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The BRI and Comparative Urban Possibility

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As both an imagined spatial frame and as material infrastructure, the BRI spurs new geographies of inter-urban comparison. Even before the BRI was officially announced, there had been a resurgence of interest in comparative methods and approaches in urban studies. In part, that arose from scholars seeking to “postcolonialise” the field, not just by taking a wider “world of cities” seriously in urban theory-building, but also through diversifying comparative frames in ways that decentre Western experiences and reference points (Robinson, 2006, 2011). Such theoretical and methodological reorientations are valuable in work on urbanizing Asia where case studies have typically: involved speaking back to debates and theory in supposedly prototypical urban regions of Western Europe or North America; or, been contained within national systems and literatures, engaging (only) area studies audiences. Both of those tendencies are challenged by Chen Kuan-Hsing’s conception of ‘Asia as method’, although he does not focus on specifically *urban* comparativism within Asia (Chen, 2010). This essay considers the comparative urban possibilities of BRI in terms of both the new transnational (and transregional) infrastructural connections established in its name, and the way in which it imaginatively collates previously dispersed urbanizing territories into new frames of reference.

Belt and Road From Below: Questions about Social Futures, Agency and Sovereignty along the BRI

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Before Chinese leaders announced the Belt and Road as a capacious framework for going out into the world, the primary platform of the Xi Jinping administration was the “China Dream” — a slightly vague derivation of the “American Dream” of individuated economic and social success. How has the China Dream been carried by Belt and Road projects in Southeast Asia? What does this tell us about visions of the future? To answer these questions this essay examines the way receiving communities of BRI projects in Laos, Cambodia and elsewhere are orienting their vision for the future in relation to Chinese ideals of success, while also considering the enduring legacies of colonialism and an older U.S.-oriented cultural hegemony. The essay thereby reflects on how geoeconomic visions and material implementations of BRI projects inflect the social reproduction and labor practices of working-class communities at emerging frontiers of global China. In doing so it argues that power is enacted in relation to both material systems and ideological imaginaries, opening space for a more nuanced understanding of human agency and sub-national forms of sovereignty.

Belt, Road, And Risk Acceptant Major Powers: What China's Grand Vision Can Teach Us about the Cold War and Colonial Legacies

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Seeking to link Asia with the Middle East, Africa, and ultimately Europe, the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is intellectual successor to the grand high modernist infrastructure development enterprises of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like the colossal Cold War and colonial projects that came before, the BRI promises prosperity, development, and even supposed "civilization." Yet, like its predecessors the BRI too faces the risk of triggering environmental catastrophe, large-scale displacement, political unrest, and social upheaval, even if inadvertently. This essay seeks to conceptualize the seemingly irresistible allure of colossal projects despite their massive cost and susceptibility to the push and pull of multiple externalities that lie beyond the scope of its designers' and backers' original intentions. Specifically, I seek to address how the BRI helps shed light on how beliefs about strategic competition drive major powers to accept and commit to costly and risky investments in far-flung regions where they have little control. In so doing, the BRI can help recast existing understandings about the nature and recurrence of such endeavors across Cold War and imperial contexts.

The Belt and Road as Method: Networks, Assemblages, and Political Power through an Infrastructure Lens

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While infrastructures may be a way in which "the state actualizes power over territory" (Menga & Swyngedouw 2018), the political effects of infrastructures are seldom straightforward. And yet, many accounts of the Belt & Road Initiative assume a relatively conventional approach to politics, and to political power. Geopolitical intentionality and top-down policy and strategic planning tend to be emphasized over project-level analyses. This essay explores a more technopolitical framing of the Belt & Road, applying an infrastructural analytic to the question of how political power is realized or frustrated, enhanced or diverted, by the distributed and relational nature of infrastructure projects. It shares with Goodfellow & Huang (2020, 2) a suspicion that "viewing [infrastructures] through the prism of China's geopolitical motivations is insufficient if we are to understand the present realities and future potential of these infrastructures." Instead, it seeks to lay out a research agenda and analytical framework for addressing the questions of how such projects grow and evolve, how they are embedded within the social-political-cultural contexts in which they develop, and how they produce political effects that at times align with broader-scale geopolitical agendas and at other times do not.

Emerging Chinese Narratives on the BRI: From Diplomacy to Digital Sovereignty and Power

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This essay focuses on Chinese elite discourses about the BRI and the ways these have evolved. How do they relate to epistemological shifts and the geopolitics of knowledge production? Specifically, I focus on two narratives: the BRI as a pathway to realize China's 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' and the 'Digital Silk Road' as emblematic of BRI 2.0. What do these tell us about diplomacy, Chinese exceptionalism, digital infrastructures, sovereignty, and power? BRI narratives (and the Chinese state, more generally) are too often read as static and unchanging. The BRI presents scholars with the responsibility and opportunity to produce nuanced research so as to see China for what it is, as opposed to what they want it to be.

The BRI as Multiple Geographies of Knowledge Production

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The Belt and Road Initiative has attracted wide scholarly attention. However, discussions among social scientists on the BRI have largely premised on the academic infrastructure in English language contexts. Academic research on the BRI in China has often been only briefly mentioned as background information in English language publications. This disjuncture between scholarship on the BRI inside and outside China reflects the multiple geographies of the BRI. This essay considers how funding sources, language politics, political framing of research, and institutional surveillance yield different intellectual spaces for understanding the BRI. In turn, examining the BRI in English and Chinese scholarship reaffirms the importance of grounded scrutiny of knowledge production.
