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Guest Editorial

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground



A B S T R A C T

The Chinese government promotes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a global strategy for regional integration and infrastructure investment. With a projected US \$1 trillion commitment from Chinese financial institutions, and at least 138 countries participating, the BRI is attracting intense debate. Yet most analysis to date focuses on broad drivers, risks, and opportunities, largely considered to be emanating from a coherent policy imposed by Beijing. In this special issue, we instead examine the BRI as a *relational, contested process* - a bundle of intertwined discourses, policies, and projects that sometimes align but are sometimes contradictory. We move beyond policy-level, macro-economic, and classic geopolitical analysis to study China's global investments "from the ground". Our case studies reveal the BRI to be dynamic and unstable, rhetorically appropriated for different purposes that sometimes but do not always coalesce as a coherent geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy. The papers in this special issue provide one of the first collections of deep empirical work on the BRI and a useful approach for grounding China's role in globalization in the critical contexts of complex local realities.

1. Grounding geopolitics

First proposed in 2013, and hailed by Xi Jinping as the "project of the century", China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promises a win-win partnership with China offering loans and investment and host countries supplying new markets in a process of "inclusive globalization" (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Zeng, 2016). Yet this hopeful rhetoric has been repeatedly questioned by many scholars, who see the BRI as a "grand strategy" for Beijing's increasingly assertive geopolitical ambitions (Tsui, Wong, Lau, & Wen, 2017), even if ultimately dismissing it as a Sisyphean effort in the face of continuing US hegemony that upholds, rather than undermines, the existing global capitalist order (Hung, 2015; Wilson, 2019).

The BRI is a strategic successor to the Chinese government's "Go Out" policy launched in 1999, which encouraged Chinese firms to make investments and bid for contracts in other countries. This early policy ensured a steady flow of raw materials into China (Smaller et al., 2012) and enabled Chinese firms to access new markets and fast-track their integration and competitiveness in the global economy (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2012; Oliveira, 2018). The BRI is both a continuation of this approach and a "spatial fix" to offload over-accumulated capital and excess industrial capacity on overseas markets (Summers, 2016). This process was induced by China's domestic economic restructuring, and now brings its form of state capitalism to developing countries around the world (Yeh & Wharton, 2016). Yet the trillion dollar figures used to describe this initiative (Menon, 2017) require substantial caveats as mere estimates and projections, emerging from an assemblage of consolidated projects alongside proposals that sometimes amount to mere boosterism, and also reflect the amorphous and ever-changing scope of the BRI (Hillman, 2018).

Politically, the BRI is also an attempt to construct and control a narrative around Chinese foreign investments - that they are not just

geopolitical power grabs or profit-seeking ventures, but win-win projects that drive mutual development (Li, Lin, & Zheng, 2015; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). The Chinese government hopes this Initiative will increase diplomatic power and generate growth at home, lubricating a shift from a foreign policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries (Tan-Mullins et al., 2010) to a more active approach that strategically deploys "hard power" (through military and security build-up in the South China Sea and in China's western border regions) with "soft power" efforts by establishing multilateral investment banks and deepening aid, investment, and cultural relations (Callahan, 2016; Winter 2019). Through their combination, the Chinese government hopes to create a long-term ability to shape global norms to its favor (Zhou & Esteban, 2018).

Missing from the literature, however, is a sense of *how* the BRI is constructed and implemented as a political and economic project. The BRI is not a monolithic program designed in Beijing and imposed upon others. Rather, drawing on critical scholarship of Chinese aid and investment, we assert that it is better understood as a bundle of intertwined discourses, policies, and projects that sometimes align but that are sometimes contradictory. Focusing on these entanglements inverts analysis of the BRI from a top-down coherent strategy to a relational, contested process that occurs in specific places. In other words, in order to understand how the BRI is reshaping global development, it must be examined empirically "from the ground".

