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**Actors and agency in China's Belt and Road Initiative: an introduction**  
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# 1 Actors and Agency in China's Belt and Road Initiative

An Introduction

*Florian Schneider*

## Abstract

This introduction provides the context and theoretical background that informs the studies in this volume. It introduces the volume's common theme: the question of how different actors give shape to BRI projects. It outlines how, rather than treating nation states as singular, monolithic actors, this volume teases apart the way different people and organizations insert themselves into BRI decision-making and implementation. The chapter discusses how we might conceptualize agency in such contexts, drawing together the volume's findings to arrive at four conclusions: 1) that in understanding the BRI, geographical context matters; 2) that the BRI is a pluralist endeavour rather than a single, unified agenda; 3) that BRI efforts often extend rather than challenge existing politics; and 4) that outcomes depend on the activities of local actors.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, agency, China, local actors, introduction, pluralism

Two women are having a casual discussion about global affairs. One asks the other: 'Kimi, ever heard of the Belt and Road?' Kimi responds: 'Yeah, the big vision of economic exchange.' Her interlocutor swiftly follows up: 'Know exactly what they are?' To which Kimi responds: 'The Belt is along the old Silk Road and the Road is the Silk Road on the sea!'

'Oh, I see,' says the other woman, 'in Chinese: Yi Dai Yi Lu!' Music fades in, and a Chinese band of young men launches into a jazzy song, accompanied by funky percussion and a female background choir that hushes in husky

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**Figure 1.1 Extolling the virtues of the Belt and Road; screenshot of YouTube music video taken on 25 June 2020**



Source: New China TV (2017)

voices 'Who, Yi Dai Yi Lu, the Belt and Road!' Images show people around the world dancing and singing. Women in front of a Thai temple. A woman in front of Sydney's famous opera house. Several young people at iconic sites in Washington, DC.

The front singer raps about how Sri Lankans will no longer have to worry about electricity bills and how a Malaysian boy can finally scrape together the money to get married to his sweetheart. As images of harbour construction, highways, and railroads flicker across the screen, spliced with pictures of someone dancing in a panda costume, the rapper extols the virtues of infrastructure development: 'More trains, more ships, more airlines!' The choir sings 'Mutual benefits, joint responsibility, and shared destiny', then 'Silk Road Fund! BRICS bank! AIIB!' The music video culminates in a choreographed dance routine in an auditorium that features Chinese girls, the dancer in the panda suit, and, of course, the choir, which now sings 'Extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits', before finally concluding: 'Uh, Yi Dai Yi Lu!' (see figure 1.1).

This propaganda video was launched on 14 May 2017. China's central news agency Xinhua uploaded the clip to its official account, New China TV, on the video-sharing site YouTube and posted the link to its social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – all services that are blocked in China. Xinhua claims that 'the sing-along was created by Chinese millennials. Young Generation around the world are singing and dancing with it [sic]'

(New China TV 2017). Reception on YouTube seems more muted than Xinhua suggests, with only about 200 comments at the time of writing, most of which are derisive. 'These are some serious Nobel-prize-in-literature-level lyrics', writes one commentator; another remarks that this is 'like trying to garner support for textile mills through competitive break dancing' (ibid.).

YouTube commentators hardly seem convinced, and this may at first sight seem like a scathing indictment of Chinese soft-power efforts, but it may also be beside the point. Under the banner of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the People's Republic of China (PRC) has rolled out a world-spanning economic, political, and social development strategy that is dizzying in scope. The Chinese state has flanked those efforts with propaganda videos like this one, which are probably meant less as a way to convince foreign audiences and more as a means to illustrate to relevant stakeholders the ambitions and motivations that fuel the BRI. Awkward and cringe-worthy as the propaganda may be, it offers useful insight into how China's leaders want the BRI to be understood: as a set of ostensibly benevolent infrastructure and development projects that mutually benefit Chinese investors and people around the world.

