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# Reordering China, Respacing the World: Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路) as an Emergent Geopolitical Culture

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Since it was set out in speeches by China's Premier Xi Jinping in September and October 2013, discussion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has proliferated in China. We argue that the scale and density of this discussion can usefully be conceptualized as an emergent geopolitical culture, reworking geopolitical narratives and spatial policies established in China in the second half of the twentieth century. In charting this emergence, we examine the ways in which the BRI links the reordering of China's economic geography with articulations of China and the world. Surveying BRI as an emergent geopolitical culture, we draw on the example of the narratives of familiarity, partnership, and location vis-à-vis China and Singapore. Our conclusions reflect on how the BRI is appropriated to visions of China's destiny. **Key Words:** Belt and Road Initiative, China, geopolitical culture, Singapore.

自从中国国家主席习近平于2013年九月与十月的演讲中发表一带一路计画 (BRI) 之后, 相关讨论便在中国内部激增。我们主张, 此一讨论的尺度与密度, 能够有效地概念化为中国浮现中的地缘政治文化, 重塑在二十世纪后半期建立的地缘政治叙事和空间政策。我们在记录此一趋势的浮现中, 检视BRI连结中国经济地理重组、并接合中国与世界的方式。我们调查BRI作为浮现中的地缘政治文化, 运用中国相对于新加坡的熟悉度、伙伴关系和区位之叙事案例。我们的结论反思BRI如何用来洞察中国的命运。 **关键词:** 认知地图一带一路计画, 中国, 地缘政治文化, 新加坡。

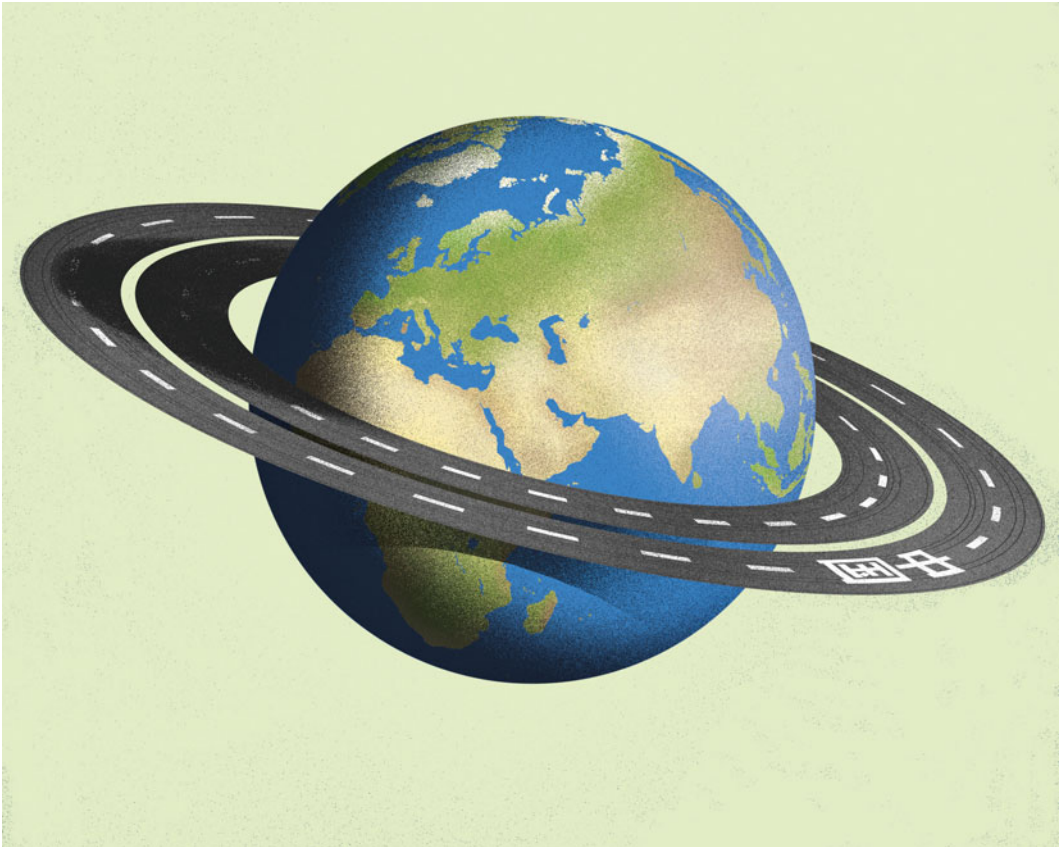
Desde cuando se la dio a conocer en los discursos del premier chino Xi Jinping en septiembre y octubre de 2013, la discusión de la Iniciativa de Cinturón y Carretera (BRI) ha proliferado en China. Sostenemos que la escala y densidad de esta discusión puede conceptualizarse provechosamente como una cultura geopolítica emergente, reelaborando narrativas geopolíticas y las políticas espaciales establecidas en China en la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Al reconstruir este proceso, examinamos la manera como la BRI enlaza el reordenamiento de la geografía económica china con las articulaciones de China y el mundo. Estudiando la BRI como una cultura geopolítica emergente, nos apoyamos en el ejemplo de las narrativas de familiaridad, asociación y localización con respecto a China y Singapur. Nuestras conclusiones reflexionan sobre el modo como la BRI adecuadamente encaja con las visiones del destino de China. **Palabras clave:** China, cultura geopolítica, Iniciativa de Cinturón y Carretera, Singapur.

