

## The Origins of the Belt and Road Initiative

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2018

A mountain cannot turn, but a road can (*shan bu zhuan lu zhuan*).

So goes an old Chinese saying.

And another: A friend made is a road paved; an enemy created is a wall built  
(*jiaoge pengyou duo tiao lu, shuge diren duo du qiang*)

I have begun with these sayings, since they indicate how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) arises from Chinese tradition and culture. But this is not all, for it also emerges from Chinese socialism. Both are relevant in a creative interaction.

Before explaining, it is worth noting how others perceive the BRI. As the worldwide project became evident and as it was officially launched in 2016, some began deploying old categories, derived from Europe. ‘Creditor colonialism’ is one, first coined in India, where British colonialism has left a deep and lasting impression. That is, a piece of infrastructure is built in a country, with a long-term debt incurred. More generally, some have suggested that the Belt and Road Initiative is just another form of colonialism per se, in which China is seeking to influence and dominate more and more places throughout the world. On this matter, it is worth recalling an old (Danish) saying: a thief always thinks everyone else is a thief. In other words, if one comes from a background of international colonialism, then one views the activities of others in the same light.

All of this is quite unhelpful, so let us try another angle or two. The first concerns Chinese tradition and culture, which can be somewhat two-edged. The key example concerns the expeditions of the mariner, Zheng He, in the fifteenth century. His fleets set out with ships equipped to use the monsoonal winds to their advantage, voyaging to all corners of the China seas, if not further afield. Importantly, his ships were not festooned with guns – as European ships were not so long afterwards – but with treasure. The idea was to give this treasure as gifts to all that he would meet. On a more negative side, this approach entails an assumption that one’s own culture is superior. Thus, gifts for those less advanced was the best approach. On the positive side, it meant that he came offering gifts, not pointing guns. Zheng He’s voyages ended too soon, subject to the vagaries of the court

in Beijing, and not long afterwards Dutch ships would appear in China's part of world, full of cannon and the search for financial gain in areas they could colonise.

What has all this got to with roads and belts? Let us go further, recalling the sayings I quoted earlier. A road turns, it can find a way through. It enables one to meet and make friends, so much so that a new friend is like a paved road. In China, where I spend a good deal of my time, the poverty alleviation campaign – focused on lifting the last 40 million people (850 million so far since 1978) – has as one of its main concentrations the building of road and rail to remote areas. A significant reason for poverty is that some people live in inaccessible areas. These areas may be mountainous, they may be distant from regional centres. Build a good road, a major bridge, a high-speed rail link, and one finds access to the wider world and the opportunities it provides.

Let me give one example. Recently, I travelled from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in the far south of China, to Beijing. The whole distance is 2600 kilometres. Although I have a love for older and slower trains, I took the high-speed rail line (*gaotie*). It travels at 310 km per hour in full flight. Through Yunnan and the neighbouring Guizhou province, it stopped at a number of regional stations, in the mountains and remoter areas. But once it joined the trunk line, it stopped at only provincial capitals. The whole journey took twelve hours, from the far south to Beijing, in the north. The train was full all the way. This experience can be replicated again and again throughout China, whether it is a winding mountain road to remote areas, or yet another rail link across the breadth of the country.

So much for roads (and rail), but what about belts? The crucial character for 'belt' is *dai* (帶). This character has a rich semantic field indeed. Its basic sense is a belt or girdle, but it also connotes a range of meanings: a zone or area, and, as a verb, to take or bring, to bear or have something attached, to lead or teach, to look after and nurture, if not also to spur on. When this character is used, it invokes this rich range of meanings. Perhaps I can put it this way: when a lover – short-term or life-long – wishes to give an appropriate gift, he or she gives a belt. Why? A belt means intimacy, closeness and commitment.

One Belt, One Road, or, the Belt and Road Initiative, has a significant pedigree in Chinese tradition.

What about the Marxist tradition, especially as this has become interwoven with, and indeed transformed, Chinese culture? To understand this situation, we need to go back to none other than Stalin. There is a crucial phase in his thought (and consequent practice) that emerges especially in the turbulent and creative 1930s. This was the time when the ‘positive policy’ – or as some have called it, the ‘affirmative action’ program – in relation to minorities was first developed. They called them ‘nationalities’, a term I prefer (these days some like to call them ‘ethnic minorities’, but this designation has a host of problems). Given that the Soviet Union was the largest country in the world, it had many nationalities. Stalin sought to implement an old Bolshevik program: fostering the languages, cultures, education, political leadership and economic incentives of the many nationalities in the Soviet Union. It became the first and most advanced ‘affirmative action’ program in the world.

