

Global China  
**pulse**  
volume 1 | Issue 1 | 2022



This text is taken from *Global China Pulse: Volume 1, Issue 1, 2022*. The journal is produced by *The People's Map of Global China*.



### China in the World

World Map, seen from China. Source: Suzy Hazelwood, Flickr.com (CC).

# What is Global China?

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In the past two decades, China's ascendance in the world has given rise to 'Global China' as a subject of public debate and scholarly inquiry. If 'Global China Studies' is an emerging field of knowledge, it may be helpful to reflect on what our central concept is. We can discern at least three meanings of 'Global China' in circulation.

## Policy

At the most empirical and commonly used level, the term refers to China's expansive engagements beyond its geographical boundaries and national jurisdiction. In the past few decades, the international media has provided extensive, albeit uneven, coverage of China's presence and activities in different countries and arenas of world affairs, from human rights to climate change, commodity markets, digital technology, international development finance, foreign direct investment (FDI), soft-power projects, and medical diplomacy. In this usage, 'Global China' is widely portrayed as and assumed to be a grand strategy masterminded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and, more recently, motivated by President Xi Jinping's personal ambitions. As the policy names of this grand strategy—from Going Out to the Forum for China–Africa Cooperation, to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Made in China 2025—enter world headlines, Global China as an empirical phenomenon also becomes reified as a cohesive set of policies constituting an indomitable force that is predatory and imperialistic to some, but developmental and beneficial to others.

Thanks to China's immense geopolitical and economic influence, and the public's insatiable appetite for information on this global force, there is now a sizeable journalistic, non-fiction, and scholarly literature tracking Global China's footprint and its consequences. As a staple of international news, the Global China story has been told by amplifying key phrases in Beijing's policy announcements, aggregating volumes of outbound investment, loans and migration, or engrossing details

of corporate battles for strategic minerals between China and the United States in Africa. While the voluminous information reported is important to keep track of a monumental phenomenon, quantity is no guarantee of quality, or even accuracy. As Deborah Bräutigam (2009, 2015, 2020) has consistently highlighted in her myth-busting research, factual errors plague reports by even the most reputable Western media sources. The scope and secrecy of Chinese activities are definitely challenging constraints, but journalistic errors are sometimes egregious—from mistaking Chinese yuan for US dollars, thereby inflating Chinese concessional loan amounts, to stories about non-existent Chinese grabs for land and farms, and using inaccurate information about international loan standards to assess Chinese loan practices. Academic publishers have also joined in the market frenzy, releasing non-fiction mass-market tomes that offer no more than airbrushed descriptions and facile prescriptions (Strauss 2019). The peril of adopting a solid empiricist approach to Global China is that China's officialdom often becomes the analysis rather than the object of analysis, drastically underestimating the existing scope, depth, and complexity of Global China.

## Power

The second meaning of 'Global China' is more analytical and approaches the idea as a power project—that is, its essence is not policy or geography, but power. In this perspective, Global China is a bundle of generic power mechanisms—economic statecraft, patron-clientelism, and symbolic domination—that China deploys in specific ways in pursuing its project of outward expansion (Lee Forthcoming). 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?). Power is relational, so we would attend to resistance, bargaining, accommodation, appropriation, and adaptations by the germane players in this power project, not as an afterthought or secondary supplementary study but as *constitutive* of Global China. If you want to understand Chinese investments in African mines, you must look at the African elite and African labour and not just at China, and you must look at non-Chinese mining companies competing with Chinese ones to specify the Chinese method of FDI.

Emphasising power rather than policy also allows us to avoid singling out, essentialising, and demonising China. For instance, while only China has a policy like the BRI, the essence of the BRI is ‘economic statecraft’—using economic means to achieve political and diplomatic goals. The use of concessional loans and infrastructure as geopolitical leverage is by no means a Chinese invention or exclusive practice. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Western donor countries have famously imposed structural adjustment as a loan condition on debtor countries with the goal of changing the latter’s political economy and forging dependence on the West. Noting Western parallels also opens comparative questions of process and politics: what and who are the unique interests and players driving China’s lending spree? In most debates, people write about ‘China’ as though there was a wilful, sinister mastermind in Beijing pulling levers and making decisions. In reality, there are many bureaucratic, ministerial, corporate, and private interests behind the Going Out policy and the BRI (Jones and Zeng 2019; Zhang 2021); they compete as much as collude, and often end up defying, derailing, or defeating Beijing’s grand strategy.