On 18 September 2017, the London-based daily *Financial Times* (*FT*) published a letter from the Chinese Embassy in the United Kingdom. The letter took issue with claims in the *FT* that China played a key role in enabling Cambodian Premier Hun Sen to cement his power base and suppress opposition politics. The details of the intersection of Cambodian politics with China's long-term roles in Cambodia are beyond the focus of this article. It is worth quoting from the letter, though, which argued that an *FT* reportage had:

... made an unjust accusation against China's policy with regard to neighbouring countries. China values its many neighbours and regards good neighbours as priceless treasure. Building good relationships with neighbouring countries is therefore a matter of course. To this end, China has worked persistently to forge friendship and partnership with neighbouring countries. ... The Belt and Road initiative [BRI] offers new prospects

for co-operation between China and its neighbours. By now, there are 356 international cargo transportation lines connecting China and its neighbours via seventy-three land and water ports. ... Countries that have differences but are willing to seek common ground can be partners. (Rong 2017)

Visions of partnership and connection loom large in the BRI. In the five years since it was proposed (then translated as One Belt, One Road) in speeches by China's President Xi Jinping, BRI quickly became a leading feature of discussions about China's relationship with the wider world. Beijing hosted a BRI Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in May 2017, attended by delegations from 130 countries and twenty-nine foreign heads of state and government; an ambitious list of deliverables was published ("List of Deliverables" 2017). A memorandum establishing an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-China Capacity Development Center was also



**Figure 1** Planet China. Source: *The Economist* 28 July 2018, front cover. Reproduced with permission from Luca D'Urbino (<http://durbodesign.com/>). (Color figure available online.)

signed, followed by an April 2018 conference on Macroeconomic and Financial Frameworks for the Successful Implementation of BRI attended by the IMF's Managing Director Christine Lagarde; ministers from as far away as Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Uruguay; senior figures from the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, the Asian Development Bank, and accounting firms; plus chiefs of private and state banks (IMF 2018). In October 2017, reference to the BRI was incorporated into the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) constitution. Maps of the BRI proliferate; an online search readily yields dozens. Such maps portray the BRI in a concrete way. Yet, part of the power of the BRI derives from how it articulates the concrete and the nebulous. In a July 2018 leader on BRI, *The Economist* noted that there is no singular official BRI plan or map, but the plethora of:

Chinese maps show the belt and road as lines that trace the routes of ancient "silk roads" that traversed Eurasia and the seas between China and Africa. ... That was the original conceit, but these days China talks about BRI as if it were a global project. The rhetoric has expanded to include a

"Pacific Silk Road," a "Silk Road on Ice" that crosses the Arctic Ocean and a "Digital Silk Road" through cyberspace. ("Planet China" 2018, 7)

Posing the question of "What to make of the Belt and Road Initiative," that week's front cover for *The Economist* depicted Earth as "Planet China" surrounded by Saturn-like ring system bearing the logograms for China (中国; see Figure 1). Inside, *The Economist* published a map of the ever more extensive network of the roads, belts, and corridors (see Figure 2). That map was based on a database on the BRI compiled by the private Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies (see [www.merics.org](http://www.merics.org)). At its most ambitious, then, the BRI sets out to "respace"<sup>1</sup> and "reorder" the world and China.

Foreign interest in the BRI is growing fast. For example, The Washington, DC-based Atlantic Council (Luft 2017) published a strategy paper debating U.S. response to the BRI. Within China itself, however, there has been a boom in pronouncements on and discussions of the BRI, from the central government to think tanks and universities, private firms, and media (He 2018). Numerous municipalities and provincial authorities

