



Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative

edited by Joseph Chinyong Liow, Hong Liu, Gong Xue, Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA, USA, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 488 pp., £200.00, \$290.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978 178990 870 1; £48, \$65 (eBook), eISBN 978 1 78990 871 8. The eBook version is priced from £48/\$65 from Google Play, ebooks.com and other eBook vendors, while in print the book can be ordered from the Edward Elgar Publishing website.

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To cite this article: Xiaofeng Liu (2022): Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Geography and Economics, DOI: [10.1080/15387216.2022.2063915](https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2022.2063915)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2022.2063915>



Published online: 11 Apr 2022.



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BOOK REVIEW

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On 3 December 2021, the opening of the China-Laos railway, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), made headlines in and beyond the two countries through which the corridor passes. The BRI, China's multitrillion-dollar scheme to improve global infrastructure connectivity, has drawn attention in academic, governmental, and business circles since its inception in 2013. The initiative has also piqued geographers' interest as they grapple with an emerging power's extraterritorial engagement and influence across scales through the lens of infrastructure development, critiquing the economic, political, social, and environmental struggles surrounding cross-border projects.

Shortly before the railway opened, the *Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative* was published. The collection offers a timely series of studies on the BRI edited by three Singapore-based political scientists, Joseph Chinyong Liow, Hong Liu, and Gong Xue. The 37 chapters were written by 45 contributors with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, from social scientists to practicing attorneys and policy analysts. Their expertise is geographically expansive, covering countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Bringing together many minds and rich firsthand and secondhand materials, the collection seeks to answer one core question: How do the prospects offered and contestations provoked by BRI infrastructure projects intersect with local political economies and global power dynamics? To solve this puzzle, the authors summarize the progress of BRI projects in various countries and regions, examine the perceptions and responses from BRI host countries and China's competitors, and reveal the geopolitical tensions exacerbated by the projects. A common conclusion among the chapters is that the BRI delivers opportunities while also carrying real risks and challenges.

As underscored in the introduction, the BRI creates opportunities for Chinese lenders to finance global development projects, offering an alternative to conventional lenders, such as the World Bank and Western governments. Yet beyond that distinction, the edited volume asks to what extent the BRI both resembles and differs from its competitors. The chapters in Part 1 try to answer this question. By offering an overview of the BRI's major components, its historical and recent development, and its domestic and international rationales, Part 1 successfully demonstrates the initiative's uniqueness. In chapter two, Baogang He argues that the foreign relations and policies of the BRI are determined by China's domestic politics. He points to the influence of President Xi Jinping's personal leadership, the BRI's management structure involving various ministries, provinces, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and government constraints on dissent. Taking a more specific case of SOEs, in chapter four, Alessandro Arduino contends that those SOEs operating overseas tend to "blur the lines between commercial and political dynamics" by taking advantage of the vagueness of the "market approach with Chinese

characteristics” to make profits. To be specific, Chinese SOEs can invest in locations with higher security risks, such as some countries in the Middle East and North Africa, because in most circumstances, when there is a crisis like the Arab Spring, the Chinese government will provide them with overseas personnel security and financial aid and support, helping reduce their losses. In this sense, SOEs’ investment choices can alter the Chinese government’s overseas behaviors. Taken together, these two chapters clearly identify the impacts of Chinese domestic characteristics on BRI decisions.

Tracing another line of what makes the BRI distinct, in chapter 7, Ana Alves interrogates the question of whether the “China Model” will be exported through the initiative. She comprehensively summarizes what the China Model and Beijing Consensus mean in the existing literature and proposes that they showcase gradual and experimental policy design and implementation, pragmatic and flexible decision-making, and the guiding roles of the state. The BRI integrates both Chinese characteristics and the Western paradigm of development, namely an emphasis on economic growth. Obstacles, however, also exist in the BRI’s implementation owing to its Chinese features. Moreover, it is questionable whether the China Model is replicable or sufficient as China’s economic rise largely relies on its gradual shift from the periphery to the core in global trade and supply chains and structures, while most BRI developing countries remain marginal in the core-periphery world system.

The final three parts of the volume explore specific cases from the perspective of BRI countries, detailing their responses, benefits, risks, and challenges. BRI countries generally welcome the opportunities the projects may bring, such as Cambodia (chapter 15) and Pacific Island states (chapter 21). However, voices within these countries may vary and frequently shift over time. For instance, Patrycja Pendrakowska reveals in chapter 23 that in 2017, Poland changed its welcoming attitude to the BRI to a “wait and see” strategy, as no substantial progress had been made. In contrast, in chapter 12, Alvin Camba et al. find a shift in the Philippines from indifference to a more welcoming attitude toward the BRI after President Roger Duterte came into power. Across the volume, it is clear that elites of host countries play decisive roles in determining BRI projects. Host country businessmen, commercial coalitions, and civil groups may have divergent perceptions of the prospects and challenges. The voice that is ultimately dominant can significantly influence the decision-making process for any given BRI project.

The collection also encompasses cases of non-BRI countries, such as the US, western European countries, India, and Japan, which exhibit contrasting views on the projects under the umbrella of the BRI. In chapter 35, Mingjiang Li argues that the US is bashing China using the BRI by securitizing the investments, highlighting the negative impacts, and proposing competing strategies. For instance, Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, in chapter 33, underlines Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), developed by the US, Japan, and Australia, to push back against the BRI in Southeast Asia. Despite opposition, the BRI still attracts some western European countries with commercial opportunities of bilateral and third-party cooperation, as noticed by Jing Men in chapter 32. More importantly, collaboration with these countries motivates the BRI projects to improve standards. As such, the BRI is subject to both competition and encouragement from non-BRI countries.

The collection adequately integrates a variety of reviews and case studies with a broad geographical scope. The chapters have solid arguments and rich supporting evidence, offering theoretical and empirical contributions to BRI studies and broader debates within international relations on the influence of a rising power’s global engagement and the effectiveness of South-South cooperation. The perspectives in the edited volume comprehensively unite China, BRI host countries, and non-BRI countries, establishing useful frameworks for analysis and posing fundamental questions such as, “What does the BRI mean to

different actors?” and, “How do different actors influence BRI projects?” More crucially, although the findings in this collection are mostly consistent with previous BRI studies, the aggregation and juxtaposition of the cases exhibit distinct geopolitical contexts and national struggles, offering valuable empirical evidence from sites previously little studied, such as the Middle East countries and the Pacific Islands.

Future BRI studies may follow the edited volume’s framework of identifying the diversity and complexity within the BRI and dig deeper into overlooked topics. For instance, although some chapters (eg. chapters 16 and 19) reveal the existence of internal diversity, the non-state actors to which the authors attend are chiefly elites or highly visible organizations. In contrast, local voices from communities and marginalized groups remain underexplored. With most academic analysis in the Western corpus focusing on the BRI’s international and national effects, more studies on the more local consequences of BRI projects’ power entanglements are crucial.

The collection presents a solid read for students, scholars, policymakers, and other professionals interested in recent developments concerning the BRI. Practically, the editors aim to raise the Chinese government’s attention to the significance of adapting to multilateralism, which China has claimed it supports. Theoretically, through the lens of the BRI, the book explores the implications of a rising China on global governance across diverse fields. Finally, and specifically for geographers, the book should inspire greater exploration into the spatiality of BRI projects. Spurred by the important work of this handbook, key questions to continue investigating are how investments vary across countries, regions, and scales, and what factors contribute to variations in how projects materialize. While the duration of the BRI is unknown, in the longer term, case studies of projects under its auspices can help the advance of theories in political geography, from extraterritoriality to scalar politics.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2022.2063915>