In *The Specter of Global China* (Lee 2017), I detail the relational dynamic producing these supply-driven loans in Zambia: they were initiated not by would-be debtor countries but by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) going abroad to export surplus capacity. The clout and connections of these SOEs allowed them to secure financing from the Export–Import Bank of China or the China Development Bank and then peddle these approved, shovel-ready projects to government officials in Zambia. To maximise corporate profit, these powerful contractors exploited the clause of non-competitive single sourcing from China to set inflated price tags (30–40 per cent higher due to the lack of bidding, according to Zambian technocrats). Not only are these projects lucrative, they also guarantee payment by the Chinese Government as loans to African governments. African technocrats knew full well the problem of inflated loans would come back to haunt them, but election-minded politicians were more concerned about getting the roads and bridges built quickly to keep themselves in power than about repayment in 20 years when they would be long gone.

Elsewhere, China’s united-front strategy has drawn a lot of policy and academic attention. Scholars at the Hoover Institution have popularised the notion of ‘sharp power’—a term coined by international media and think tanks, and defined as the coercive,

corrupting, and covert exercise of influence and power that undermines democratic institutions. But at its heart, the united front is just old-fashioned patron–clientelism—namely, the exchange of benefits for political loyalty or support, at either the elite or the mass levels. Once again, China is hardly the first regime to use this means of power. The US domestic lobbying industry and US security partnerships with autocratic regimes abroad are prime examples of patron–clientelism. The questions we should ask are comparative ones: how are Chinese ways different, why, and under what conditions does the united front work, fail, or become appropriated?

Other examples are China’s Confucius Institutes (CIs) and the China Global Television Network (CGTN), which we can empirically examine as Chinese policy tools to achieve soft power. But viewing the CIs and CGTN, as well as scholarships, academic exchanges, and social media, from a power analytic means recognising them as generic strategies used by many nation-states, not just China, to achieve ‘symbolic domination’—mobilising symbols and cultures to shape habits of thought, dispositions, and the classification of reality. The questions then become what is unique about the Chinese way of symbolic domination, and what explains its uneven local reception and effectiveness? Maria Repnikova’s (2022) research on Chinese soft power and CIs in Ethiopia shed important light on the unique Chinese conception and practice of soft power; its target audience is not just international but also domestic, and its enticement not just cultural, but also pragmatic and economic.

A new generation of Global China scholars is producing cutting-edge scholarship adopting this power and relational approach. Among the works featured in a forthcoming special section of *The China Quarterly*, Liang Xu (Forthcoming) and Derek Sheridan (Forthcoming) consider the local dynamics and histories of South Africa and Tanzania, respectively, when they study Chinese investments in factories and wholesale trades. Their arguments are not just clichéd assertions or politically correct posturing that Africans have agency and can resist Chinese interests. They analyse how race, class, and gender hierarchies and imaginations in African contexts shape Chinese–African encounters. Juliet Lu (Forthcoming) and Wanjing Chen (Forthcoming) turn to Global China in Laos. Lu chronicles how a Chinese state investor in rubber plantations had to navigate the vagaries of local state politics in both China and Laos and was at times pulled by contradictory interests as a profit-

driven business and a development partner. Chen, on the other hand, highlights how overseas Chinese business leaders can usurp the patron–client ties spun by Chinese united-front officials to privilege their personal interests above those of their patrons.

## Method

The third approach to Global China emphasises the ‘global’ context, conditions, and impetuses of Chinese developments. Even domestic practices within China are influenced by global forces. Global China in this approach is less about China going out, and more about how transnational and global interests, imaginations, institutions, and politics shape what is happening inside China. I call it a ‘method’, as it is an analytical strategy that helps us overcome the longstanding ‘methodological nationalism’ that has plagued China studies, area studies, and the social sciences in general.