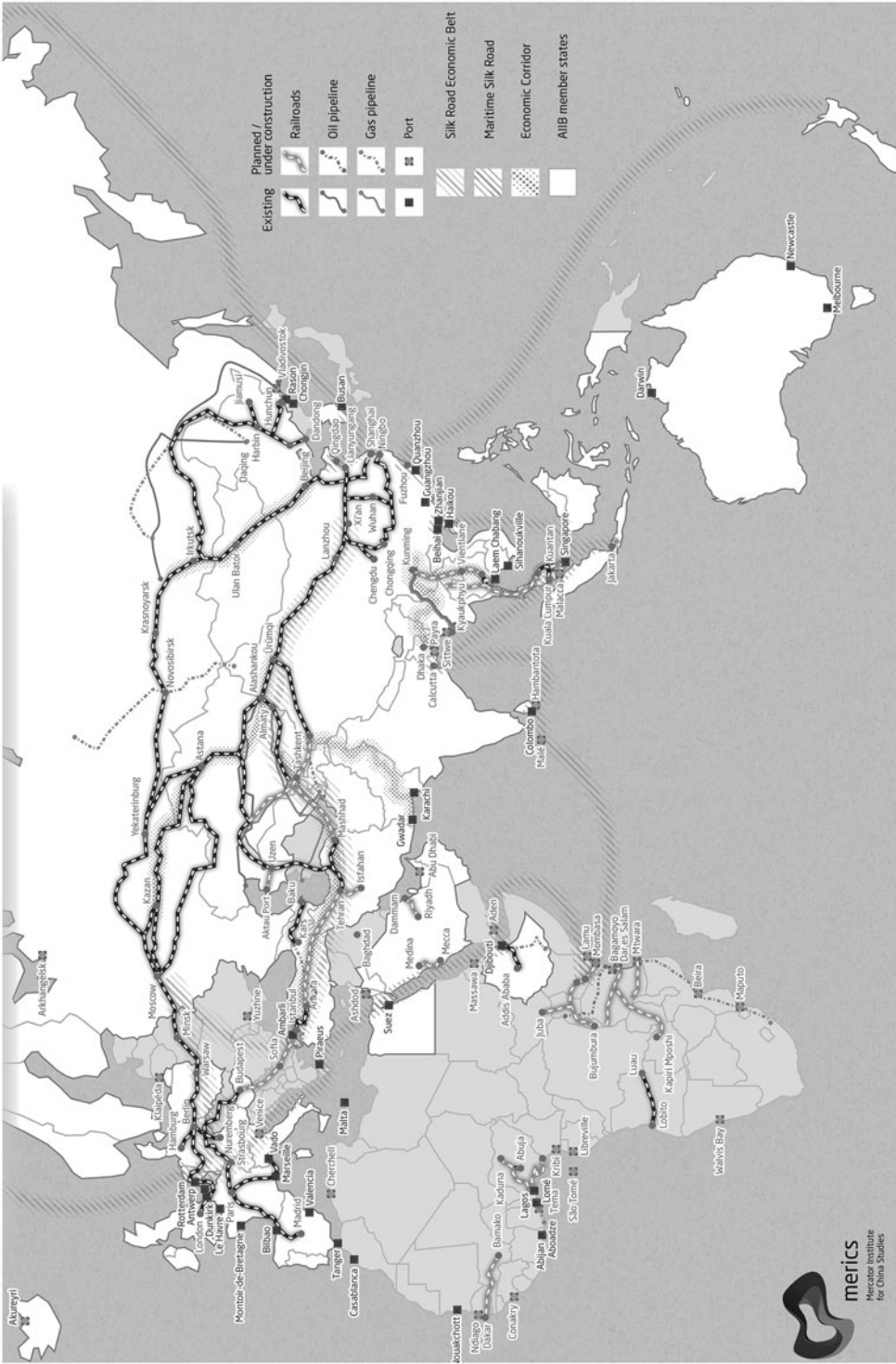


Figure 2 Map of Belt and Road Initiative. Source: The Economist 28 July 2018, 14. Reproduced with permission from Mercator Institute for China Studies (<https://www.merics.org/en>).

are seeking to get a slice of the opportunities and connections that the BRI envisions (Sidaway and Woon 2017; Nordin and Weissmann 2018). The land (known as the Belt) and maritime (known as the Road) connectivity that the BRI envisions was supplemented by the Digital Silk Road, announced first in *Nature* by the Director-General of the Institute of Remote Sensing and Digital Earth at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Guo 2018). Foreign commentary diverges in judgment about the BRI's feasibility. A Dutch think tank asks whether it is "A Road to Riches or a Road to Ruin?" (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). Our purpose in this article, though, is not to adjudicate BRI's prospects and pitfalls. Instead, we seek to understand more deeply its configuration and conditions of possibility.

The BRI's antecedents include 1920s and 1930s plans of connecting China and Germany following the nineteenth-century invention of the Silk Road as a historiographical lens by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (Sidaway and Woon 2017). Much more recent forerunners include discussions of links between China and Europe via Kazakhstan in the 1990s (Garver 2006) and, subsequently (since around 2010), strategies of connecting western China and Central Asia (Summers 2018) and southwest China with the lower Mekong (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam; Rolland 2017). The breadth and scale of references to the BRI, however, are such that they form what might usefully be conceptualized as an emergent geopolitical culture. In an account of Russian geopolitics, Toal (2017) advanced the analytical framework of geopolitical culture with reference to "prevailing sense of identity, place, and mission in the world ... first and foremost, about the identity of a territorial entity and the locational analysis it presents to itself and the world" (39). Di Cosmo (2009) developed a related idea of "military culture," noting how in China this includes:

Strategic culture (in Chinese, *zhanlüe wenhua*), which involves a decision-making process that transcends the specific behaviour of military people and involves instead the accumulated and transmitted knowledge upon which those involved in making strategic choices, from both the civil and military side, base their arguments, validate their positions, and examine a given situation. (3–4)

We prefer Toal's (2017) term, however, given the expansive sense of how for "geopolitical cultures ... regime type and state power structure—economic, security, ideological, and political networks—condition their operation" (300). A geopolitical culture extends far beyond elite narratives into a range of popular cultures as well as finding itself reflected in a broad range of spatial policies that express and

embody its logic. The BRI has quickly acquired such roles in China, beginning as a top-down narrative but quickly being adopted and sometimes adapted at and by a wide range of sites and actors. Our sense of its emergence is also informed by Williams's (1977) conceptions of shifts in social formations: "By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created" (123). In charting BRI's emergence, we examine how it links the reordering of China's economic geography with Chinese articulations of China's place in the world. In so doing, we argue that this geopolitical culture should be studied through its dynamics and the ways it reworks antecedents. As such, we follow Ciuta (2016) in understanding geopolitics as "a palimpsest, the product of serial, imperfect synchronic and diachronic erasures and writings-over that produce geopolitical knowledges *of*, and *in* different contexts" (30, italics in original). We then sketch an example of the BRI as geopolitical culture via the narratives of familiarity, partnership, and location vis-à-vis China and Singapore. Our main focus here is not the articulation of (geo)economics and (geo)politics that so much of the literature about BRI foregrounds. Sum (2018) described this as "the remaking and intertwining of geoeconomic/geopolitical discourses and practices" in an account of the "tropes" that "selectively articulate academic theories, policy rhetoric and media narratives" (2) about BRI. Reviewing some of this literature about the BRI's "twin logics of territorial and economic power," Blanchard and Flint (2017) noted how the BRI's "contemporary connectivity projects entailing massive infrastructure components ... have generated heated discussion about their potential to transform the global geopolitical landscape" (223). Here, though, we focus on how BRI articulates and is invoked by a wide range of visions and actors. This extends to eschatological discussions about China's key role in human destiny. These discussions exemplify how the BRI's expanding geopolitical culture is shaping parameters of debate in and about China's trajectory, including some that deviate far from the party line.

