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China's Belt and Road Initiative: An Epochal Initiative Connecting the World

Dr Xiangming Chen



CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: AN EPOCHAL INITIATIVE CONNECTING THE WORLD

In 2013, the Chinese Government launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive global infrastructure-building initiative, to increase trade by connecting cities within and across continents. The initiative is redefining globalisation, urbanisation, regionalism, and development. **Professor Xiangming Chen** has released a policy expo-book (sponsored by the Regional Studies Association) that traces out the changing economic, social, and spatial fortunes of the regions connected to the initiative. In this timely book, the author outlines a modern, fresh and factual account of an outward-looking China ushering in a new era of globalisation through a variety of widespread and far-reaching trans-boundary economic and infrastructure connectivities.

China's Infrastructure Revolution

When we think of China, we often think of the factory of the world. Many of our products such as clothes, electronics, and cosmetics have labels that read 'made in China'. What is perhaps lesser known is that the People's Republic of China has produced numerous world-leading infrastructure projects. China has the world's fastest train, longest highways, tallest skyscrapers, largest hydropower plant, and a global satellite navigation system with the largest number of satellites.

Professor Xiangming Chen of Trinity College in Connecticut is an expert on urbanisation and globalisation, particularly within Asia. Most recently, he expanded on his work and investigated China's changing relationship with and growing impact on the rest of the world, focusing on the BRI.

China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative

The BRI is the largest-scale instalment in China's sustained infrastructure and economic boom from home to overseas. This large global infrastructure-building initiative seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks. The Chinese Government launched the initiative in 2013 with the aim of increasing cross-border trade, stimulating economic growth, and improving regional integration.

The BRI geographically touches and extends to over 70 countries across Asia, Europe and Africa, with expanded cooperation with 70 other countries and 32 international agencies through a total of 206 agreements. Developments in the initiative include the building of ports, railroads, roads, airports and tunnels, and may require multi-trillion funding to construct these projects in many developing countries.

Since the initial China-Europe Freight Train line was rolled out in 2011, it has created a large number of new trade and production connections, as products can now move more swiftly and cost-effectively between many connected locations across Eurasia. These trains have carried 41,008 trains between over 50 Chinese cities and 168 European cities via Central Asia by the middle of 2021. The longest of these freight routes, also the world's longest, links the Chinese city of Yiwu – the world's largest centre for small commodities – with Madrid, covering 13,500 kilometres.

Beyond the China-Europe freight train, the BRI covers numerous other infrastructure projects with a targeted completion date of 2049. The BRI is set to be the world's largest infrastructure and development project in human history. BRI-connected countries contain about 60% of the world's population and roughly one-third of the world's gross domestic

‘For China, the BRI is a call for a world order centred on cooperation, commerce and common and mutual development’



product (GDP) and trade, according to Chinese Government estimates. Given its massive demographic and economic weight and coverage, the BRI is a transformative force capable of reshaping the current global order.

A China-Led Globalisation

Professor Chen released a policy expo-book that observes the BRI and its impacts at multiple scales, from redirected trade flows between China, its neighbouring countries, and far-flung connected regions, to new economic zones and transport systems within and across a variety of other countries, including many African nations.

Driven by globalisation from above and pushed by urbanisation and development from below, the BRI, as outlined by Professor Chen, has taken on a crucial role of bridging and integrating global, national, and local economies across a large swath of the globe. Connectivity is the name of the game for the BRI.

Chen anchors the book on the ambitious assertion that ‘the BRI

has ushered in an era of epochal regionalisation’. He argues that ‘the BRI’s regionalising dynamics are reshaping globalisation, urbanisation and development simultaneously and relationally, each occurring through a series of ground-breaking regional corridors, which define the BRI’s geo-economic contour.

An Introduction to the Book

The book explores four topics: the BRI’s connections and interactions with regionalisation, globalisation, urbanisation, and development, respectively.

