Silicon Roads was a travel project during the summer of 2018 attempting to delve into the fascinating world of entrepreneurship in Chinese cities such as Hong Kong and Beijing. As part of my journey, I spoke to entrepreneurs trying to build revolutionary products and services and tackle the problems they saw around them. In Beijing, I learned how entrepreneurs are increasingly starting businesses on top of social media platforms such as WeChat and no longer feeling that developing their own app is necessary. In Beijing I participated in a hackathon called 'Angel Hack' where my team and I built an app called
Spaceable winning second place. We ultimately developed this app into a company before being accepted in an incubator programme. You can find more about Spaceable which helps anyone find a flexible co-working space wherever they are at Spaceable.co

In Hong Kong, I saw the excitement around blockchain technologies attending a hackathon where I worked on a micro-task platform and met developers not only from Hong Kong but around the world, from California to Sydney. I was amazed to see the level of investment and talent that blockchain projects were able to attract, and while many of its promises are clearly overhyped, it’s undeniably from meeting many blockchain developers that with enough smart people working on these projects tremendously exciting breakthroughs are possible. The hackathon took place over a weekend, and the goal was to build an app using a blockchain platform called EOS in just 24 hours. It was a hugely exciting event and helped to improve my Javascript and Web development skills. I think being an active participant in the startup and technology scenes both in Hong Kong and Beijing helped me to experience and understand the culture far more clearly.

The Chinese startup scene is incredibly exciting but very difficult to understand without interacting with the community in real life. In major cities, there is a surprising number of people from around the world working for and on companies in the country. This is rarely discussed in Western narratives around Chinese companies. That said, in comparison to other startup ecosystems such as in San Francisco and London it’s very homogeneous. Consequently, Chinese language skills are critical to truly understand the nuances of
technology entrepreneurship, affirming to me the importance and relevance of my Chinese language studies as part of my degree. Entrepreneurs in China still face many challenges ranging from governance issues to problems around accessing or hosting foreign websites are additional barriers unique to the country. However it’s clear that many people at every level from corporates to the government realize the value of a thriving entrepreneurial community and are doing their best to support and encourage innovation at every level.

The connections that I’ve made in the region will hopeful allow me to continue to explore Chinese entrepreneurship whether I’m carrying out research or developing new projects alongside new potential partners. Thank you to the Santander travel grant for helping to make this travel possible.

I’m currently in the process of producing a short documentary containing interviews and accounts of this trip which I will be publishing on SiliconRoads.com shortly.
Blockwork team after the Hong Kong hackathon (I'm on the far left)

EOS hackathon main hall