### Reordering and Respacing: Third Front, via Open Door to Peripheral Diplomacy

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into a detailed genealogy and developmental trajectory of contemporary China's geopolitical culture (see Woon [2018] for a summary), let alone the wider spatial policies that accompany its shifting parameters. These reflect a complex path, in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) at first balanced alliance with the Soviet Union with developing ideas of post-colonial Afro-Asian solidarity, codified in a 1954



**Figure 3** Major railways constructed during the “Third Front Movement.” Adapted from Meyskens (2015).

speech by Zhou Enlai as Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则): mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in internal affairs, and equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence. From the early 1960s, border skirmishes with India and the emerging Sino-Soviet split reaffirmed China’s sense of geopolitical apprehensions. Arguably, however, China’s geopolitical orientations can be distilled into three temporal phases since the establishment of the PRC and in particular following the 1962 public split with the Soviet Union. The first period under Maoist China into the late 1960s reflected a geopolitical logic that had internal (territorial) defense as its underlying imperative. This was born out of the concern by then-leaders of the CCP that the United States (or, subsequently, the Soviet Union) might launch attacks on China’s cities. Judging that it was incapable of resisting these warring initiatives particularly in the coastal areas (due to the superior naval capabilities of the two “threatening” countries in question), the CCP embarked on a massive campaign to shift

industries to China’s interior, a program that came to be known as the Third Front Movement (三线建设; Naughton 1988). Between 1964 and 1980, China devoted nearly 40 percent of its capital construction budget to “conceal” (隐蔽) Third Front industries in inland areas “near mountains” (靠山) and “inside caves” (进洞). Third Front railroad building followed this policy as well, covering core areas in China’s northwest (Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai) and southwest (Chongqing, Yunnan, Guizhou; see Figures 3 and 4). According to Meyskens (2015), the CCP “made this strategic choice because it was preparing to fight an asymmetrical war, and so it sought to establish strongholds in inaccessible locations that minimized China’s military vulnerability” (239). As the global geopolitical backdrop shifted, and China adjusted, the Third Front policy faded, but its infrastructural legacy endures. In a wider account of regional policy in China, Summers (2018) described Third Front’s legacies:

It expanded the rail network westward by adding ten interprovincial lines ... [that] integrated much



**Figure 4** Map indicating Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Open Coastal Cities under the Open Door Policy and the earlier Third Front area. Adapted from Yeh and Wu (1999) and L. Zhang, LeGates, and Zhao (2016). Note that depictions of the extent of the Third Front area vary. Some, such as Wu (2015, 27), are more extensive than depicted here.

of inland China into the national system. Indeed, the completion in 1965, 1966, and 1970 of the Chongqing-Guiyang, Kunming-Guiyang, and Chengdu-Kunming lines respectively serves as a reminder of the infrastructure legacies of the programme, and of what was achieved through state planning even during the otherwise tumultuous early years of the Cultural Revolution. (21)

Although there was an interim in the 1970s accompanying China's rapprochement with the United States and other Western powers, a fuller reworking of Chinese geopolitics and spatial strategies ensued in the 1980s under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, when the primary goal of the CCP was to develop the economy while maintaining order. These objectives required a peaceable international environment permitting a concentration of China's energies on economic development. As such, Deng laid down the geopolitical dictum of

“hide your strength, bide your time” (韬光养晦), with the understanding that China would eventually become more powerful and able to exert greater influence on the world stage. In turn, this rested on the simultaneous emergence of an economic model that Deng called “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义); essentially the development of a variety of capitalism, with a large state role and deep articulation with world markets, including trade and financial circuits. This was first expressed in the so-called Open Door Policy whereby eastern and southern areas of China were designated as either Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or Open Coastal Cities to attract foreign direct investment. The rationale for choosing these sites included their geographical proximity to Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to mobilize the ethnocultural affinities with overseas Chinese communities for business opportunities (this is something we return to later, where we discuss China–Singapore relations through the BRI). It elicited a reconfigured

spatial pattern within China (see Figure 4) that seemingly reversed the Third Front policy agenda of shifting significant Chinese economic activities inward (and westward). The scale of sociospatial disparity that ensued led economist Paul Krugman (cited in Fingleton et al. 2010, 360) to conclude emphatically that “the mother of all core–periphery patterns” had emerged in China. Open Door and the SEZs reconfigured China’s economic geography and rearticulated it with the wider world. They did so, however, through initially developing the coastal areas that historically had been subject to foreign imperialism prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. A “Develop the West” (西部大开发) policy announced in 1999 was a step to countering the uneven development that had (re)emerged in the 1980s, even though in practice it also saw a deepening of flows of mineral resources and hydropower eastward (Goodman 2004). From 2010, however, a new round of Develop the West focused also on connecting western China with neighboring Central Asia, with western China scripted as a “‘bridgehead’ to the rest of Asia” (Summers 2018, 26).

The BRI aims to go further to rebalance the map of China’s development, while deepening China’s world role. When current Chinese President Xi Jinping took the helm in 2012, he made it clear that with decades of hard work, “socialism with Chinese characteristics has crossed the threshold into a new era” and China is now ready to make “new and greater contributions to humanity” (see Xi 2017). Xi soon stated his determination to reorient China’s foreign policy toward one that is “proactive” (更加积极, 更加主动) and “strives for achievement” (奋发有为) (Xi 2015). Although these are broad terms, Xi’s articulation arguably signaled the end of Deng Xiaoping’s “bide and hide” foreign policy strategy (Yan 2014; X. M. Liu 2015; Huang 2016). As Chinese commentators have pointed out, this shift is not only reflective of Xi’s confident assessment that China has moved from periphery or semiperiphery to the center of the international system. More important, it has also got to do with the “visionary and transformational” leadership of Xi, who is “ambitious and innovative in moving Chinese foreign policy to a new direction” (Hu 2018, 14; see also Yang 2017; J. W. Wang 2018). Notably, Xi’s ability to initiate institutional reforms (e.g., by chairing an unprecedented number of central leading groups [中央领导小组] that have decision-making authority within China and eliminating the two-term limit for the state presidency) has consequently allowed him to consolidate power within the CCP and advance ambitious agendas for China (Hu 2018).

Conveying Xi’s proactive foreign policy approach, China’s foreign minister has exhorted China to engage in “major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色大国外交; Y. Wang 2017). This emphasis on “Chinese

characteristics,” to many, implies that the Chinese government will conduct its international affairs in ways that align with traditional Chinese cultural values, rebuffing Western models (L. H. Zhang et al. 2018). This geopolitical stance was most forcefully expressed by Xi (2014a) when he introduced the idea of a “New Asian Security Concept”:

One cannot live in the 21st century with the outdated thinking from the age of the Cold War and zero-sum game. We believe that it is necessary to advocate common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia. We need to innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a road for security of Asia that is shared by and win-win to all.