But how do these projects work out in practice? What are the implications of the BRI in different contexts, and how should we assess official PRC claims about the mutual benefits that these developmental interventions ostensibly entail? The aim of this book is to explore such dynamics in global, regional, and local contexts. The research presented here is the result of a large-scale collaborative project started in 2019, pre-COVID-19, at the LeidenAsiaCentre (LAC). The project examined the BRI in global perspective and was informed by subsequent discussions at workshops at Singapore's EU Centre and the LAC in the first half of 2020.

This chapter discusses the findings from that project. It first outlines some of the major concerns and debates in the existing scholarship on the BRI, focusing in particular on the internal and external aspects of the initiative as well as on the BRI's effects and the motivations that might drive its various projects. The chapter then introduces the core theme of this book: agency. It examines what 'agency' means in this volume, as well as why a focus on the actors that drive BRI-related processes is relevant. Following this brief conceptual discussion, the introduction provides an overview of the individual chapters and then concludes by presenting the core findings that emerge from the contributions. These findings are: that geography is an important factor in the BRI, that the initiative is shaped by diverse interests, that its projects often extend rather than challenge earlier initiatives (e.g. by international organizations), and that the BRI's practical implementation depends heavily on the actions of local actors.

## Seven Years of the BRI: Hopes, Anxieties, and Controversies

According to estimates (Hillman 2018), the Chinese authorities plan to spend somewhere between US\$1 to 8 trillion on BRI-related projects before the initiative runs its course on the eve of the PRC's hundred-year anniversary in 2049. Infrastructure has been at the heart of the initiative since its launch in 2013. Under the BRI banner, Chinese foreign direct investment has flown into electric power projects, mineral mining and processing plants, and the construction of bridges, highways, ports, and railways (Dai 2018; Kuik 2020: 82-83; Lai & Lentner 2018; Negara & Suryadinata 2018: 12-23).

Trade has been another crucial dimension. The BRI has ushered in numerous 'economic corridors' and free trade agreements with partner countries (Lin 2015). As Li and Chaisse (2018: 465) put it, the BRI 'plays a key role in China's economic recovery agenda as its main purpose is to trigger various investment and trade demands to counteract the dwindling economic growth rate and excess production capacity'.

In this way, the BRI has much to do with China's domestic politics and economics. It is today shaped by concerns over a perceived lack of consumer-driven growth at home, overcapacities among state-owned enterprises, potential instabilities in China's financial system, and the wish to internationalize China's currency as reliance on the US dollar becomes more risky in the wake of the US-China trade war (Gordon et al. 2020: 14-18; Tekdal 2018). But for elites in the PRC, the initiative also helps construct a community out of citizens who are at risk of becoming disillusioned by the waning of the Chinese Dream. Van Dinh (2020: 92) compares the BRI to the Great Wall and its ability to unite diverse peoples along China's borders, arguing that:

After 30 years of development at all costs, China seems to be losing the driving force of development, a worrying prospect for a Chinese Communist Party that has survived on the basis of continuous economic development for over 30 years. The BRI is the trump card that can supply a new glue for bonding the Chinese people against the temptations of separatism and disillusionment with progress.

Creating infrastructure networks to facilitate domestic cohesion and development is not at all a new strategy, and Ghiasy (Chapter 11 in this volume) reminds us that telegraph lines, railroads, and canals have been instrumental not just in facilitating trade but also in creating the standards and norms of how modernity now works. In many ways, the BRI is an

attempt to shape such standards in the twenty-first century, to usher in an age of hyper-modernity defined by values popular in the PRC, whether it is in areas such as trade, taxation, and finance, as Sampson, Wang, and Mosquera Valderrama discuss in their contribution to this book (Chapter 3), or whether it is in education, science, and technology, as D'Hooghe shows in her chapter (Chapter 2).