The aim of this special issue is to analyze the diverse discursive and material relations that both make up the BRI and continually reshape it. We envision the BRI as a process of co-construction, involving not just state and business elites from China, but also local officials, financiers, firm operatives, middlemen, and community members. Papers in this collection engage the BRI as dynamic and unstable, enabling it to be rhetorically appropriated for various and often contradictory personal, political, and economic purposes. Yet we also recognize the powerful

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incentives on behalf of various actors to promote the Initiative as something that is coherent and controlled by Beijing, thus elevating some favored discourses, policies, and projects over others. The case studies presented here cover infrastructure projects like road and dam construction, as well as the diplomatic and social exchanges that cradle the financial flows, discursive constructions, and “soft power” of the BRI. Taken together, the contributions comprise one of the first collections of theoretically robust and empirically grounded work on the BRI.

2. Theoretical insights from critical methodologies

Our collection provides some of the first deep empirical accounts of the BRI while also advancing theoretical and methodological arguments about the role of the Chinese state and capital in global political geography. Theoretically, this collection argues that these global shifts are not merely the outcome of great power relations, reducible to a contest between “China” and “the West”, even if articulated through a “post-modern geopolitics” (*pace* Browning, 2018). One might envision the BRI as a techno-political practice by “Beijing” to secure global flows of commodities and capital (cf. Bridge, 2013; Grundy-Warr, Sithirith, & Li, 2015), emphasizing state-control over ever-increasing global production networks (cf. Rolf, 2019). Yet our special issue contributes to and advances recent arguments in *Political Geography* that the exercise of sovereignty is always spatially selective and graduated (Holden, 2017), and power is not so much exercised upon capital and commodity flows, as it emerges through the relations established by global flows themselves (Emel, Huber, & Makene, 2011; Jents, 2020). While accurate, it is not so productive to simply assert “the BRI is geopolitical”, nor is it sufficient to suggest that China is exporting a particular model of development through the Initiative (see Harlan, 2017; Yeh & Wharton, 2016). Rather, we must recognize how global initiatives like the BRI are messy, contingent, and uneven in their outcomes, even as Chinese and global elites benefit from presenting it as a unified framework and strategy.

Building on these points, this collection also argues for the necessity of in-depth fieldwork and mixed methodology to study global processes (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017; Hart, 2006). Policies are formulated, finance is mobilized, and projects are implemented in specific places – sites of struggle that must be analyzed to better understand the broader implications of the BRI. This methodological orientation sets our collection alongside recent advancements in political geography literature that “ground” China’s global integration in socio-material co-constructions and discursive particularities (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Sidaway, Rowedder, Woon, Lin, & Pholsena, 2020), revealing the globally networked nature of its finance (Lai, Lin, & Sidaway, 2020), the “fuzziness” of the BRI’s nature and contours (Narins & Agnew, 2020), and the locally specific processes of “muddling through” that produce China’s borders and cross-border engagements (Woodworth & Joniak-Lüthi, 2020).

Our critical relational approach does much more than just “illustrate” the BRI. It helps to further liberate political geographic analysis from methodological nationalism or the “territorial trap”: the geographical assumptions of classical geopolitics and international relations that naturalized “the exercise of state power through a set of central political institutions” and homogenized “the clear spatial demarcation of the territory within which the state exercises its power” (Agnew, 1994, p. 53). In so doing, our approach reveals the complexity and multiplicity of both state and non-state actors, the (im)permeability and disparities of borders, and the convergences and divergences that produce geopolitical forces and geoeconomic phenomena associated with the BRI, yet that are not visible as or reducible to national level macroeconomics and inter-state relations. In other words, we shed light on the “intimacies” of global politics and capital, and show how territoriality operates beyond the confines of nation-states (cf. Bagelman & Wiebe, 2017; Shin, 2019). This critical political geographic approach is especially useful to navigate the largely non-transparent realm of Chinese politics and transnational corporate relations. Shifting our focus

away from “Beijing” and state-owned enterprises, we instead attend to the particular individuals and multiple institutions (Chinese and non-Chinese) that actually assemble Chinese capital with various factors of production in specific places (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Murton, Lord, & Beazley, 2016; Oliveira, 2019; Rippa, Murton, & Rest, 2020).

