on China. Apart from books by Western experts, I also read books written from the Chinese perspective, and followed reports of think-tanks on geopolitics. Every day, I did my morning exercise in front of CCTV English, watched zillions of videos of you-tubers, propaganda movies, and followed Chinese netizens online. The artist should look at everything. Like Werner Herzog once said: “the poet must not avert his eyes”.

I also enrolled in Chinese courses at the Confucius Institute in İstanbul. My aim was not only to learn the language, but also to see how a soft power tool works – from the inside. After all, Belt and Road is not just about infrastructure or trade. It also seeks to reduce distrust by spreading a message of harmony, promote the image of China as a responsible trade partner and highlight its rebirth as a cultural power, after the “100 Years of Humiliation”. The vast network of Confucius Institutes around the world (110 countries) are used for this purpose. They organise many educational and cultural activities which demonstrate China’s ambition to spread its values globally. In İstanbul, I witnessed how they were doing this with teaching materials or propaganda magazines and posters scattered around the institute. In one lesson, we were given postcards describing Xinjiang as a pastoral heaven, devoid of people. I thought of my delivery man and his family.

I am known for my documentary films about rituals and how they are used by social groups, communities or states. One of my previous films was about Turkey’s global expansion through its network of Turkish schools in over 100 countries, and how a certain ritual – partly borrowed from World Expositions, and partly invented for the purpose – was used to justify it to a local public. Now discontinued, this was a big event where students from different international Turkish schools around the world competed in Turkish poetry, songs and dances; first in their own country and then in Turkey for the finals. It was called the Turkish Olympics.

It’s not easy to prove how much these countries borrow from each other, but China devised its own ritual for the same purpose and called it the Chinese Olympics or the Chinese Bridge. Like the Turkish one, it is an annual international contest in which students of Confucius Institutes in different countries like Germany, Australia, Kazakhstan and Ethiopia compete in Chinese poetry, opera and martial arts. Winners of national competitions are taken to Beijing for the finals in a televised event.

My plan was to enter into the Confucius network and get to know the people who organise the Chinese Olympics in different parts of the world. Then, I would film the semi finals in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Germany and Turkey, before going to Beijing for the final. In the end, I would produce a documentary film that would relate to my work about the Turkish Olympics.

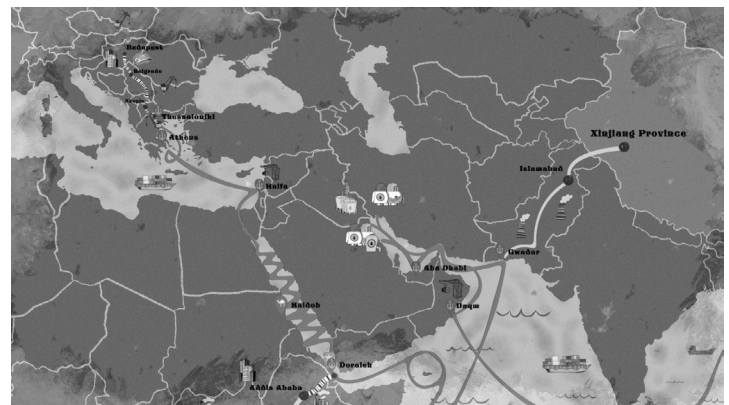
However, not everything went according to plan. Unable to enter China because of my passport, then prevented from going *anywhere* by the Covid pandemic, and finally the civil war in Ethiopia; I couldn't make the film. During this period, there were two questions in my head. First: what can a documentary filmmaker do when they are unable to shoot films? Second: Should an artist keep on doing the same thing?

So, I decided to make a change in my artistic practice. I would stop making films on my own. My new projects would be in collaboration with other artists, in different parts of the world and in different formats than documentary films. All these new projects would be informed by my growing interest in geopolitics, particularly global expansion strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative. For the Jakarta Biennial, I collaborated with Indonesian mural artists for a large mural about the Maritime Silk Road. For an exhibition in Oslo, I made maps about the Polar Silk Road in collaboration with a Russian artist. Chinese investments in the Himalaya became the subject of three *thangka* paintings that I made with the Nepali artist Tashi Lama for the Kathmandu Triennale (included in this exhibition). In all these works, we used the vast amount of information gathered in my research, further advanced by local research assistants for each project.

Also included in this exhibition, my animation film with the Indonesian artist Fetra Danu, *China, Beijing, I Love You!* (2023) is a turning point in my career, because in this work I mixed fiction with documentary. Turning obstacles to advantages, I could create scenes in locations I couldn't go to with my camera, or animate people I couldn't have possibly filmed, such as the prime minister of Indonesia — personified as the Minister of Extraction in the film. But most importantly, I could turn an inanimate substance; nickel, into the main protagonist of my film.

Most of what you see in this film is based on facts or real events. For example, the riot scene in the nickel processing plant is a representation of the real riots that took place in Morowali Industrial Park, where poor working conditions caused the death of several workers. To recreate these riots with animation, we studied several YouTube and TikTok videos recorded by mine workers. The slogans they are shouting are also taken directly from these videos. The animated map showing the Maritime Silk Road, with its route, ports and their functions is based on our meticulous research about all infrastructure projects on this route. Only this research took us four months to finish. The Ministry of Extraction's promotion of nickel mining in Indonesia is inspired by the actual commercials of the Indonesian state, which were frequently aired in international news channels at the time of our research. The use of infographics in the film is a nod to this medium's common use in geopolitical studies. It is also part of the accessible visual language I wanted to build in the film. The subject was already heavy, information was loaded and the film took place in multiple geographies. So it was important to have a visual language that wouldn't put an extra load on all these, but facilitate the film's understanding by a wide range of audiences.

All my works have been political. But recently, I became a geopolitical artist. Looking back at it now, I am often wondering why I took this direction. And it's not only me; the same tendency can be seen with other artists in different parts of the world. More and more artists are working like investigative journalists to produce works that focus on political power linked to geographic spaces such as territorial waters, sovereign land and the wealth of natural resources — or infrastructure projects such as those in this exhibition. The resulting artworks include genuine and evidence-based information that has the potential to piss some people off, which is why artists doing these kinds of works are increasingly becoming the target of political authority — just like journalists. Artists dealing with geopolitics today make more sense than ever before.



Köken Ergun & Fetra Danu, *China, Beijing, I Love You!* (still), 2024

