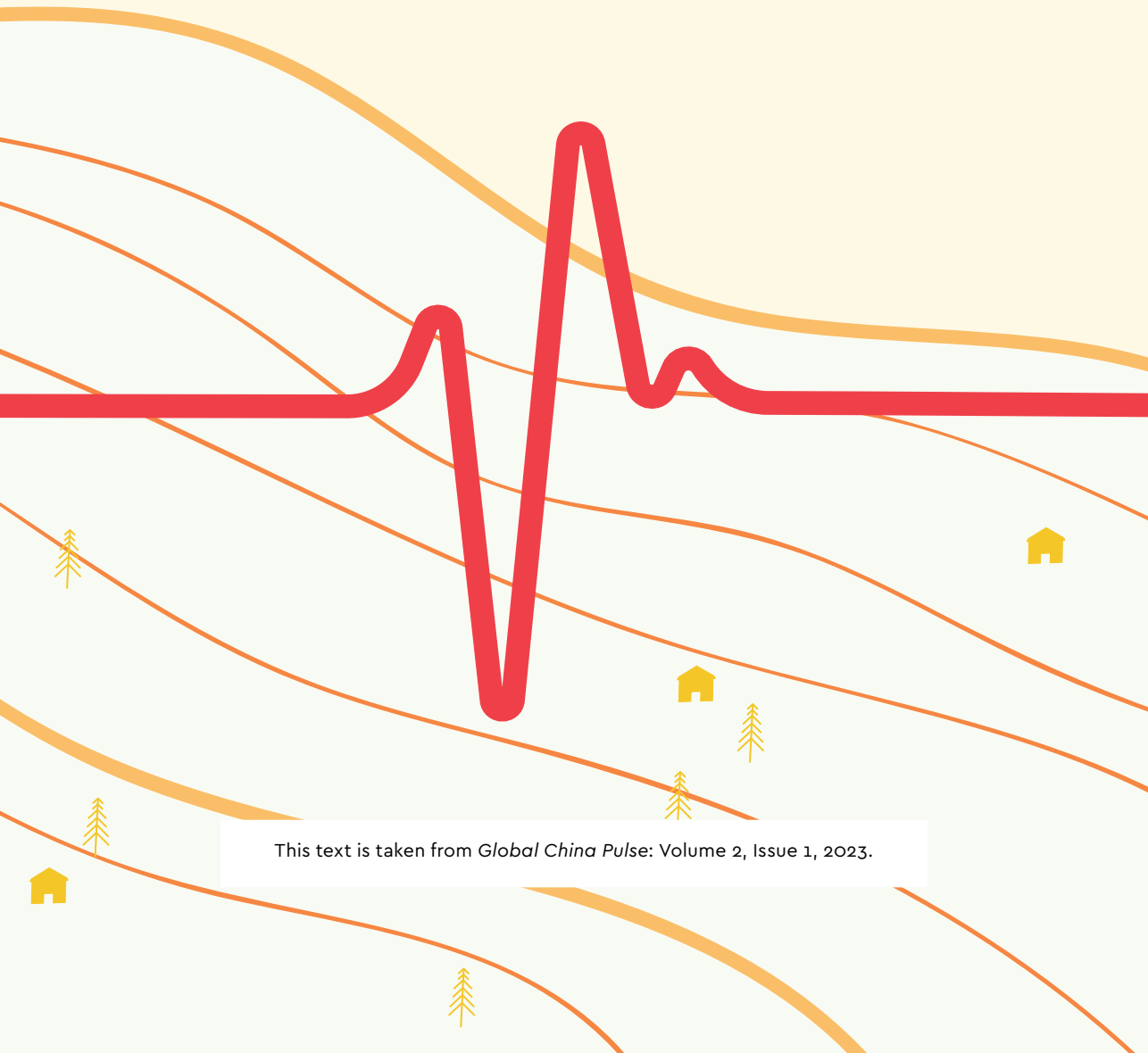


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The Urban Geographies of China's Belt and Road Initiative

Elia APOSTOLOPOULOU

Here, in the new town, boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies,
unrealized possibilities.