It should then come as no surprise that the BRI is predated by, and in many ways marks the culmination of, earlier developmental and foreign policy strategies that also tried to give China a greater role in regional and global networks. Previous administrations already promoted the idea of developing Chinese border regions by 'going West' via Xinjiang (Moneyhon 2003) and by 'going out' to join international organizations like the WTO (Blanchard 2013; Lu 2015; and the contributions in Wang 2015). Indeed, while it may at times seem as though the BRI and its allied initiatives, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), challenge the institutions of the US-led Bretton Woods system, they frequently sit alongside existing institutions and they draw expertise and procedures from organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (see Wilson 2017). In some instances, as Gonzalez-Vicente illustrates in his chapter on China in the Caribbean (Chapter 7), BRI-related institutions reproduce rather than subvert the market-making and business-centric agendas and practices of the IMF, even if the different policy formats at times obscure such similarities. While this may not always be self-evident to practitioners in international organizations, the official motives that are meant to guide BRI investments are indeed not that different from those championed by earlier neoliberal capitalist institutions: to coordinate policy, improve connectivity, promote free trade, assure financial integration, and establish people-to-people bonds (State Council 2015).

As a vehicle for economic development, the BRI has been attractive in so-called developing countries, and it would be callous to dismiss the real-world transformative impact that BRI projects have had on people who can now often move more freely and live in more comfort due to the new infrastructure-led growth in their societies. However, the BRI's record has not been an unqualified success. It is important to ask who the beneficiaries of these transformations really are. Who stands to gain, and who is left out? Several analysts have contended that BRI-fuelled investments often pose dire environmental risks (Ewing 2019; Hughes 2019; Teo et al. 2019) and reveal a 'treacherous disconnect between China's commitment to fighting climate change at home versus abroad' (Friends of the Earth 2017: 61). Others have criticized the fact that BRI projects support states with poor governance

records (Dollar 2018), raise questions about local employment effects and general labour standards (Zou 2019), lack transparency and privilege Chinese companies in potentially unfair ways (European Chamber 2020), and risk creating significant debt vulnerabilities in partner countries (Bandiera & Tsiropoulos 2020; Dollar 2018).

In addition to these issues of BRI performance, the motivations behind the BRI have also been questioned, particularly the official Chinese narrative that the BRI is a benevolent development agenda with no strings attached. Recent studies have made the case that the BRI is part of the PRC's 'economic statecraft', and that Chinese leaders are using the substantial economic resources at their disposal to further their interests abroad (see the contributions in Li 2017). The BRI has consequently been compared to the 1948 Marshall Plan, which provided aid to Western Europe after the devastation of the Second World War (Economist 2018). This is a comparison that Chinese BRI proponents loathe due to its geopolitical implications (see Mitchell 2018).

Even though this analogy with the Marshall Plan is neither historically nor analytically accurate (see Shen & Chan 2018 for an insightful critique), it is telling that the BRI's political implications evoke such Cold War dichotomies, even if the two sides of that dichotomy are now effectively both capitalist. Perceptions about systemic and ostensibly irresolvable differences between China and 'the West' remain, and they continue to shape the debate. For instance, Chinese investments have raised concerns that the BRI might be accompanied by PRC attempts to strategically undermine liberal agendas, for instance by countering efforts to promote human rights, specifically by the European Union (Wong 2017). In some EU contexts, BRI-related funding has started to fuel anxieties that 'European member states are compromising on European principles to accommodate Chinese investment' (Hanemann & Huotari 2017: 7; see also BusinessEurope 2020: 151). While in practice the record of the PRC's efforts to turn 'its economic heft into political influence' is likely 'far less worrisome than most popular writing suggests' (Reilly 2017: 182), Chinese officials have nevertheless remained mostly unsuccessful at 'reducing popular anxiety over China's rise' in target societies that are governed by long-standing threat perceptions of the PRC and its ruling Chinese Communist Party (*ibid.*; see also Pardo 2018).

Chinese leaders, diplomats, and planners continue to try and alleviate such threat perceptions (Goh & Martina 2019) and address concerns about the BRI's sustainability and corporate social responsibility, with Xi Jinping announcing a recalibration of the BRI towards more 'high quality' cooperation that is 'open, green and clean' (Xi 2019). However, many of the



complex problems that accompany the BRI are bound to persist. Preliminary observations about the effect that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the BRI suggest that some of these problems may even become further aggravated, for instance where BRI partners suffer crisis-related economic losses and find themselves hard-pressed to repay their debts (Kynge & Yu 2020; Tower & Staats 2020). All of this paints a picture of complex interactions that are extremely difficult to pin down and evaluate systematically. How, then, should we assess Chinese BRI projects seven years after the initiative's original inception?