Xi’s words underscore the need to think beyond the material confines of hard power—military force and economic strength—to consider China’s geopolitical role in terms of soft power: “Beijing is on a moral mission to improve the world through its ideas, aspirations and norms” (Callahan 2018, 15). Xi has repeatedly stressed that China’s drive to develop shared beliefs and norms will build a “community of shared destiny” (Xi 2013, 2014b).

Although this notion of shared beliefs is commonly associated with discourses of mutual respect and trust, equality, reciprocity, and win-win cooperation, there have been a range of (scholarly) voices within China that pick up on different Chinese philosophies, traditions, and histories to explain the origins and context of these ideas and their contemporary geopolitical implications. One school of thought elaborates on China’s traditional idiomatic usages of the word *he*. The first *he* (和) denotes not only peace but also a harmonious integration with nature. Applying this to foreign policy, *he* does not disavow all forms of military force but justifies a defensive use of force because survival serves as the natural end goal of a state. At the same time, China is driven by another *he* (合), or the desire for benign outcomes. This culminates in the CCP’s insistence on exporting its economic success overseas so as to consolidate China’s reputation and responsibility as a major power (Y. Q. Qin 2011; Y. W. Wang and Han 2013). Another strand within China is guided by philosopher Laozi’s (老子) ideas, which represent all peoples in the *Tianxia* (天下) system (literally translated as “All under Heaven”) as equals, regardless of their background. According to Zhao (2005), the *Tianxia* system is “the most appropriate empire for the twenty-first century because it is the only system that thinks through the world as opposed to through the lens of a specific nation-state and its values or needs” (102). As Zhao (2005) further elaborated, geopolitical interactions and relationships are forged on the basis of China’s classical “tribute



system” (朝贡体系, *chaogong tixi*) of concentric circles in which the civilized imperial capital at the center flows out to embrace the periphery, forming a pattern of interdependence, coexistence, and coprosperity. Interestingly, this latter exposition is indicative of the spatial manifestations of China’s geopolitical vision for the contemporary era. As President Xi (2014b) contended, China’s geopolitical culture of “major-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” can only be realized through practicing “peripheral diplomacy” (周边外交). This means that China needs to deepen friendly relations with neighboring countries first through economic cooperation to “realize the China dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (复兴中华的中国梦; Xi 2014b). Under such circumstances, peripheral diplomacy falls back on classical Chinese notions of a hierarchical Sinocentric tributary system (as was illuminated in the works related to *Tianxia*)—that places Beijing at the center of the new regional order.

### **Belt and Road as Geopolitical Culture**

The previous section examined the broader historical and contemporary spatial imaginations and associated policies within the (changing) geopolitical culture of China. The following discussion seeks to zoom in specifically on the BRI, to demonstrate how it can be critically analyzed and understood through the lens of China’s geopolitical culture, whereby the BRI knits together ideas and institutions and reworks prior strategies to simultaneously develop China and integrate Eurasia into a Sinocentric community of shared interests, destiny, and responsibility.

The BRI is envisaged as a long-term project to connect Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and beyond through the construction of land and sea-based infrastructural networks (Xi 2014b; National Development and Reform Commission [NDRC] 2015). Touted as an open and inclusive set of infrastructural projects, the BRI was sometimes presented as a positive alternative to the United States’s Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and other modes of Western-directed “globalization” (see W. D. Liu 2014; W. D. Liu and Dunford 2016; W. D. Liu, Dunford, and Gao 2018). After the Trump administration’s abandonment of the TPP in January 2017, Beijing reaffirmed the BRI as an alternative open vision of integration and harmony as commentators asked, “Will Trump make China great again?” (Nordin and Weissmann 2018, 231). To get the BRI’s ambitious program on track, China had already pledged US\$160 billion to the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund, which are the main funding bodies for the BRI. This move by the Chinese government has elicited debates in

the West and India (which is wary of the close partnership between Beijing and Islamabad), with claims that the BRI is a tool for China to exert global ascendancy (see Sidaway and Woon [2017] for an analysis of such accounts). These perspectives have been repeatedly challenged by the Xi administration, however. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (cited in Swaine 2015, 6) stressed that the BRI is never imposed and forced onto other states and would be “sensitive to the comfort level” of its participants. Xi (2017) regularly emphasized the collaborative ethos of the BRI, stressing China’s adherence to the initiative’s openness and inclusiveness, characterized by “wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.” This rhetoric fuses with reminders that the BRI offers a “new growth point for promoting the sustainable development of global economy toward a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation at its core” (Xi 2017).

The BRI has become especially prominent in academic realms. Many public intellectuals in China have a robust view of the BRI as a cultural and moral alternative to what is seen as the U.S.-led world order. According to these voices that weave cultural issues into their narratives, the BRI will not only join economies but reconfigure “civilizations.” For instance, Zheng Yongnian, who frequently advises the CCP leaders, sees the BRI as an opportunity to use China’s civilizational values to guide the rules of a “post-US global zeitgeist” (时代精神; Y. N. Zheng 2015, 197–200). Wang Yiwei, a high-profile commentator from Renmin University in Beijing, likewise conceives BRI as a key to Chinese normative power in the twenty-first century. He celebrated the BRI as a “revival of the ancient civilizational links from the Tang dynasty,” which is described as a “Golden Age” that was only overshadowed by the rise of the Ottoman Empire (Y. W. Wang 2015, 34). As opposed to “Western imperialism,” Y. W. Wang (2015) argued that the “Silk Road was a road of friendship and prosperity, a road of exchange and mutual respect and offers a superior model of globalization” (2). As such, China’s culture is seen as a resource that will change and rework the rules and norms of international institutions: The successful implementation of BRI will demonstrate how China no longer “submits to globalization, but is proactive in creating new standards of globalization” (29). The end result is clear as Y. W. Wang explained, “the BRI uses the Silk Road Dream to realize the China Dream, which will lead to the World Dream” (29). Although this goal might sound overly ambitious, it echoes some of Xi’s statements invoking China’s civilization and development model as exemplars for global governance.