A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away.
It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar.

This is the realm of freedom.

It is an empty realm.

—Lefebvre (1995: 124)

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies a new global paradigm of infrastructure-led development (Schindler and Kanai 2021), with wide-ranging implications that have the potential to reshape economic and geopolitical landscapes and global urban geographies (Cheng and Apostolopoulou 2023). Although the term 'belt' implies a continuous surface, the flows of capital, goods, and people within the corridors of the BRI primarily concentrate within *key urban nodes*. As such, strategically positioned flagship projects in selected cities reflect a spatial paradigm that largely reproduces hegemonic capitalist ideas about urban and economic development (Summers 2016). Evidence indicates that the New Silk Road is a global catalyst for profound urban transformations and that urbanisation has significantly intensified alongside its emerging spatial configurations (Wei et al. 2023). The importance of establishing infrastructure networks to connect urban nodes is also evident in the reference in the BRI's vision document to major cities within China, including port construction in coastal areas and international airport hubs in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and numerous inland cities (Derudder et al. 2018). Amid the multitude of real and promised BRI infrastructure projects, there is a synchronised assemblage of urban spatial components comprising large-scale infrastructure, industrial projects, and substantial investments in the urban built environment (Apostolopoulou 2021a, 2021b), including, for example, railways, airports, ports, industrial parks, hydropower projects, optical-fibre networks, special economic zones, smart cities, greenfield investments, real estate, and commercial projects.

BRI infrastructure introduces new purposes and connections among urban regions, driving the restructuring of existing towns and cities alongside sometimes entirely new built environments. It transforms existing cities into trade, financial, and tourist hubs, fundamentally altering the urban fabric and reshaping urban geographies, including local-global inequalities, on a truly unprecedented transcontinental scale. Although BRI

urban geographies exhibit significant geographical differentiation and diversity, they profoundly influence how the urban is perceived, produced, and experienced (see, for instance, Apostolopoulou et al. 2023; Smith 2022; Williams et al. 2020; Wiig and Silver 2019; Zheng et al. 2022). And even though there is no universal model of urbanisation along the New Silk Road, certain distinctive characteristics emerge in the context of BRI-driven urban transformation. These have led to the introduction of the concept of ‘Silk Road urbanisation’ (Apostolopoulou 2021a) to better describe the intersection of the BRI, patterns of urban growth and spatial restructuring, and the ways these impact the lives of urban-dwellers across the globe. Below, I outline three distinct characteristics to contribute to the academic debate about the BRI’s urban geographies.

First, BRI-driven urban formations are influenced by a city-centric perspective of urbanisation aligned with China’s 2014 *New Urbanisation Plan*, which emphasises the transformation of villages into towns and towns into cities (see also Oakes 2020). In the places where BRI projects materialise, this often involves the acquisition and privatisation of land to facilitate and leverage urban development. Land acquisition is a key driver of rapid urbanisation within China (Hsing 2010) and is linked to extended human displacements. An essential characteristic of these formations is the interconnection between infrastructure and urban development: urbanisation is portrayed as the primary pathway to modernisation and often serves as a medium to create the city itself, echoing Star’s (2010) description of infrastructure as the ‘Cinderella’ of urban studies—a relationship that transforms the spaces it connects (Roseau 2022).