Rather than taking for granted what “counts” as a BRI project, therefore, or even what constitutes Chinese foreign investments and diplomacy, our contributors reveal the co-constructed and relational processes through which discourses about the BRI and Chinese geopolitics emerge and transform in particular moments and places (Oliveira & Myers, 2020). Attention to place-based relations helps explain how this process privileges some actors while silencing others, and produces particular configurations of power that are advanced, transformed, or resisted. This is not simply about challenging the authoritative nature of public statements by government officials, economists, and infrastructure construction companies, but also about revealing how these are predicated on situated epistemologies that coexist side-by-side, contesting the very nature of the Initiative itself (Callahan, 2016; Rippa, 2020; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). Consequently, this collection reveals *who* articulates specific notions of the BRI, *how* different actors and forms of knowing are elevated or marginalized regarding these projects, *where* these distinct visions converge or come into conflict with one another, and *why* particular projects advance or fail to advance.

3. Outline of the special issue

Combining grounded empirical data in frameworks of political economy, political ecology, discourse analysis, and historiography, the contributions to our special issue triangulate concrete political geographies of the BRI. Mike Dwyer’s analysis of the Northern Economic Corridor, centered around a highway in Laos subsequently included in the BRI, reveals how vulnerable populations were excluded from the mitigation efforts of infrastructure construction and thus calls attention to the “indirect” impacts of infrastructure construction projects as central to their political and economic evaluation. Xiao Han and Michael Webber, who examine the assemblage of Chinese-backed dam construction in Ghana, demonstrate how such projects are co-constructed by Chinese and non-Chinese actors in ways that are not reducible to “Beijing’s” geopolitical and economic interests. In the same vein, Igor Rogelja examines how Chinese investments in roads and coal plants in the Balkans become entangled in local political instability and fiscal exigencies to such an extent that geostrategic imaginaries dissipate in the face of the local politics and materiality of concrete, gravel and lignite coal. Together, their contributions challenge the over-simplified assumptions about the temporality, scope, scale, national character and interests of BRI projects, which forces a recalibration of geopolitical assumptions and geoeconomic possibilities associated with the BRI.

Further developing this analysis of the BRI as co-produced by multiple interests within and beyond China, Galen Murton and Austin Lord examine how a variety of Chinese and Nepali actors interpret, reimagine, and rhetorically appropriate BRI discourses within their own political goals and strategies, exposing how the very anticipation of China-facilitated development projects serve as grist for both domestic and trans-national political struggles. Similarly, Henryk Szadziewski’s analysis of BRI discourses in Fiji demonstrates the entanglement of anticipatory geographies of Chinese investment and development cooperation with Fiji’s domestic strategy for cultivating economic ties with China and other countries. Rather than mobilizing these cases as evidence of “win-win” articulations between “local” interest in China’s “global ambitions”, these contributions destabilize the coherence of the BRI and bring into focus the relational contestations of identity that inform political geographies of sovereignty and state-making in the first place.

Supplementing political economic and discursive investigations of the BRI around the world, Andrew Grant’s ethnography of the China-Kazakhstan border crossing at Khorgos emphasizes the cultural

transformations informed by the BRI's "soft power", which prove to be rather counter-productive as Kazakhs with Kazakhstani and Chinese citizenship renegotiate their identities around the Chinese government's territorial security practices. Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi in turn examines the political ecology of road construction in Xinjiang, where the adverse environmental conditions of the desert, and the socio-economic complexity of infrastructure maintenance, threaten the proposed but fragile connectivity of the BRI across Central Asia. Thus, socio-cultural and ecological vulnerabilities call into question the geopolitical and geoeconomic frameworks of the BRI itself, while motivating research that brings these forms of friction into the foreground. Finally, reflecting on the geopolitics of satellite imagery and the narratives of development that inform the BRI, Mia Bennett's contribution supplements grounded ethnography of China's borderlands with a critical remote sensing methodology for observation of the BRI's material transformations.

4. Conclusion

Our special issue demonstrates how the BRI transforms as an object of research and political intervention from the ground, and brings debates about the geopolitics and political economy of China's global engagement into the critical fold of long-standing questions of capitalism and globalization in the field of political geography. In a moment that seems to be defined by the end of the so-called Washington Consensus and a general re-structuring of decades-long geopolitical and strategic alliances, exacerbated now by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it has triggered, China's growing influence in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even Europe can only partly be understood within classic frameworks of international relations or economics. Thus, as an intervention of critical scholarship, this collection marks a significant and timely contribution to a fast-growing body of literature about the political geography that emerges through global flows of people, capital, and discourses related to China's emergent role as an international development actor.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102225>.

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