### Actors and Agency in China's Globe-Spanning BRI Networks

As the rapidly evolving discussions about the BRI show, scholars, analysts, and policymakers are arriving at nuanced assessments of the initiative that move beyond early depictions of the BRI as either a benevolent Chinese development project or a sinister geopolitical play for world dominance. Recent contributions to the debate emphasize the diversity of BRI-related projects and the need for careful empirical analysis (e.g. the contributions in Cerrai et al. 2020; Chong & Pham 2020b; De Cremer et al. 2019). This present collection speaks to this growing field of inquiry that tries to tease apart how the BRI plays out in different contexts. It is informed by the realization that understanding the BRI requires both truly global perspectives and careful attention to the role that local actors play in giving shape to individual BRI projects.

The theme that runs through this book is agency. In much of the literature on global politics, and particularly in mainstream international relations theory, agency is located firmly with nation states. It can indeed be tempting to treat states like the PRC as monolithic, unified actors that push politics forward through their behaviour in a seemingly anarchic world. The metaphor of the state as a person has consequently become a commonplace shorthand that allows academics, journalists, and practitioners to home in on a core dynamic in international relations. For many, speaking of what 'China' does, how 'India' reacts, or what 'Indonesia' wants is not just convenient, it is an essential conceptual choice for cutting to the heart of global politics, and scholars like Alexander Wendt (2004) have staunchly defended this practice.

The contributions in this volume do not dismiss the relevance of nation state actors in international relations, certainly not in a context like the BRI, where a one-party state is powerfully inserting itself into regional and

global networks of goods, people, finances, and information. At the same time, this book contends that viewing the BRI mainly as a coherent strategy by a growing monolithic Great Power is too much of a simplification, and that we should instead understand the BRI as a complicated set of political, economic, and social initiatives launched by a dizzying array of actors, all of whom are trying to understand (and profit from) the changing role of the PRC in world politics and economics. Importantly, our point is not just that there are many actors implementing the PRC government's vision, but that the central government is one of many actors trying to make sense of an important moment in the developmental trajectory of the country as a whole (see also Gonzalez-Vicente, Chapter 7 in this volume).

Such a perspective promises to bring nuance to the discussion, but, as Healy (2017: 119) has warned, nuance for nuance's sake is not necessarily helpful and can become a self-serving 'holding manoeuvre' that offers a convenient way not to have to make decisions 'when faced with a question for which one does not yet have a compelling or interesting answer'. So why do we need the additional nuance that an analysis of actors and agency promises to offer? What do we gain by looking at this dimension of the BRI?

As Michael Billig (2013) has argued, academic accounts too frequently reify the processes that shape our world, turning them into handy categories that are ultimately inaccurate representations of what is actually happening around us. To Billig, there is a real risk of 'describing how things happen in the social world without mentioning how people might make them happen, or, indeed who the people are who make them happen' (ibid.: 142). Limiting an argument or analysis to categories like 'China', 'Africa', 'Europe', 'the West', etc., means doing injustice to the people who inhabit those categories. It means not describing the world as it is, and this should be of major concern to practitioners who must make decisions in complex, rapidly evolving situations shaped by high degrees of uncertainty. This is evident from various empirical studies of actors in different contexts (see, for example, Latour & Woolgar 1986; MacKenzie 2006; Miller & Slater 2000; Schneider 2019).

Another benefit of following the actors is that it provides a reality check on where agency truly lies. Latour, providing one definition of agency, has argued that agency describes the ability to 'modify a state of affairs by making a difference' in ways that 'make others do things' (Latour 2005: 71, 107). We should then ask: Who has that ability in a specific context? Is it PRC government officials, private Chinese entrepreneurs, their counterparts elsewhere, or someone else entirely, for instance illegal actors (see Ferchen on China and Southeast Asia, Chapter 10 in this volume)?