Darren Byler’s (2021) new book on Xinjiang as a penal colony is a prime example. He shows how digital surveillance systems and forced labour in cotton fields, factories, and concentration camps targeted at Uyghurs are atrocities accomplished by both the Chinese Government and a litany of global actors. American research universities, global IT giants, and the global apparel industry are business partners complicit in Xinjiang’s human rights violations. Beyond global capitalist interests, legal scholars have called out the global rhetoric and legalisation of the ‘War on Terror’ of the past two decades. The equivalents of the US *Patriot Act* enacted in 140 countries and counterterrorism measures required by the United Nations after the Security Council passed Resolution 1373 in 2001 (HRW 2012) have enabled and encouraged China’s ‘people’s war on terror’. In short, China has been part of a global trend of leveraging national security legislation to curb civil and ethnic-minority rights and consolidate executive power in different regime types (Cody 2021). How autocratisation, as a global political movement not reducible to global capitalism, has shaped China and its variant of authoritarianism is an important topic for Global China scholars.

Beyond Xinjiang, Franceschini and Loubere (Forthcoming) illustrate a ‘Global China as method’ approach by tracing Chinese/global entanglements—that is, material and discursive parallels and linkages—in various domains, from labour practices, surveillance capitalism, and overseas development financing, to the

neoliberalisation of universities and academia. Elsewhere, Hung (2020) reveals how US and Chinese corporate collaboration and competition underlie the rise and fall of 'Chimerica'. Before the 2010s, China recruited US corporations to be its proxy lobbyists in Washington. Amid China's economic slowdown after 2010, state-backed Chinese corporations became increasingly aggressive in expanding in domestic and global markets at the expense of US corporations, which ceased to lobby keenly for China in Washington. This means Reform and Opening-Up and its current incarnation are the results not just of the reform architect Deng Xiaoping or the CCP, as contemporary China scholarship has emphasised, but also of the alignment and contestations of global and domestic interests and players. Both global and domestic dimensions must be considered simultaneously, and not artificially compartmentalised as subjects for international relations and domestic Chinese politics, respectively.

## Past and Present

A new wave of scholarship has exhumed from the dustbin of history a pre-globalisation and pre-reform era 'Global China'. During the Cold War, despite US embargoes, communist China sustained international trade with and imports of technology from Europe and developing countries (Kelly 2021). The predecessors of today's BRI were China's extensive international development cooperation projects (Monson 2021; Zhang 2021; Rudyak 2021). As a sociocultural force, the ideology and practice of Maoism travelled widely in the Global South during the 1960s, and among the American and European Left (Calhoun 2008; Lanza 2017; Lovell 2019). Mao's *Little Red Book*, consciousness-raising, armed struggle, the people's war, and more were inspirations for the Black Panthers in the United States and many national-liberation movements in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Evans 2021; Snow 1989). Providing scarce material resources ranging from military training and medical aid to scholarships and railways, Maoist China was the self-proclaimed leader in the global fight against racial injustice and colonial subjugation and in the non-aligned movement that sought Third World solidarity and development models beyond those of the United States and the Soviet Union. Beyond the radical Left, transpacific exchanges between American and Chinese journalists,

musicians, dancers, Christians, and diasporic activists defy the facile idea of an insulated China before the official beginning of the Reform and Opening-Up era (Gao 2021; Wilcox 2019).

In a nutshell, Global China is an exciting invitation to rethink existing paradigms of the study of China and the world, past and present. The China–global nexus—connection, complicity, competition, collaboration, contrast, and convergence—compels us to move away from naturalising China as a geographical entity defined by its territorial boundaries, and assuming without empirical evidence or comparison that anything that happens therein is uniquely and quintessentially ‘Chinese’. At a time of rising (ultra-) nationalism and international rivalry, as methodological nationalism garners ever-more political, moral, and emotional purchase, *Global China*, as a critical and intellectual resource, is even more important and urgent. ●