Second, BRI formations represent a notable manifestation of China’s growing hegemony and its aspiration to establish infrastructure as a defining feature of its stated aspirations for ‘inclusive’ globalisation (Chen 2018). China has allocated a significant portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) (8–9 per cent) to infrastructure investments, addressing a substantial part of the global infrastructure gap. However, the benefits of these investments have favoured Chinese state-owned enterprises, with most contracts awarded to Chinese companies—a pattern observable in all the places where we conducted fieldwork in the past four years (see, for instance, Apostolopoulou 2021b; Apostolopoulou and Pant 2022). Moreover, several BRI projects involve the transfer of public infrastructure to Chinese ownership and/or management, often in core areas of capital cities, with the case of the Port of Piraeus in Athens an illustrative example. This often contributes to the creation of newly bordered territories that generate ‘structural holes’ within the fabric of sovereign territory (Sassen 2013). Importantly, even though this places China and the broader Asian region in a more competitive position compared with the United States (Harvey 2005), the interests involved in BRI projects present a more complex picture. This involves the increasing role of multilateral agencies, corporate actors, transnational capital, and infrastructure developers (Mayer and Zhang 2020) and their alliances with the shared objective of influencing national and regional urban planning agendas (Hildyard and Sol 2017).

The BRI's local–global partnerships are evident not only in funding mechanisms but also in diplomatic discourse in all the places where we conducted research (namely, Greece, Nepal, Peru, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom), emphasising the purported win-win outcomes of establishing infrastructural corridors, forging new trade relations, and promoting the free movement of capital. Nonetheless, these alliances should not be interpreted as heralding the end of intracapitalist competition: they are largely driven by opportunistic interests with both Chinese and host-country national political-economic elites grappling to advance their interests within the context of BRI projects (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019).

Third, emerging urban formations related to the BRI primarily exist as spatial fixes, emphasising the prioritisation of private profits, corporate interests, and multinational growth coalitions over the infrastructure of social reproduction (Apostolopoulou 2021b). In each city where we conducted fieldwork (including Athens, Chancay, Colombo, Kathmandu, and London), BRI projects concentrate (cheap) labour and capital, facilitate the circulation of capital through the integration of transportation, real estate, and commercial ventures, and have significant environmental impacts. The conceptualisation of urban space as a catalyst for market-oriented growth and elite consumption practices did not, of course, emerge with the BRI: it has been central to the idea of the city as a growth machine (Logan et al. 2007), exemplifying the neoliberal urban regeneration of the past two decades (Apostolopoulou 2020; Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015; Harvey 2012). BRI interventions build, therefore, on existing legacies, governmental agendas, and hegemonic narratives, exacerbating the uneven geographies of urban gentrification and displacement in the studied cities and deep-rooted social, environmental, and spatial inequalities, albeit with varying degrees and speeds, to ensure privileged access to new markets by leveraging the possibilities offered by spatial fixes (Christophers 2011; Harvey 2018; Smith 1987). Silk Road urbanisation goes beyond the concept of 'Chinese exceptionalism' (Zhang 2013) to capture precisely how specific international historical-geographical conditions intersect with national and local circumstances, shaping new urban development pathways. In cities of the Global North like Athens and London, Chinese investments have played an amplified role amid prolonged crises, privatisation, public disinvestment, and austerity policies. In Global South cities such as Colombo, many projects have accelerated class-driven gentrification, leading to the displacement and dispossession of the working class, and have exacerbated social and environmental injustices under the rhetoric of constructing a new city based on a neocolonial speculative imagination to attract global investors and professionals seeking a world-city experience (Goldman 2011).

The transformation of cities is not, of course, driven solely by the BRI. It is, rather, an exemplar of a much broader global hegemony of infrastructure-led urbanisation, which prioritises the creation of new trade corridors and transnational connections across the globe while disregarding the urban commons and social needs. It thus effectively erases prior legacies and histories to facilitate a profound reconfiguration of urban spaces.

Deepening urban marginality and inequality are evident across diverse contexts, from places like Chancay in Peru to the London Docklands. However, this also creates opportunities for new spatial resistance and the formation of local–global alliances that can generate novel possibilities for urban socio-spatial change. As we move into the next decade of the BRI, relational analysis of divergent trajectories of socio-spatial urban change inspired by Marxist postcolonial geographies (Hart 2018) can shed light on emerging resistance and alliances and their potential to challenge the prevailing patterns of urban marginalisation and inequality, highlighting the transformative agency of local communities in shaping the future of their cities. ●