As Links demonstrates in her chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), and as is also evident from Van der Lugt's contribution (Chapter 13), relations between Chinese actors and their interlocutors in African countries may at times take on dynamics that the existing literature on Chinese activities in Africa tends to overlook. African actors attract Chinese investments, negotiate context-dependent outcomes, or exert their own influence in the process. As often as not, Links points out, such agency does not turn adversarial; it empowers local actors to make their own choices. Similarly, Kuik shows in his chapter (Chapter 9) how agency can be unevenly distributed across Southeast Asia, with actors carefully balancing their own interests against different domestic constraints. But agency does not have to be limited to making decisions and acting in the world; for some actors, it can mean shaping and remaking the world in which they then act. As Forough shows (in Chapter 12) in his discussion of such 'geographic agency', we should also explore how actors 'define, articulate, and (rep)resent themselves and their place (their identities, fears, and aspirations) in the world geographically'.

In many ways, then, it is unhelpful to reduce nation states like 'China' to single actors. The PRC and the region-spanning networks that its BRI are currently recalibrating around the world are instead the backdrop before which different people and groups make their own politics happen, often in deeply idiosyncratic ways. That is what this book is about.

## Overview of This Book

In this volume, our contributors offer a theoretically informed, interdisciplinary analysis of China's BRI in various global, regional, and local contexts. The overarching framework is grounded in critical area studies, emphasizing that local knowledge and perspectives matter in international affairs. The authors come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from politics and international relations to law, geography, and economics. The chapters of this volume provide detail-oriented empirical studies, based on first-hand fieldwork and policy analysis. They offer both bird's-eye views of China's BRI at age seven, as well as important interventions into debates about how we might conceptualize agency at a time when Chinese actors seem to be at the heart of so many rapidly evolving regional and global networks. Following this general introductory chapter, the book proceeds in three parts. The first provides 'big picture' analyses of China's BRI in international institutions and global collaborations. The second part offers analyses of regional dynamics. The third part examines individual case studies in specific settings.

Chapter 2, by Ingrid d'Hooghe, examines the connection between the BRI and Chinese policies for international cooperation in higher education as well as science and technology. It argues that Chinese stakeholders – e.g. various government organizations and education and research institutes – make the connection work in two directions: the BRI is used as an instrument to promote the country's higher agendas in education as well as science and technology and, vice versa, international cooperation in these areas is used to promote the BRI. By analysing the roles of state and non-state actors in education and science diplomacy, D'Hooghe finds that efforts to build the relationship are primarily state-driven. The chapter ends with a discussion of what this development means for China's position in higher education as well as science and technology. Who may benefit and who may lose out?

In Chapter 3, Sampson, Wang, and Mosquera Valderrama examine the decisions that inform the BRI's institution building. The chapter explores the tension between strategic and efficiency-oriented concerns, and it traces those tensions across three issue areas: tax, trade, and development finance. As the authors show, in dealing with the challenges, the Chinese government lacks an integral governance framework that systemically coordinates all the relevant institutions. Instead, it takes varied institutional approaches to oversee the operation of BRI projects and mediate disputes, ranging from bilateral trade agreements to multilateral financial institutions. Based on multiple case studies, the chapter illustrates the plurality among Chinese actors; it argues that China's development of tax initiatives for the BRI is mostly motivated by efficiency drivers, its trade agreements with a number of key BRI partners by strategic drivers, and its effort in establishing multilateral financial institutions by both drivers.