These ideational underpinnings find spatial manifestation in President Xi’s peripheral diplomacy approach that was discussed earlier, to cultivate a “community of shared destiny” by prioritizing



**Figure 5** Layout of the National Major Circulation Network within China under the Belt and Road Initiative. Adapted from Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China (2015).

economic exchanges with China’s Asian counterparts before encompassing the rest of the world (NDRC 2015). The external spatialities evolve in tandem with the internal geographies of the initiative, however. Both the internal and global connectivity of China’s coastal and inland ports is being bolstered (Ducruet and Wang 2018), in addition to high-speed rail, new airports, expanded highways, and digital infrastructure. Chinese publications have singled out the “pivot cities” (支点城市) (Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies 2016), “port cities” (港口城市) (see L. Zhang, LeGates, and Zhao 2016), or “node cities” (节点城市) (Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China 2015) that act as “bridgeheads” (桥头堡) via the BRI to connect China with the outside world. It is, however, also the circulatory networks and channels within China (as envisaged by China’s Ministry of Commerce) that demand critical scrutiny insofar as they connect the different internal nodal points of the BRI (Figure 5). Crucially, the BRI’s internal

circulatory system is made possible through reworking, but not erasing, the geopolitical–spatial strategies previously enacted under the Third Front, Develop the West, and the Open Door Policy. Notwithstanding that port cities developed during the Open Door period serve as “gateways” (管道) for China to “expand out” (走出去) to Southeast Asia and beyond via the Maritime Silk Road, the circulatory channels that are geared toward western regions of China largely follow the rail networks constructed under the Third Front. As Meyskens (2015) noted, one of the lasting consequences of the Third Front Movement is that it enabled “new locations in the inland [western] regions” to be “integrated into the national railroad system” (259) and subsequent developmental agendas of the Chinese state. In this light, the BRI must be seen not simply as overlaying but as actively drawing on, reanimating, and reworking prior geopolitical cultures and attendant developmental visions and spatial policies.

## China–Singapore: Capitalizing on Familiarity and Location

Similarly, China’s strategy in weaving the BRI through maritime corridors via Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean references histories of maritime mobility. In particular, it invokes Nanyang (南洋). This refers to lands and waters beyond the South China Sea per se (on which most recent Western comment about China’s maritime geopolitics has focused) where scores of Chinese migrants arrived from China during the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. It was during this period that Nanyang “served as the gateway to the West,” bearing “multiple imperial etymologies” during the peak of Western power (Bernards 2016, 19). Through the late colonial period and into the epoch when postcolonial states emerged in what started to be called Southeast Asia, the Nanyang imagination “provides an alternative to the continental imagination and cultural capital of China as ancestral homeland” given the scores of overseas Chinese (Bernards 2016, 19). As such, Nanyang occupies not just a geographical area near China and the onward sea corridor to the West but, significant as well, a familiar cultural environment. Specifically, Singapore stands out as a key state for China to collaborate with given its Chinese majority status in Nanyang and the late Minister Mentor of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew’s decades of engagement with China’s political leadership starting from the mid-1970s. In describing “China’s longstanding fascination with Singapore’s development experience that has preoccupied post-Maoist leaders from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping despite the obvious differences between the tiny Southeast Asian city-state and the most populous country on earth,” Ortmann and Thompson (2018) noted how “there is great Chinese interest in Singapore’s success in combining effective governance and efficient state capitalism with stable one-party dominant rule” (1).

Yet although the *New York Times* recently reported concerns that China might court more influence among the ethnic Chinese majority who constitute more than three quarters of Singapore’s population (A. Qin 2018), stories about China–Singapore relations in Singapore’s daily *Straits Times* more often foreground the BRI as the basis for mutual interest. One of China’s largest BRI engagements with Singapore, known as the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI), was the third government-to-government project. The first two such collaborations took place in Suzhou in the early-mid 1990s (Suzhou Industrial Park [SIP]; see Yeung 2000) and Tianjin in the late 2000s (Sino–Singapore Tianjin Eco-city [SSTEC]; see Pow and Neo 2015). The partnership has deepened with experience gained from prior cross-engagements in the last two decades, and China has banked on familiarity to continue transferring Singapore’s “software”—or technical know-how for

