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BRI, Logistics, and Global Infrastructure:

New World Order, the Game of Go, and the Dispositif of *Shi*

Joyce C.H. Liu

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies

National Chiao Tung University

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國立交通大學文化研究國際中心

International Center for Cultural Studies

National Chiao Tung University

Rm.103 HA Building 2, 1001 University Road

Hsinchu, Taiwan

Tel: +886-3-5712121 Ext.58274, 58272

Fax: +886-3-5734450

Website: https://iccs.nctu.edu.tw/en/wps_list.php

Email: iccs.wps@gmail.com

**BRI, Logistics, and Global Infrastructure:
New World Order, the Game of Go, and the Dispositif of *Shi*¹**

Joyce C.H. Liu
National Chiao Tung University

Abstract

This contribution discusses the concept of logistics in the apparatus of global infrastructure, focusing on the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects that have directly or indirectly involved different parts of the world. My initial questions are: What is the motor behind this project? Is the will of Chinese President Xi Jinping the sole pushing force behind this BRI projects? What does he want? Through the process of my research, I realized that merely one person's power could not achieve the automatic apparatus that drives this gigantic engine. Instead, it requires the participation, or desire, from all sides and for different purposes. My questions then evolve into a different dimension: What is the imaginary of this global vision or total vision? Or, to put in another word, what is 'the infrastructure of the infrastructure' that undergirds this OBOR project? How is the global infrastructure invested, with what interest and through what sectors? Why does China employ the rhetoric such as Confucian virtues, harmony under the *tianxia*, Third World brotherhood, and so on to advocate the BRI? I want to address the above diverse questions through the concept of logistics. I shall bring in the idea of the Chinese game of Go and the dispositif of *Shi* (勢). I argue that the Chinese concept of the dispositif of *Shi*, the administration of the circumstances and situation, can help us better understand the BRI strategic economy in managing this new world order and its potential development.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Taiwan; logistics; Go; dispositif of *Shi*

Introduction

I was struck by the sight of the prominent presence of China Aid as soon as I stepped out of the Addis Ababa Bole International Airport during my trip to Ethiopia for a conference in January 2019. The billboard of China Communications Construction Company is right outside

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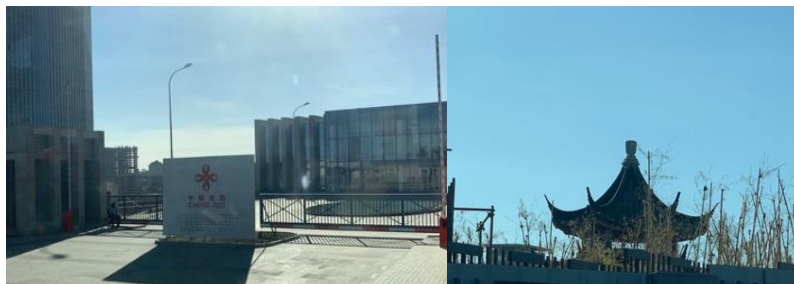
of the airport. It writes: “Civilized Construction to Reveal our Elegance” (see picture 1).



Pic. 1. The advising billboard of China Communications Construction Company at the Addis Ababa Bole International Airport. Photo by the author.

Pic. 2. The signs of China Jiangsu International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

Following the bus tour guided by the colleague from the local Modern Art Museum, Gebre Kristos Desta Center, I was led to see the district where Chinese construction companies have built many high-rise buildings and expensive department malls. I noticed several signs of China Jiangsu International, one of the many Chinese state-owned construction enterprises, in different areas of the city (see picture 2). In the downtown center of Addis Ababa, the sign of “China Aid” and a Chinese pavilion in the park of the headquarters of the African Union (AU), constructed by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation, also show the stable connection not only between Ethiopia and China but between the African Union and China (see pictures 3–4). Among the fully launched construction projects and the smart buildings at the center of Addis Ababa of local residential areas, I spotted the disturbing juxtapositions of slums, the half-completed buildings pending, and poor people walking or lingering in the streets. (see pictures 5–8)



Pics 3-4. African Union (AU) in the downtown center of Addis Ababa, with the sign of “China Aid” at the front

gate and a Chinese pavilion in the park. Photos by the author.



Pics. 5–8 Smart malls and hotel amidst local slums, half constructed buildings, and the poor in the streets with the advising board of logistics in Addis Ababa. Photos by the author.

According to local people's accounts, many of the construction projects were suspended because the companies have used up the funding, and these cases mostly involved corruption. Also, having seen all the fancy buildings and new constructions in Addis Ababa, it was shocking for me to learn that there were no adequate fundamental infrastructural facilities for the citizens, even in the capital and the largest city in Ethiopia. People have to prepare an electric generator at home because there is no electricity supply in the general neighborhood. Most people have to go for a long distance to fetch water because there's no water supply system in their districts.