In the first contribution to Part II of this book (Chapter 4), Ferchen turns to regional dynamics, specifically to the role of the BRI in relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. Prior to 2017, Chinese officials and scholars clearly and directly rejected the idea that these regions were part of the BRI. Even though the BRI was geographically expansive, extending as far as Africa and Western Europe as parts of both the overland and maritime components of the plan, the Western Hemisphere appeared to simply be beyond the BRI's scope. However, in 2017, China started to sign a series of BRI Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and BRI-related infrastructure and other 'connectivity' deals with governments in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. This expansion of the BRI to Latin America and the Caribbean took place at precisely the same time that the United States was beginning a concerted pushback against Chinese dealmaking and influence in regions like Latin America and Africa. Chapter 4 thus

offers an overview of the still-short history of the BRI in Latin America and the Caribbean, what it means in the broader context of China's developing country diplomacy in the region, and how it is playing out against the backdrop of widening US-China strategic rivalry.

In Chapter 5, Links introduces the reader to the African region in relation to China and the BRI. She provides an overview of the current field of China-Africa studies and identifies common narratives that have enveloped these relations. As a cornerstone region, Links sketches Africa's centrality to the BRI while introducing one of the remaining lacunas in the field, namely the question of African agency. In particular, the chapter looks at reasons for the general neglect of the issue of agency in the literature, as well as how it is incorporated in the few instances where it is analysed. As a region, Links explores Africa's centrality to the BRI against the backdrop of intensifying China-Africa relations, making a case for Africa as a fundamental cornerstone of understanding the BRI in both its practical and more ideological facets.

Links continues her analysis of the BRI in Africa in Chapter 6, which provides an in-depth analysis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and its interaction with China through the BRI. In this chapter, Links explores the issue of agency on the part of African actors, specifically the agency exercised by SADC as a regional power that covers a vast geographical area. Often overlooked by scholars of China's BRI in Africa, Links's focus on SADC demonstrates the reach of the BRI as well as the relevance of this project for seemingly geographically 'distant' locales, as seen through the eyes of the 'users' themselves. Links employs a deductive approach to the issue of agency, whereby agents are placed at the centre of analysis and themselves demarcate the bounds of agency. This agent-oriented or user perspective circumvents the paternalism of imposed definitions in order to place onus and definitional power on the actors themselves. Such an approach, Links argues, promises to provide the foundations of an open and empowered conversation on matters of international relations more broadly.

Chapter 7 moves the emphasis to the Caribbean, specifically to Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Gonzalez-Vicente shows how the BRI's financial muscle and infrastructure building have transformed the Caribbean developmental landscape. Key to this transformation has been China's capacity to launch new projects in otherwise heavily indebted or cash-strapped economies. This has been achieved through complex financial arrangements that involve China's diplomacy, policy banks, and construction and natural resources-based enterprises. As a result, some of the region's traditional interlocutors, such as the IMF or the EU, have lost their undisputed capacity

for influence and coercion. However, Sino-Caribbean relations have also contributed to entrenching long-established structural and postcolonial impediments to development. The chapter explores broader regional trends and illustrates them using the cases of China's relationship with Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Gonzalez-Vicente argues that the BRI represents yet another iteration of neoliberal business-centric development, and as such it remains unable to foment qualitative socio-economic change in the Caribbean.

Chapter 8 by Van der Putten and Petkova constitutes the first analysis in Part III of this book. It explores the geopolitical significance of the BRI in the case of Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia. Van der Putten and Petkova argue that this region constitutes the geographical centre of today's global great-power rivalry, in which the United States and China are the key players. It was in the Indonesian capital Jakarta that President Xi Jinping, in 2013, announced China's ambition to build a modern-day version of the maritime Silk Roads. Which economic and diplomatic activities constitute the BRI in the case of Indonesia, and what is their impact on political relations between Indonesia and China and Indonesia's position with regard to China-United States tensions? This chapter focuses in particular on Indonesia's efforts to maintain strategic autonomy and on manifestations of great-power influence on the country's foreign policy-making.

Kuik continues the discussion about Southeast Asian cases in Chapter 9, turning to Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand. He asks: Why do China's BRI projects progress relatively smoothly in communist Laos but slowly and selectively in military-ruled Thailand and substantially, albeit with volatility, in quasi-democratic Malaysia? Kuik argues that differences in political systems are only part of the answer. By focusing on the BRI engagement of these three nation states, his study highlights the agency of the host countries in shaping the patterns of foreign-funded infrastructure cooperation. China as a stronger partner will always 'push the envelope' in its partnerships. Nevertheless, it is the host country, specifically the ruling elites, who will engage China-backed projects based on their need to optimize their respective pathways of legitimation vis-à-vis the contending elites and masses domestically, leading to varying responses.