Chapter one highlights the significant features of the BRI as a new form of global regionalism whose geographical scope and economic impact may be unprecedented. The next three chapters discuss how the BRI affects globalisation, urbanisation and development, respectively, through three case studies detailing the BRI in action. The last chapter outlines a set of policy recommendations that can help turn the BRI into a global public good.

In chapter two, Professor Chen focuses on the continental freight train routes across Eurasia, singling out the Chinese city of Xi’an – the eastern point of the ancient Silk Road – as a powerful logistics hub creating and running 15 regular and a number of irregular freight lines to Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia.

In chapter three, he introduces the paired construction of a new city and railway across the China-Laos borderland, highlighting the China-Laos Railway linking the city of Kunming in southwestern China to Vientiane, capital of Laos, covering 1,022 kilometres and beginning operation by the end of 2021. Then, in chapter four, he focuses on the port-park-city development corridor between Djibouti and Ethiopia that integrates China-built special economic zones in both countries and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway stretching 753 kilometres.

The BRI’s Synergistic Force

In the book, the author uncovers the BRI as new regionalisation that triangulates the processes of

Rapid Growth of the China-Europe Freight Train, 2011-2021



Source: Updated from Chen (2020: Figure 2.3). Data for 2021 refer to the number of freight trains during the first six months.

globalisation, urbanisation and development, underpinned and connected by mechanisms of connectivity, infrastructure and sustainability, aggregating into a synergistic force for large-scale change.

The BRI's regional significance lies in the creation of six cross-border corridors and a score of sub-corridors that originate from inside China and extend out into its neighbouring countries, and lands farther afield into Asia, Africa and Europe. Professor Chen argues that there are many short and long-term global, national and local consequences of these cross-border regional corridors.

For example, they have stimulated opportunities for landlocked developing countries, such as those in Central Asia, and Laos and Ethiopia. These regions and countries can benefit from China-created cross-border links through these corridors for directly accessing sea and maritime trade. This marks a great geographical turn of fortune for the countries previously hemmed in by their landlocked locations.

For example, the Chinese-Europe Freight train has blossomed into an expanded number of new freight routes in a short time, linking together a large number of cities in interior China and Central Asia to European ports in gaining export outlets and time-saving movement of export goods.

In addition, Professor Chen's analysis traces the BRI's inside-out impact on global urbanisation starting from China's own unprecedented and rapid city-building, to China's role in constructing urban and transport infrastructures abroad such as the China-Laos Railway, which opens up a major artery of access for landlocked Laos to the sea via Thailand. This railway, which originates from Kunming, the capital city of China's Yunnan Province, will also provide landlocked Yunnan with access to sea through Laos.

A Rising Chinese Superpower

China operates under a different political and economic model than Western economies do. The government plays a direct and powerful role in managing the economy while maintaining space for private entrepreneurs. This is in contrast to Western economies, which tend to be more economically liberal and limit government direction and intervention.

China is able to build infrastructure within and along the BRI countries rapidly, partly because it is able to inject massive amounts of money, via government-backed loans, to finance construction. Another reason is that China can mobilise large groups of construction workers quickly and deploy them to overseas construction sites, even during the pandemic.

The BRI has begun to reshape the master processes of globalisation, urbanisation and development by affecting the economic, social, and spatial fortunes of many countries and cities in the world. The book reveals how this has unfolded to usher in a new era in which globalisation, urbanisation and development intersect in ways that would not be imagined and possible without China's massive influence through the BRI.

BRI-induced Competition and Beyond

Indeed, the rise of China, and the BRI itself, has generated major concerns, especially among Western countries. The G7 nations have even agreed on a counter the BRI with the so-called Built Back Better World (B3W) initiative, while the EU has just unveiled the 'Globally Connected Europe' initiative to complement its 'Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU strategy', introduced in September 2018. However, setting aside political quandaries, the BRI has put China so far ahead as a world leader and expert in infrastructure development and forging global connectivity.



Source: From Chen (2020: Figure 4.2).

