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The BRI, Grounded

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A decade on, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has left an indelible mark on the global landscape and international public debate. A search on Google Scholar reveals a staggering 56,700 articles featuring the term ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, while 32,300 reference its previous moniker, ‘One Belt One Road’. Even a cursory Google search returns a staggering 11 million results for the BRI. While diverse perspectives on the initiative abound in uncountable studies, opinions, and sources, they can be broadly categorised into two camps: one hailing it as a novel development paradigm and the other condemning it as a problematic Chinese strategy that reshapes the world order, with China often labelled as predatory or debt-trapping. Both viewpoints commonly centre on geopolitics, international relations, and state-centric analyses, and increasingly frame the BRI as positioned vis-a-vis US investment initiatives.

Grounded research, however, provides a different view. Beneath the surface of these overarching perspectives lie more complicated and messy relations. Grounded studies have illuminated that the BRI is neither centralised nor all-powerful. In fact, it is even far from being a grand strategy. Dominant macro-perspectives neglect the fact that the BRI is often locally driven and made possible through collaboration and competition with other local and international actors. Indeed, scholars assert that reducing the BRI to a mere export development model oversimplifies its complexities (Harlan 2017; Yeh and Wharton 2016). Klinger and Muldavin (2019) argue against viewing China’s global integration as a result of isolated actions following a predetermined economic script. As their research underscores, to better grasp the BRI, one must examine local context, landscape, history, and politics. Similarly, Oliveira et al. (2020) stress the importance of examining the BRI empirically ‘from the ground’ to grasp how the initiative is reshaping global development.

Reflecting on the first decade of the BRI, this contribution underscores the significance and insights of *grounded* research on China’s global integration to ask: what have we learned from grounded BRI research 10 years into the initiative? Specifically, I focus on literature that grounds Global China through the examination of specific projects and resources, spanning infrastructure like roads, dams, railways, and economic zones, as well as land-based and energy investments in agriculture, mining, and plantations. Across this literature, scholars approach grounded analyses in various ways—as method, orientation, theoretical framework, and political commitment—resulting in fresh, nuanced, and multifaceted viewpoints that extend beyond the confines of the BRI itself. Drawing insights from my study of this research and ethnographic exploration in

China and Southeast Asia, I forward several critiques and advocate a more multifaceted conceptualisation of Global China in the wake of Ching Kwan Lee's pioneering work (see, for instance, Lee 2017).

Crucially, the BRI and China are not monolithic entities, but rather comprise networks of corporate, state, and individual relations. Much research on China commonly depicts the country as a uniform individual actor. In this view, China becomes a cohesive and unidirectional force and, as a result, research often focuses on the impacts of 'China' and 'Chinese' capital on distant places. However, this approach neglects the particular and contingent ways in which Chinese capital enters places and host countries, problematically simplifying China's role around the world. On the contrary, Global China entails complicated, at times contradictory, forms of state, corporate, and personal relations. When it comes to the BRI, far from being unified, relevant investments and their effects are heterogeneous in terms of actors, processes, and outcomes. Aware of this, much of the grounded scholarship on the subject then aims to avoid state-centric analysis or nationalist framings of China, instead underscoring Global China as a relational field of power. Lee (2022: 26) suggests that the 'intellectual payoff of seeing Global China as a power project is that one will ask questions about agency (who?), interest (why?), method (how?), and consequences (so what?)'.

Another vital contribution of grounded research is the recognition that the BRI is co-constructed by Chinese actors and local stakeholders such as officials, communities, or middlemen. The BRI is enacted through a wide range of interests that do not necessarily always align. Rather, China's global integration is complicated and contingent, proceeding through links between local and transnational actors that transcend borders, which requires grounded studies that complexify actors and examine the rescaling of the state, capital, and elite interests (Oliveira et al. 2020). This prompts a call for in-depth studies that unravel these intricate relationships, further nuanced by an examination of how state, capital, and elite interests rescale. A case in point is Laos, where the interaction between local land issues and international dynamics shapes outcomes, highlighting the influence of internal struggles rather than a cohesive 'China' strategy (DiCarlo 2021; Lu 2021). Another case are the criminal syndicates that run online scam compounds in Southeast Asia, discussed by Franceschini, Li, and Bo in their op-ed for this issue of *Global China Pulse*.