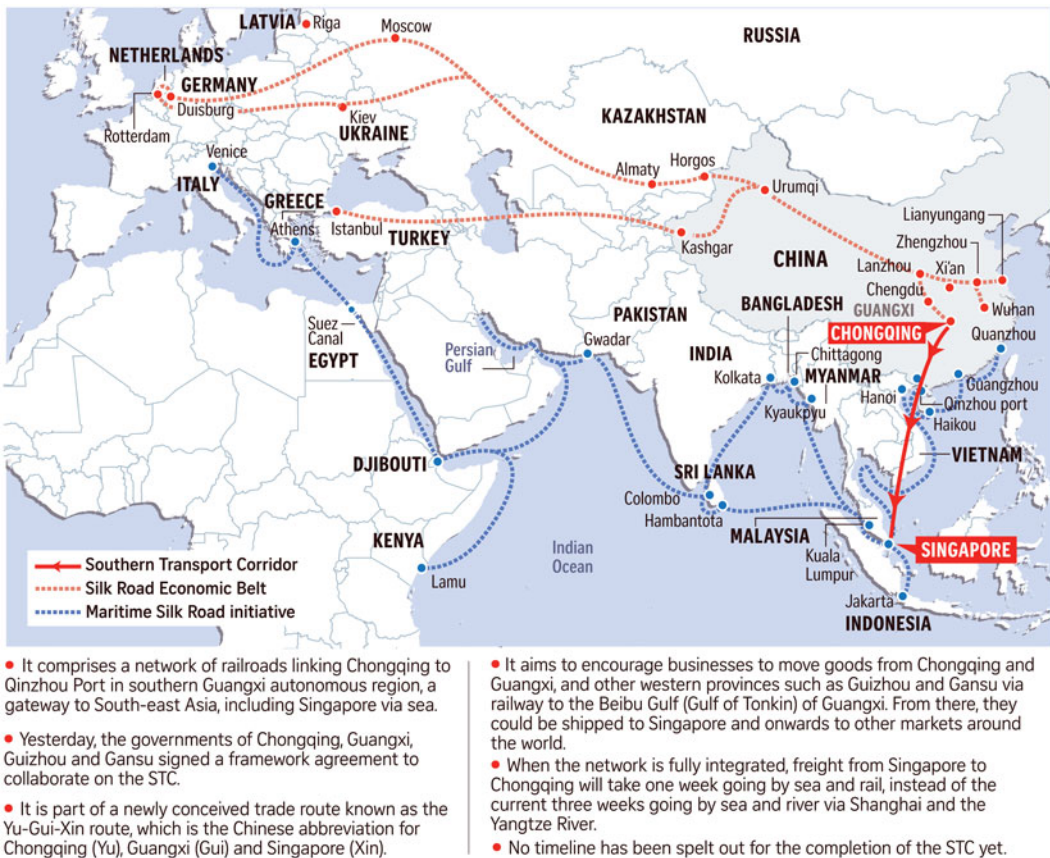
the BRI—with the CCI the most geographically extensive and complex.

The project aims to make Chongqing a node for connection between other Chinese regions and the wider world. Greater Chongqing houses more than 30 million people and in the last decade it has recorded rapid connectivity gains with the world beyond China, outpacing the rate of such gains of China’s southern and eastern coastal cities that hitherto had been the pacesetters (Derudder et al. 2018). In August 2017, the improvement of transport connectivity between Chongqing and Southeast Asia was given a further boost through a joint announcement of the Southern Transport Corridor, where Singapore’s trade promotion agency, International Enterprise (IE) Singapore, and the governments of Chongqing (and those to its south), Guizhou, Guangxi, and Gansu (further north), signed a memorandum to foster Chongqing’s connectivity with Singapore via the Gulf of Tonkin (see Figure 6). In particular, this promises a shorter and more direct trade route between western China and Southeast Asia, saving precious time as goods are moved within a week in both overland (from Chongqing to Nanning in Guangxi) and sea routes (Qinzhou port in Guangxi to Singapore) of China’s BRI (Chong 2017). Specifically, Qinzhou port as the strategic maritime thrust in the Sino–Singapore partnership fulfilled Sun Yat-Sen’s (1866–1925, who became the foundational figure of the early twentieth-century Chinese Republic) aspiration of a “southward channel” (南向通道) to Nanyang for economic development (see Lim 2018). Indeed, accompanying talk about bridging land and sea routes of the BRI mobilizes historical and geographical imagination of prior connectivity and contact.

In a recent reportage mentioning six other business councils that “promote economic exchanges between Singapore and Chinese province or municipality,” the *Straits Times* (Chong 2018) invoked the air, land, and sea links “emphasized by the Belt and Road Initiative” (A6). Beyond these and CCI’s physical transformations on the ground, China sees Singapore as an international financial hub to realize BRI’s investment goals. According to Singaporean Minister Chan Chun Sing, the Chinese authorities always remind their Singaporean counterparts of the number “3385, which means 33 percent of all the outbound investment under the BRI initiative comes through Singapore, and 85 percent of all the inbound investment to China comes from Singapore” (Jaipragas 2018). Minister Chan attributed this to Singapore’s ability as a financial hub to syndicate the loans (Jaipragas 2018), and perhaps it is not a surprise, then, seeing China signing a memorandum with Singapore on mediation to help businesses resolve disputes that might arise under the BRI (Lee 2017). The financial strengths of Singapore and the concentration of corporate law

## Southern Transport Corridor (STC)

The corridor acts as a bridge between the overland and maritime silk roads of China's Belt and Road Initiative



**Figure 6** Map of the Southern Transport Corridor. Source: Chong (2017). Reprinted with permission from The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. (Color figure available online.)

expertise in the city-state have also led to an economic counselor at the PRC Embassy in Singapore commenting that the BRI is a “propeller and ballast” for Sino–Singapore bilateral ties (C. Zheng 2017).

Singapore’s placement of the third government-to-government collaboration at a very high-level Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) helmed by Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, along with explicit statements from its top political leaders that Singapore can play a role of a “useful pathfinder” for China to try and experiment with the BRI, given Singapore’s comparative smallness and nimbleness in finding new areas of competitiveness and competence, is a strong indicator of Singapore’s commitment (see, e.g., Cheong 2017; Tan 2017; Tanoto 2017). The Sino–Singapore partnership might be distinctive in terms of the earlier Nanyang connections

and close political–economic history of bilateral collaborations. Yet Singapore also remains deeply integrated into the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region established after World War II. Notwithstanding conflicts over territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea (see Rolf and Agnew 2016), China’s challenges to the U.S. alliance system in traditional military terms have been limited and yield countermoves (Luttwak 2012; Liff 2018). The BRI’s Singapore connection, however, appropriates a broader repertoire of historical and geographical imaginations. In so doing, as a former permanent secretary at Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote, the BRI potentially disrupts a “binary fallacy”<sup>2</sup> of the United States versus China in the region, instead yielding an “East Asian architecture ... likely to consist of multiple overlapping frameworks” (Kausikan 2018, 37).