Chapter 10 also focuses on Southeast Asia. As Ferchen argues, analyses of the 'China model' of development have until recently focused almost exclusively on explanations for, and debates about, China's own domestic economic growth. Yet as China's global trade, investment, and financial role has expanded, especially under Xi Jinping and his signature BRI policy,

there is growing interest in whether China seeks to export a version of the China model abroad. Ferchen shows how state-led forms of development, especially BRI-related infrastructure finance and construction, are only one aspect of the export of the China model abroad. Providing case studies from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam (with additional insights from the Philippines), the chapter explores how the much less discussed, but just as crucial, informal and often illicit aspects of the China model are creating complications for the BRI in host countries and for China itself.

In Chapter 11, Ghiasy examines how the BRI has impacted connectivity and integration in South Asia. More significantly and extensively, he investigates how academic perceptions and policies have evolved in India and Pakistan in response to the BRI since its inception in 2013. These two states provide a unique agency, which Ghiasy defines as the ability to influence or resist influence, in the BRI context. The region's dominant power, India, is a staunch critic that refuses to sit at the BRI table. India is exemplary of the degree to which a non-partaking actor can counter, or supplement, the BRI in its region. The region's other power, Pakistan, hosts the BRI's flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and is the single largest recipient of BRI investment. Pakistan provides insight into how a deep-seated partaker's perceptions and policies on the BRI have evolved. To permit tailored data collection, Ghiasy draws from a series of interviews he conducted with leading Indian and Pakistani academics. His work shows how these academics make sense of China in the region, and it grants an understanding of the BRI's interplay with South Asia's various geopolitical fissures.

In Chapter 12, which focuses on the Iranian situation, Forough tackles two issues: the first is to demarcate in a preliminary fashion the conceptual boundaries of what he calls 'geographic agency'. The second is to apply this concept to the case of Iran and its geoeconomic processes. Adopting a critical geography approach, Forough unpacks how Iran is reinventing itself geographically through certain 'space-making processes' and policies (such as port modernization, the 'railway revolution', or its 'geoeconomic connectivity drive') and certain 'space-framing assumptions' that underlie those processes. Forough argues that the country is showing agency at three geographical levels: 1) as a nation state, it is systematically representing the 'idea of Iran' as a 'civilizational crossroads'; it does so 2) in a region that the Iranian government chooses to call 'West Asia' (and not the Middle East), thereby reconnecting it to Asia, and 3) in an emergent world whose organizing trope is that of a 'New Silk Roads' imaginary and whose overriding logic is more geoeconomics than geopolitics.

In the final chapter of this book, Chapter 13, Van der Lugt analyses various causal relations through which Ethiopian and Chinese actors interact in the context of the Digital Silk Road initiative. She contends that, from a Chinese perspective, the Digital Silk Road is explained as a serious attempt to narrow the gap between underdeveloped and developed countries by improving their own capacities. From a Western perspective (Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, etc.), Chinese investments in the Digital Silk Road are often depicted as unethical support to authoritarian leaders. What is playing out in Africa (and other parts of the world) is part of a larger contest between the West and China for dominance over the future of technology and global influence. Through detailed, formal process tracing, Van der Lugt moves beyond the simple dichotomy of good and bad Chinese investments in the digitalization of Africa. Instead, her chapter identifies the actors involved in the digitalization of Ethiopia and investigates their motives and levels of influence.