A particular strength of this scholarship, then, is its focus on the host location and its domestic processes (Mohan and Lampert 2013). While many studies concentrate on the Chinese side of the equation, it is imperative to explore host-country politics and the domestic mechanisms fuelling, facilitating, and sustaining BRI-related initiatives. For example, Loughlin and Grimsditch (2021) illustrate how the local political economy mediates how BRI projects are framed, received, and unfold. Relatedly, debates about differences between Western and Chinese institutions, governance, or objectives should accommodate host-country agency, challenging the assumption of unbridled global competition. Attending to host-country perspectives sheds light on their active role in

shaping projects and prevents us from uncritically reproducing rhetoric of imperialism or neocolonialism. For example, Lao officials did not passively accept a railroad from China but actively sought investors, contractors, and financing.

While pointing to host-country agency offers a counterpoint to the notion of an all-powerful China, grounded research also pulls apart the unevenness and inequities connected to BRI efforts. It delves into the lives of those constructing infrastructure, unearthing the rhythms and inequities that labourers experience. Franceschini (2020) shows how Cambodian and Chinese workers on Chinese-owned construction sites in Cambodia are each exploited, but in different ways, while Chen (2020) found that Lao labourers who endeavoured to resist exploitation on the construction sites of the Laos–China Railway found themselves gradually supplanted by their more vulnerable Chinese counterparts. In my research, I have written about the monotonous cycles of labour and feelings of anticipation and precarity that mediate BRI development. Research has also examined the lives of the intended beneficiaries of BRI projects, revealing how vulnerable populations were excluded from the protective measures of infrastructure mitigation (Dwyer 2020). Others have demonstrated the implications of land loss on local livelihoods (Suhardiman et al. 2021) and advocated for livelihood-centred analysis (Lindberg and Biddulph 2021).

In addition to the BRI shaping localities around the world, the initiative reverberates within China itself, reshaping its internal dynamics (see Zhang’s contribution in this forum). It is thus also essential to consider the ways in which the Chinese State is reconfigured by its Going Global experiences and feedback developed in the past 10 years. Scholars have noted a ‘boomerang effect’ on Chinese entities and interests (Wang and Hu 2017). Grounded studies of such effects are currently thin.

Grounded research also offers an opportunity to ‘ground truth’. This is critical because the BRI is not as concrete as the rhetoric and agreements would suggest. The maps of a world connected by lines of infrastructure do not necessarily manifest on the ground. An example is the Laos–China Railway, for which the Lao and Chinese sections remain unlinked, leading to bottlenecks at the border. Grounded research reminds us to not take slogans, plans, and policies at face value, as they unfold in unpredictable and uneven ways, if they unfold at all. It also points to the work the BRI label could be doing in relation to a project, as elites and investors might benefit from presenting the BRI as a unified strategy. The BRI banner has, indeed, been deployed to generate a sense of legitimacy or confidence in a project, even when such projects are undertaken by dubious actors with a criminal past, as in the case of Myanmar’s notorious Shwe Kokko Special Economic Zone (Cheng 2022). Such discrepancies underscore the more complex nature of the BRI compared with simplified slogans and policies.

Finally, embedded in much of this research are important temporal insights. As we make clear with our *People’s Map of Global China*, projects are not static, they change and respond to local and global forces over years of planning, negotiation, construction,

and operation. However, there is often a preference for studying the present or short-term history in relation to the BRI, focusing on stages of infrastructure development as political and developmental moments (Zhang 2020). Increasingly, researchers recognise the need to attend to project maintenance over time. In addition to studying moments from early planning to long-term maintenance, historical perspectives help shift our thinking beyond the confines of national history to examine the waves and evolution of infrastructural discourses and complexes over decades or centuries (see Enns and Bersaglio 2020; DeBoom 2022).

This short review shows how many researchers rightfully started from the premise that the BRI requires grounded research. Indeed, it is an argument I have made for many years. However, while we can no longer say that the BRI lacks grounded research, there remains an imperative to continue to unravel the geographies and interconnections that materialise through the flows of people, capital, and discourse intertwined with China's expansion. This pursuit transcends the boundaries of academia; it must resonate with a broader audience, encompassing decision-makers, and dispelling the prevailing oversimplifications that fail to capture the nuances of Global China.

Across these insights, Lee's (2017) formulation of Global China as a shorthand for China's economic expansion and stabilising strategy, not as a singular entity but as a phenomenon, proves invaluable. Indeed, this perspective has resonated across the works of discerning grounded researchers to signal the myriad forms of Chinese global engagements. As this contribution and others in the forum highlight, the BRI stands both as a catalyst and a canvas: influencing and influenced by dynamics such as domestic trends in China, host-country politics, sociopolitical and grounded processes, and the geopolitical landscape. Each crucially shapes the trajectory of the BRI and must be understood in their specificity. ●