The infrastructure that China has built is clear to see and its effects are tangible. The new infrastructure has begun to make a difference to everyday people and businesses across borders with noticeable economic and social benefits. 'The US destroys and China builds' was how a taxi driver from Ethiopia in Washington DC responded to Professor Chen's question about China's activity in Africa a few years ago. As the BRI has led to more finished infrastructure projects in developing countries, it alerts us to take note of livelihood projects such as the recently completed Orange Metro Line in Lahore, Pakistan.

Professor Chen is keen to assert that his new book also aims to steer the prevailing debate away from the popular notion that the BRI is China's one-state initiative to gain global geopolitical influence. He instead sees the BRI as a China-driven project that has opened up an unprecedented time of large-scale corridor-shaped regionalisation capable of reconnecting and reconfiguring the current pathways of globalisation, urbanisation and development.

Is the BRI Sustainable?

If there is one challenging question for the BRI, it pertains to its long-term sustainability in terms of keeping up the financial resources for infrastructure projects, generating return on infrastructure investment, and achieving

the best fit or compatibility between China-invested projects and the national and local needs of developing countries.

Professor Chen caveats this by calling for a more proactive response from developing countries that host BRI projects and possible cooperation between China and the West on BRI projects that bring forth their complementary strengths to benefit developing countries. Given the long-term horizon of infrastructure projects, the full balance of the BRI's ultimate economic and social impact won't be felt and measured for years to come. Further down the line, we will be in a better position to assess whether China has created infrastructure in Africa in a financially stable and sustainable manner.

As the BRI has run into the pandemic year of 2020 and its gradual recovery, it has given Professor Chen a timely opportunity to partially rethink and reinforce the book's topic and focus. He highlights that even against the disruption caused by COVID-19, the China-Europe Freight Train carried more containers of traded goods including PPEs in both directions throughout 2020, than it did the year prior in the same period. The number of freight trains experienced another surge in the first half of 2021 (see the chart on the previous page), showing resilience and long-term sustainability.

Indeed, China's early suppression of the virus and economic recovery allowed it to provide medical assistance to many other countries. Professor Chen added evidence on a 'pandemic diplomacy' as China sent medical supplies to Europe using the BRI's China-Europe Freight Train routes. In fact, since the pandemic, China has expanded the China-Europe Freight Train routes by adding rail-sea intermodal extensions to East Asia and Southeast Asia.

The BRI for Academic Learning and as a Global Public Good

Professor Chen is not stopping at this book; he has research plans to tackle other topics in more geographical contexts associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. He is teaching his research to undergraduates and graduates in the United States, China and beyond. In this way, the next generation of leaders can be informed of the BRI's transformative influence and thus make a more enlightened difference in the world.

He is also preparing a Chinese edition of the book for publication in China. This will help the book reach more readers including students, scholars and policy-makers, to build more channels for a broader understanding of the BRI across the global community.

The world is on the verge of a new post-pandemic era characterised by more contested globalisation and faster technological revolution. The world also faces instability and great uncertainty related to an emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States. At this critical juncture of a more polarised world looming, Professor Chen ends the book by alerting all parties and policy-makers to what can be done to turn this China-driven initiative into a potential global public good that can benefit all countries and peoples.



Meet the researcher

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Professor Xiangming Chen served as the Founding Dean and Director of the Center for Urban and Global Studies at Trinity College in Connecticut from 2007 until 2019. He is currently Director of Urban Studies and Raether Distinguished Professor of Global Urban Studies and Sociology at Trinity College. He is also a distinguished guest professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. He received his MA and PhD in sociology from Duke University. He previously served as Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and as a visiting professor at Yale. Over the course of his career, Dr Chen has received many fellowships and grants, including from the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Sociological Association, the Henry Luce Foundation and the Regional Studies Association. He has published extensively on urbanisation and globalisation with a focus on China and Asia, and his publications include a number of books and numerous book chapters and journal articles. He has conducted policy research for the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNCTAD and OECD.

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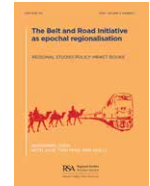
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