## Main Findings

The contributions in this volume run the gamut from aerial views of the role that Chinese actors play in global institutions and regional networks to specific case studies that zoom in on BRI dynamics in local contexts. Four recurring observations stand out as the main findings of this book:

- 1 *Geographical context matters*: as several of the contributors show (e.g. Van der Putten and Petkova), geopolitical and geoeconomic understandings of the world shape how actors make decisions in BRI-related contexts. In some cases, physical geography functions as an almost 'static reality' that 'talks back' to actors as they go about their activities (as Ghiasy illustrates). In other cases, actors exert definitional agency to give meaning to geography and turn it into a resource for decision-making processes (see Links and Forough). In all of these instances, actors put their geographic context to work in the service of specific agendas, both conceptually and materially.
- 2 *The BRI is a pluralist endeavour*: there is no single, unified BRI agenda. This becomes clear from the various individual cases presented in this volume, especially Ferchen's and Kuik's comparative analyses, but it is also evident from the behaviour of Chinese actors in different institutional settings (as illustrated by both D'Hooghe and Sampson, Wang, and Mosquera Valderrama). Different contexts require their own understanding of the situation, and consequently their own policy responses.



- 3 *Old wine in new bottles*: as Gonzalez-Vicente shows, and as the work of Sampson, Wang, and Mosquera Valderrama also suggests, BRI efforts often extend rather than challenge existing politics. The PRC's investment, aid, and connectivity projects frequently take their cues from institutions like the IMF and World Bank, reproducing both best practices and the problematic externalities that have characterized these predecessor activities.
- 4 *BRI outcomes depend on local actors*: the BRI is shaped by diverse local actors who exercise their agency by connecting with Chinese counterparts to achieve their own goals. This is particularly evident from the studies of BRI-related projects in Africa (Links, Van der Lugt) and Southeast Asia (Ferchen, Kuik). In these cases, local actors integrate the PRC leadership's ambitious plans for cooperation into their own developmental frameworks.

In short, the authors represented in this volume each examine context-specific dynamics by following the actors to show how the BRI's outcomes take shape in practice. Practitioners and observers would be well advised to similarly approach these complexities on a case-by-case basis, so as not to fall into the trap of overlooking or misinterpreting how different people and organizations insert themselves into the highly complex decision-making and implementation processes that make the BRI a near-global reality today.

In the PRC's propaganda video on YouTube, Kimi exclaims: 'The Belt is along the old Silk Road and the Road is the Silk Road on the sea!' While the video itself remains campy and awkward, her statement illustrates how clever Chinese propagandists have been in at least one regard: their branding of the PRC's foreign development initiative as a direct extension of historical cultural and trade relations. Several of the BRI's core projects and institutions now contain the evocative label 'Silk Road'. The titular 'Belt' and 'Road' are officially called the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21st-Century Maritime Silk Road', the BRI's alternative name is the 'New Silk Road' (see also Pairault 2020), and the authorities have dubbed their extension of the BRI into cyberspace with the 'Digital Silk Road' (Ghiasi & Krishnamurthy 2020; see also Van der Lugt, Chapter 13 in this volume). The idea of ancient, far-flung networks emanating from China informs much of the imagination surrounding the BRI (Griffiths 2017: 21). Xinhua's Twitter accounts, for instance, are awash with images that are meant to illustrate this: dunes, camels, exotic markets, desert sunrises, peoples in colourful ethnic dresses, and so on (for examples and a discussion, see Nie 2019: 184).

The contemporary, modern reinvention of the so-called Silk Roads arguably has little to do with the actual historical record of these routes (for discussions, see Chong & Pham 2020a; Christian 2000; Hansen 2012). Be that as it may, branding the BRI as the ‘New Silk Road’ is ultimately an effective marketing strategy (SupChina 2016), designed to invite as many stakeholders as possible into projects that promise to jump-start past successes and glories, be they real or imagined. The results of these projects are often idiosyncratic, and they are at times fraught with risk or failures. These outcomes are of course important, but regardless of the BRI’s efficacy, the actors involved in the BRI are recalibrating the world as we know it. As more and more actors take up, challenge, revamp, and rework these much-evoked ‘Silk Roads’ in diverse situations, we need critically minded research that does not shy away from leaning into the complexities and nuances of the BRI to unpack both its global ambitions and its local instantiations.

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