CHINAMADE BRIEF

The BRI as an Exercise in Infrastructural Thinking

Tim Oakes, January 2021

Figure 1. Gui'an New Area, Guizhou, 2018 (Image credit: Tim Oakes)

It's difficult to understand how a project with a name like "One Belt, One Road" (*yidai yilü* 一带一路) could spark much excitement. And while the translation upgrade "Belt & Road Initiative" suggests something a little less haphazard – something with goals and frameworks and plans – the name still fails to stimulate the degree of reverie and unabashed obsession that China's "project of the century" has in fact garnered. Seven years into the initiative, enough has already been written about the BRI to probably fill several libraries. The attention-grabbing magnetism of the "Belt & Road" has always confused me. The willingness on the part of many scholars, journalists, commentators, and analysts to write about the BRI as if its hyperbolic aspirations of vast connectivity were already set in concrete on

the ground made me think I was missing something. I became convinced that what Hillman (2020) calls "The Emperor's New Road" was a spectacular case of "the emperor's new clothes."

It turns out, I was indeed missing something. And that was the whole point. It wasn't that there were facts-on-the ground that had somehow escaped me, or that a high-level policy document had finally been drafted. The hole in the middle of the Belt and Road – a hole where there should have been plans and policies – was *intentional*. Where actual content might be expected to be clarified and laid-out, there was instead a sort-of "fill in the blank" space. The Belt & Road was only ever meant to be a vague idea, a notion, a gesture, the beginning of a sentence waiting to be completed by someone else. It was an invitation. And perhaps this is why it has generated such an exuberant response. Many of us can't resist filling in the blank.

The BRI is not a policy. It's not even a 'soft policy' (Holbig 2004), that is, a policy written with enough vagueness to accommodate the highly diverse, and often competing, agendas and instruments that will drive its implementation. It's barely even a framework. Instead, it's an aspirational statement of evolutionary principles that invite imaginary cartographies of lines and corridors. Rather than viewing the BRI as a grand scheme formulated by Xi Jinping – a view that continues to dominate most popular media and commentaries from the punditariat – we are on safer ground approaching it as an evolutionary discourse, perhaps even a performance, a kind of 'development theater.' I don't mean dismiss the BRI as a charade but rather to emphasize the point that to look for a concrete scheme or policy in the BRI is to be looking for the wrong thing. And yet, *concrete* is indeed what we should be looking for.

As Tang Xiaoyang (2020) has argued, China does not pursue a linear approach to policy-implementation. Initiatives are offered on a gradual and experimental basis, and (importantly) in a way that will generate competition, inviting local governments and collectives to imagine themselves as the model everyone else will follow. Each locality hopes to implement the initiative in a spectacular way, getting noticed and hopefully rising to the level of model status. To look for the grand scheme underlying the BRI misses the point of such initiatives as they emerge in China. It seems to me that the key questions to ask are these: how will the BRI evolve and change in response to developments and outcomes along the way? How does the BRI ecosystem adapt to specific conditions that it encounters and creates? How does it get shaped by the on-the-ground experiences as it moves along?

Addressing these questions, in turn, requires a focus on the actual projects and spaces where 'global China' is materialized. This means a focus on infrastructure, the most prevalent material form that the BRI comes in. There are at least a couple ways of conceptualizing a focus on infrastructure. The first is scale. The BRI needs to be studied *locally*, *on the ground*, and *qualitatively*. The Beijing-centric view that has dominated the BRI library misses the fact that the BRI was never anything more than the collective efforts of all those locally-situated actors "filling in the blanks." Local improvisation and bargaining has always been the central story of the BRI. There has been no shortage of ink spilled on the broader-scale geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. But the *concreteness* of China's actual projects need to be the focus and, importantly, the *contestedness* (Lee 2018) of those projects. Tina Harris (2013) has found that the nuance generated through ethnographic approaches to understanding transboundary infrastructure development almost always contradicts the hegemonic narratives that drive those projects in the first place. Those hegemonic narratives tell a story of connectivity as a realm of expansion, opening, and unfolding. And yet on the ground, as Alessandro Rippa (2020) has found, spatial patterns and practices are displaced, demolished, and buried as often as they're enhanced and smoothed out. Meanwhile, Liu and Lim (2019) have noted the lack of studies on how smaller states have engaged with and reacted to

Figure 2. Bridge construction on the Mekong in Luang Prabang Province. The bridge will be a part of the BRI Vientiane–Boten railway. (Image Source: Wikimedia)

the BRI and the fact that most studies emphasize the perspectives of Chinese actors. Indeed, most studies default to Beijing as the primary actor.