At a crucial moment, Stalin made a breakthrough: the model of ‘affirmative action’ within the Soviet Union also applied to colonised peoples throughout the world. In some respects, he argues, the Russian Revolution itself was an anti-colonial act, a freeing of a whole range of peoples from subservience to the colonial powers of Western Europe. But it also meant that the Soviet Union – as a ‘beacon’ and a ‘torch’ – would light the way to liberation from colonialism throughout the world. With this breakthrough, the Soviet Union began to foster anti-colonial struggles throughout the world. We find this taking place in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In this phase, the project entailed arms (think of the Kalashnikov), educations, logistics, education, funds and more.

Two implications follow. First, this support was the transformation of the global communist revolution into a new phase, focusing on the peripheries of the ‘global world order’ rather than its centre, as had first been imagined. Second, this focus led to one of the greatest transformations of the twentieth century, apart from the Russian Revolution itself: the success of one anti-colonial struggle after another, the vast majority of them supported by the Soviet Union (although it also generated tensions *between* socialist states, with some – like Cuba – at times criticising Soviet involvement in Latin America). By the 1970s, the world did not look the same anymore.

The question remains: what has all this got to do with China?

In many respects, the Belt and Road Initiative is fostering a new phase of the anti-colonial struggle. This may seem like a surprising claim, so let me explain: in the wake of the twentieth-century's success in throwing off the old colonial yoke, a new yoke was found. This involved 'foreign aid', rendering many of the former colonies financially dependent of the powers from whom they received this 'aid'. The process was streamlined and globalised through organisations such as the World Bank, which would give loans with heavy conditions attached – all the way from neo-liberal economic and social 'reforms' to implicitly forcing 'regime change'. Essentially, these loans comprised another form of bribery: cash handed over to a local ruling class to as to keep them compliant in the global hierarchy. In other words, it was not the exception but the rule that substantial wads of cash ended up in the pockets of the local ruling class. What better way to keep them on side?

As a result, nothing much was built, no infrastructure – crucial for any country's economy and society – established. As someone from Romania put it to me: in rich countries, corruption happens, but schools, roads, rail and so on still get built; in poor countries, corruption happens and nothing is built.

This is where the Belt and Road Initiative offers a very different model, developed out of Chinese experience. Any country with an infrastructural need is potentially eligible. In Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, Asia, project after project is being built by Chinese companies. So also in countries regarded as financial pariahs within Europe, such as Greece or Serbia or Hungary. Even in Greenland, a Chinese company is in the final round of negotiations to build a new airport. Does China have an agenda? Of course, not least of which is enabling a shift from the 'global world order' that has dominated since the end of the Second World War. They prefer to call it a 'global village', without demanding changes to the internal structures of governance, economy and society. Why? The Chinese are keen indeed on sovereignty. In the same way that they make sure no other country interferes with their internal affairs, so also do they relate with other countries.

With all this focus on infrastructure, which neo-liberal economics typically finds a waste of money (as Marx already pointed in the third volume of *Capital*, why build something when you can speculate, making money form money?), China's know-how has

and continues to leap ahead. The signature example is high-speed trains. Initially, the Chinese drew on German and French expertise in order to build the 'Harmony' series of trains. But as they laid out thousands upon thousands of kilometres of track through deserts and soaring mountain ranges, and as they built hundreds and hundreds of trains, they developed the technology beyond what is found elsewhere. The new Fuxian train is the result, with longer life in its crucial parts, higher speed, smoother running and greater comfort. It travels the 2100 kilometres from Beijing to Guangzhou in eight hours. Crucially, the train was completely designed and constructed in China. This example could be replicated again and again. So when a Chinese company bids for an international infrastructure project, it is offering not cheap labour but the highest quality product.

To wrap up: I began with two Chinese sayings, so let me finish with another: Do not be afraid of a long road, but be afraid only of a shortage of aspiration (*bupa luchang zhipa zhiduan*).