## Conclusions

This article has argued that the BRI, closely articulated with narratives about China's role and destiny, might be conceptualized as an emergent geopolitical culture. Rather than seeing such contemporary ideas and policy framework as radically novel, we have described how the BRI reworks prior Chinese geopolitical discourses and the consequences of their attendant spatial policies. Such creative reworking of policy and process has arguably been a wider feature of the PRC. BRI seems to be an example of what Heilmann and Perry (2011) called China's "adaptive governance":

What emerges from studying the legacies of revolutionary and Mao-era policy styles in contemporary Chinese governance is not a ready-made "Chinese Model" defined by replicable institutional variables. We find rather a fluid, context-, situation-, and agency-based modus operandi: a method of policy generation and implementation based on acceptance of pervasive uncertainty, a readiness to experiment and learn (even from enemies and foreigners), an agility in grasping unforeseen opportunities, a single-mindedness in pursuing strategic goals, a willingness to ignore ugly side effects, and a ruthlessness in eradicating unfriendly opposition. (21–22)

The relationship with Singapore also indicates how the BRI revisualizes historical and geographical networks that long predate the PRC. The significance of an emergent geopolitical culture is arguably measured by the range of such reworking and its capacity to blend them into a narrative of inclusion and connectivity. That the BRI is now referenced in a vast range of projects and by municipalities in their development strategies all over China is testimony to its growing range. Such widespread local replication of and experimentation with central government policies has long been a feature of modern China (Chien 2008). Yet such is the breadth and fluidity of the BRI discourse that it sometimes goes beyond another local adaptation of the party line to exceed official parameters. Indeed, if geopolitical culture is understood as a palimpsest, then the different layers of geopolitics can also be peeled off and given diverse interpretations and readings by a wide array of (state and nonstate) actors.

The BRI has certainly generated opposition outside China. Notably it became part of the political debate in the Malaysian general elections of May 2018. The new government, led by the veteran politician Mahathir Mohamad, warned against "a new version of colonialism" through the BRI, in a pointed expression of Asian unease about China's increasing economic and political influence (Hornby 2018). Radio Free Asia (RFA), a U.S.-government-

funded broadcaster first established in the early years of the Cold War, published a cartoon on its website, depicting Mahathir's cancelation of BRI projects signed by the previous Malaysian government as a refusal of the kind of deal that led Sri Lanka to sign a ninety-nine-year lease on the strategic port of Hambantota with a Chinese state firm, in exchange for wider rescheduling of Sri Lankan debts to China. The BRI's relationship to China as creditor and the scale of debts being accumulated (see Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018) will feed into political debates elsewhere. On the RFA Web site, the exiled Chinese cartoonist Wang Liming (under the *nom de plume* Rebel Pepper) lampooned the BRI as a "Trojan Horse" (see Figure 7). The image quickly circulated on social media in Malaysia and beyond. After the new Malaysian government canceled some BRI-flagged projects, a columnist writing for *The Economist* ("Banyan: Can't Pay" 2018, 26) suggested that the new government in Pakistan also "ought to do a Mahathir" and cancel "skewed deals [that] are in China's favour—or plain fishy" (26). Critical discussions about responses to the BRI are underway in many other countries. The Japanese case is particularly notable, with a set of maps of infrastructural connectivity that must be viewed in the mirror of the BRI (Wallace 2018; Yoshimatsu 2018) and that have been echoed in Indian, Australian, and U.S. discussions.

There are also voices within China that have been openly critical of the BRI. For example, in an open letter addressed to President Xi Jinping, retired Chinese professor Sun (2018) urged Xi not to "pour money" (大撒币) into other countries through the BRI. He argued that the money could be better spent on alleviating the dire circumstances faced by "the large number of impoverished peoples within China" (中国大量贫困人口). Other unofficial actors are seeking to adapt the BRI to their own visions. Notably, some Chinese Christian evangelists, operating outside the official Protestant Church, are discussing spreading the Gospel via the westward linkages that the BRI enables. The history of Chinese missionary Christianity and the wider world, specifically ideas that Chinese missionaries had a divinely ordained duty to spread the Christian gospel to the predominantly Muslim lands between China and the biblical Holy Land, dates back to the 1920s (Brandner 2011) and is known as the Back to Jerusalem Movement. An underground presence in China, this is most visible outside China, where it interacts with wider "end times" Christian millennialism, whose apocalyptic geopolitics circulates widely on the Internet and in popular books, especially in the United States (Dittmer and Sturm 2010). The Chinese end times evangelists are reported to now have around 1,000 missionaries overseas and their number of adherents has recently grown rapidly in China itself, despite official



**Figure 7** Cartoon accompanying story “Malaysia Postpones China-Backed Projects Worth \$22 Billion.” Source: Radio Free Asia, 21 August 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/cartoons/malaysia-postpones-08212018170548.html>. Reproduced with permission from Radio Free Asia. (Color figure available online.)

censure. In an interview with the *FT*, the pastor of one of them declared, “We have the Belt and Road policy, so there will be economic entry. Alongside the economic entry will be companies and other groups entering, including missionaries” (Hancock 2017). Such predictions are far from the range of CCP-led narrations of the BRI and their reanimations of geopolitical culture and spatial policy that have been our focus here. Perhaps what they both share is self-assurance based on faith about China’s fundamental role. Both might be symptomatic of how the BRI is forming a geopolitical culture within which a range of visions of China and the world creatively intersect with a set of lines on a map. ■

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Our notion of respacing is adapted from Engel and Nugent’s (2009) spatial history of Africa, “invoking new regimes of territorialisation: re-ordered states, transnational and sub-national entities, new localities and transborder formations” (6).
- <sup>2</sup> This articulates with a wider discussion about the prospects for war between the United States and China. Many of the U.S. parameters of this debate still follow exchanges over a decade ago between former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the

political scientist John L. Mearsheimer. For a summary, see Arrighi (2007, 309–13) and Vaisse (2018, 400–402). More recently, before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Kissinger (2018) referred to the BRI as “a quest to shift the world’s center of gravity” (6). He drew attention to the long time horizons that the BRI operates in.

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