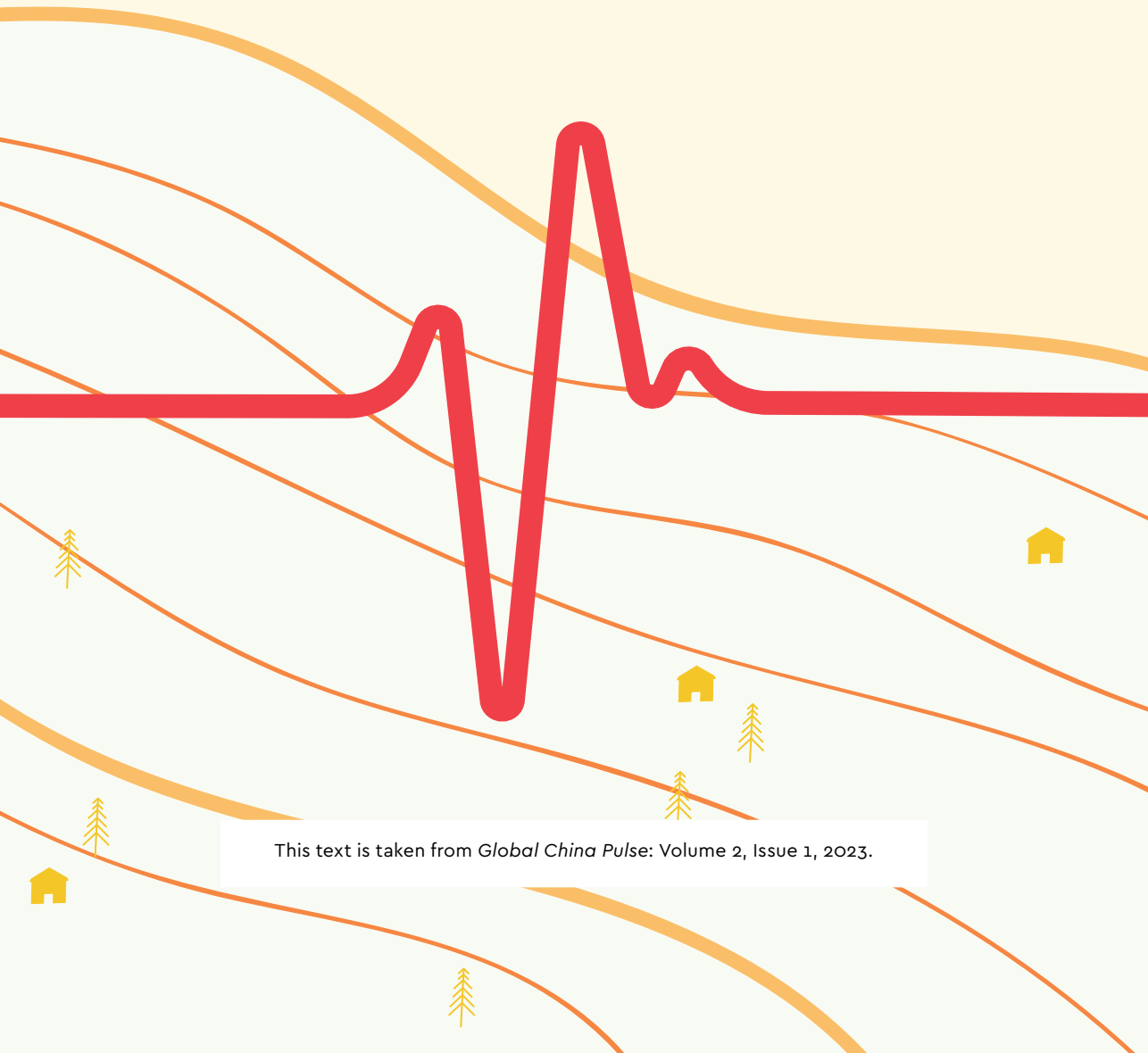


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### Broken Bridge

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# Towards a Three-dimensional Analysis of the BRI

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**T**he first decade of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has inspired a diverse range of research agendas and case studies regarding China's deepening global integration, rapidly expanding across disciplines, topics, and geographical boundaries. In this contribution, I survey the growing body of Chinese and Anglophone scholarship on the BRI to locate the main lines of inquiry. I identify three key understandings of the BRI: as discourse (the construction of space, identity, and geographical imagination); as project (the reconfiguration of infrastructural connectivity, capital accumulation, and sovereign regimes); and as experience (the remaking of places, social environments, and everyday livelihoods). As the BRI edges into its second decade, I suggest that future research undertakes a three-dimensional analysis to account for the initiative's horizontal connectivities, interscalar relations, and historical trajectories.