Studying the BRI locally also means that it needs to be studied locally *within* China. While considering the unique roles of policy banks and state-owned enterprises is an important part of this approach, we also need to consider the role that provincial governments and municipalities – and, in particular, the rivalries among these governments and municipalities – have played in steering the BRI in directions that had not been anticipated. Much of this is the result of the local and regional rivalries that have always driven policy implementation in China. But it is also the result of competing priorities at the local level. Xinjiang, for instance, has played a less significant role than might be expected given its pivotal location facing central Asia. While some Xinjiang companies (e.g. the Yema Group) have played a major role in building BRI-related infrastructures, the government has remained preoccupied with the surveillance and encampment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Meanwhile wealthier coastal provinces have played a large role even though the impetus for the BRI was initially to consolidate economic development in China's interior borderland provinces and to restart the slumping Open Up the West initiative. He Baogang (2019, 187) has for instance observed that, "Guangdong's existing infrastructure, and its prior experience as an engine of Chinese growth, has enabled it to adeptly exploit the opportunities afforded by the BRI."

In addition, studying the BRI from within China draws our attention to the BRI as itself an *effect* of the 'infrastructure machine' of the Chinese state (or, the 'infrastructure maniac', *jijian kuangmo* 基建狂魔 as many of my interlocutors in China have wryly referred to the their government). Infrastructure construction is a bi-product of the political economy of Chinese statecraft (Oakes 2019). The BRI brings our attention to the fact that this bi-product is now exceeding China's borders. But it also brings our attention to the peculiar legacies of state socialism in China (Bach 2019). Xi Jinping did not create this infrastructure machine. However, an argument can be made that Mao Zedong did not create it either. In some ways, it derives from the technocratic nature of reformist visions in China that date to the late 19th century.

A second way of conceptualizing an infrastructural focus for studying the BRI is to consider infrastructure not only as an *object* but as a *unit* of analysis and, indeed, as an *analytical strategy*. Brian Larkin (2013, 329) has noted this "peculiar ontology" of infrastructures:

> Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things...Yet the duality of

> infrastructures indicates that when they operate systematically they cannot be theorized in terms of the object alone.

This relational approach to theorizing infrastructures suggests that when we consider infrastructure as a unit of analysis, we develop a set of systemic connections that transcend scale and enable an emphasis on both the effects of these projects and the ways those effects in turn feed back into subsequent decisions, practices, and discourses about development and change at broader scales. That is, an infrastructural approach remains attuned to the *evolutionary* nature of the BRI. Effects might be constituted in techno-political forms (i.e. new political formations contesting everything from a new dam or high speed rail line to new forms of surveillance and data mining), or they might be constituted in merely material forms (i.e. a new highway renders older transport networks obsolete, producing remoteness for once-connected places and connection for once-remote places).

Figure 3. An AliExpress Station in Moscow that links Russian buyers to manufacturers in China. (Image source: Wikimedia)

Considering infrastructure as a unit of analysis also draws our attention to project temporalities in alternative ways to those focused on short-term debts as opposed to long-term payoffs. There are two conventional infrastructural timelines. Both are linear and idealistic. One draws a line from project design to construction to completion. The other connects early debts with later payoffs. Neither accounts for the temporalities of infrastructural materials themselves (that is, their decay, obsolescence, suspension), or on the unanticipated outcomes, or dispositions, of infrastructures, their appropriations by those for whom they were never intended, their repurposings, and even their symbolic seizures for better or worse. These temporalities are of course essential to any scaled-up understanding of the BRI as an evolutionary process.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that an infrastructural approach does not necessarily mean a focus on megaprojects. Indeed, in some ways, megaprojects have mostly been ephemeral, trotted out in the form of fanciful birds-eye-view renderings, or as lines and symbols populating the cartographic answer to the BRI as an invitation to "fill in the blanks." But considering infrastructure as a unit of analysis and analytical lens can also suggest a focus on the everyday and the mundane. Here infrastructures may be surveillance cameras running facial recognition software, or smart phones feeding data into algorithm-driven processes of social ordering. These 'soft' infrastructures are arguably more profit-driven than the 'hard' infrastructures of highways, trains, and pipelines. And they have also emerged as a key platform for rural development. Everyday infrastructures may thus constitute the workaday lives of villagers who process e-commerce orders in 12 hour shifts for Alibaba. Much of rural China has in fact become the human infrastructure supporting China's global technology reach. In some cases, most notably in Xinjiang, that human infrastructure is incarcerated as both labor and data resource. But in most cases, providing digital infrastructure support services has simply become a way of life for hundreds of millions

of rural laborers who have responded to the government's call to return home and participate in 'Rural Revitalization.' Over 3,000 'Taobao villages' now dot the Chinese countryside, and Alibaba's rural e-commerce model (officially labeled the Electronic World Trade Platform or eWTP) has joined the BRI with new hubs established in Malaysia, Rwanda, and South Africa (Wang 2020).

As an invitation to "fill in the blank," the BRI pairs well with Xi Jinping's "China Dream." Both are like ghost cities waiting to be populated. Both are "pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealized possibilities," as Henri Lefebvre (1995) put it, writing about the boredom of life in the New Town. But as an exercise in infrastructural thinking, the BRI is all concrete and steel and wire, the empty buildings of the dreamy New Town. What it turns into depends not on the plan, but on the people who move in.

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