## The BRI as Discourse

Research has examined the ways in which narratives, concepts, and practices are deployed to represent the BRI in political, policy, and popular discourses. Envisaging the creation of transregional land–sea infrastructural nodes and networks from Beijing, Chinese elites actively evoke classical Western geopolitical imaginaries from the early twentieth century, especially those of Halford Mackinder, such as ‘heartland’, ‘rimland’, and ‘sea power’ (Sidaway and Woon 2017). Such tropes permeate dominant Chinese writing, with references to ‘pivots’, ‘zones’, and ‘frontiers’ by which Chinese geopolitical power is exercised over other peoples and places. These imaginaries represent geostrategic visions that have been translated into intensifying preoccupations with continental and maritime territories, as well as a geo-cultural discourse of a ‘Silk Road spirit’ and a ‘community of shared destiny’, at the heart of which sits the Chinese civilisation (Callahan 2016; Winter 2019).

Chinese elites are not the only source of desire and anxiety about the BRI. Western (especially US) academic and pundit circles, alongside BRI research initiatives, centres, institutes, and think tanks, have produced a significant discourse related to the initiative. The BRI has revived Mackinder's (1904: 430) fears and underlying Orientalist codes in his ‘Geographical Pivot of History’ that the Chinese would conquer Eurasia through continental infrastructure networks and ‘might constitute the yellow peril to the World's freedom’. This cultural imagination is deeply embedded in mainstream Western

iterations of the BRI that conjure a racialised imperial narrative of a ‘civilisational clash’, especially in the context of the escalating conflict between the United States and China (Richardson 2021).

## The BRI as Project

Critical discourse analysis has been complemented by international political economy approaches that locate the BRI’s emergence and evolution within the context of shifting regimes of global capital accumulation. From this perspective, the BRI is a key example of the infrastructure-led development paradigm that has arisen worldwide in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, with a focus on financing transnational infrastructural connectivity (Schindler and Kanai 2021). The BRI is understood as a state-led ‘spatial fix’ that seeks to redirect China’s post-2008 overcapacity by facilitating capital networks across Eurasia through infrastructure (Summers 2016). It also exemplifies China’s domestic path of infrastructure-led development, especially through the Great Western Development Program launched in 1999 to address the underlying crises emanating from post-Mao China’s (capitalist) development model (Yeh and Wharton 2016).

The BRI’s global infrastructure push has also been fuelled by the need to extract new raw materials, access cheap skilled labour, and create favourable regulatory environments, with the availability of cheap capital and low interest rates in major economies including the United States and China (Hilyard and Sol 2017). Its unfolding enrolls a variety of actors in China, host countries, and beyond, including multilateral development banks, bilateral aid agencies, state-owned enterprises, multinational corporations, private consultancies, and central and local governments. These actors occupy different positions in global production networks and co-produce the ‘strategic coupling’ of national development strategies (Flint and Zhu 2018). The BRI’s ‘state-coordinated investment partnerships’ bring together state and business actors to export overcapacity and address infrastructural demands in underdeveloped markets, often with accumulation and sovereignty regimes, mirroring similar social arrangements within China (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019).

## The BRI as Experience

The BRI is not only influenced by centralised (geo)political economies, but also constantly negotiated in a multiplicity of place encounters and varying contexts, as well as within complex networks of social relations and power struggles (Klinger and Muldavin 2019; de L.T. Oliveira et al. 2020; Shin et al. 2022). Its contours are shaped as much by alignments and tensions among external actors as by local-scale everyday

dynamics in host countries, wherein the BRI becomes a contingent experience. Critical development scholars and political ecologists have examined the BRI as a flexible, relational process that depends on the social and spatial embeddedness of each project (DiCarlo 2022; Driessen 2019; Fei 2023). They offer analyses of the BRI's impacts on places, the environment, and livelihoods, including how these are differentiated along lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as how injustices are interlinked.

A significant part of the global infrastructure gap has been addressed through BRI projects, generating essential life-supporting infrastructures and urban services that contribute to economic growth and development. Yet, the place-specific power hierarchies and asymmetries fundamentally shape the possibilities and perils of the BRI's transformative and yet destabilising forces. An important area that future research could explore further is the role of social movements in contesting the power of infrastructure megaprojects and development programs. While often place-specific, such grassroots activism creates alternative spaces for articulating non-capitalist visions of a 'good life', development strategies, national/local identities, and cultural systems, which continue to push research and theoretical frontiers to question the elite scripting of accumulation by dispossession.

## Towards a Three-Dimensional Analysis

The preceding critical engagements have made visible the BRI's imagined, material, and lived spaces across multiple different terrains, geographies, and scales. As the initiative edges into its second decade, I suggest a three-dimensional analysis in future research that considers horizontal connectivities, interscalar relations, and historical trajectories. First are the horizontal connectivities and interdependencies linking places where BRI projects materialise, including the character and dynamics of their co-evolution, as well as the attendant flows of capital and people. Second are the vertical interscalar relations between larger-scale and smaller-scale processes and ideologies. In the case of the BRI, this includes considering how changing global accumulation patterns, geopolitical interests, state policies, and related development processes shape the production and reproduction of places, environments, and livelihoods, while being subject to contestation and facilitation from local actors and power struggles. Third is the historical trajectory: how BRI-related places echo or reproduce historical processes, such as extractive capitalism and territorial struggle, and how these places may shape longer-term and larger-scale historical trajectories. ●

*This essay draws on the author's paper 'Locating the Belt and Road Initiative's Spatial Trilectics' (with Elia Apostolopoulou), published in Geography Compass in April 2023.*