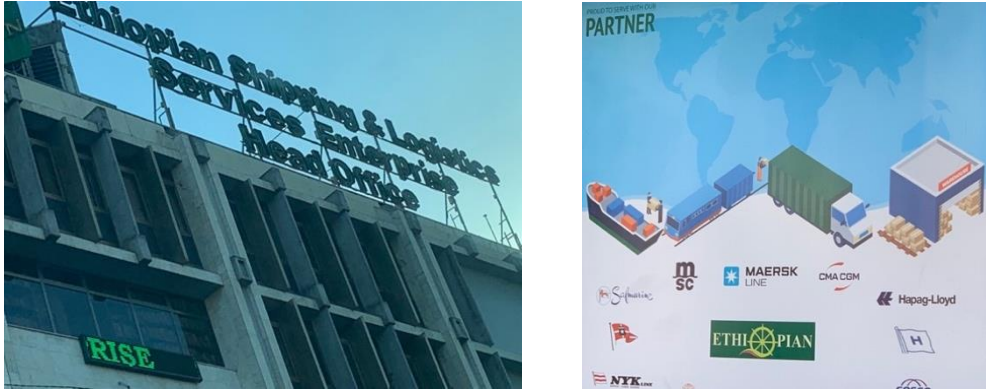
I later realized, through further research, that China Communications Construction Company labeled on the billboard outside the airport is in charge of the airport construction project. The Ethiopian government aims to make Addis Ababa a strategic aviation hub between China and Africa. The Bole International Airport is a project the Ethiopian Airlines Group signed with China Communications Construction in 2017. According to recent research by Gordon Pirie

on China's strategic aviation projects through the BRI projects, the airport was funded with a loan of USD 345 mio. from China's Exim Bank and anticipated continued cooperation with China as part of a planned USD 3 bio. airport outside Addis Ababa (Pirie 2020: 80). It reflects the rapid increase of trade, aid, and infrastructure projects in Addis Ababa since the mid-1990s. Pirie's study also shows that Addis Ababa is only one of the many strategic aviation hubs between China and Africa. Among more than 30 African countries that have signed an infrastructure finance agreement with China, the biggest recipients are resource-rich countries: Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Sudan. Among other projects, most prominent are the transport projects that include railway, road, and airports connecting different parts of Africa with cities in China. In addition to Addis Ababa, there exist 77 construction and associated hardware projects at airports in Africa, including Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, and Zambia. The investment model involves loans and grants, but also part-exchange deals over oil and minerals. (Pirie 2020. 77–80)

China Jiangsu International, which I saw on the billboards in the streets, is primarily in charge of project contracting, labor service, importing and exporting trade business, and real estate development with more than 100 countries. Particularly in North Africa, East Africa, South Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean Sea. It was established through the People's Republic of China's (PRC) State Council's authorization in 1980. Over the past three decades, executing the "Go Out Strategy" promoted by the Chinese government, China Jiangsu International has become one of the leading cooperate enterprises both domestically and internationally. Now it has become one of the top 200 largest contractors in the world, many of them are related to the BRI projects. (China Jiangsu International Economic and Technical Cooperation Group, LTD. n.d.)

Addis Ababa has been described as a city that looks like a Chinese city, such as Shenzhen, Chongqing, or the suburbs of Shanghai, with the skyscrapers, trains, roads, and industrial parks (Marsh 2018). The economics of Ethiopia has been on the rise in recent decades. Its government actively seeks bilateral partnerships for infrastructure development. It was one of only two African countries with high-level delegation representation at the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing on 14 and 15 May 2017. The results of the Second Belt and Road Forum in 2019 promises to boost the Ethiopia-China relations further (Global Times 2019; Tibebe 2017). The head office of the Ethiopian Shipping & Logistics

Services Enterprise that I observed in Addis Ababa is in charge of the transportation of commodities and materials from any port in China to Djibouti seaport to Ethiopia dry port. (see pictures 9–10)



Pics 9–10: Ethiopian Shipping & Logistics Services Enterprise. Photos by the author.

The above-described observations of the China Aid constructions and the logistics chain in Ethiopia triggered my interest. I have been watching the development of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in recent years, as most people do because this global infrastructure project has directly or indirectly involved different parts of the world today. My initial questions are: What is the motor behind the BRI? Is the will of Chinese President Xi Jinping the sole pushing force behind the BRI projects? Why does he employ rhetoric such as Confucian virtues, harmony under *tianxia* (天下) and Third World brotherhood, to advocate the BRI? *Tianxia* means “all under heaven,” indicating the total terrain under the rule. Does China take the whole world as its own *tianxia*?

After my trip to Addis Ababa, I was convinced that it is not that simple. The discrepancy between the Ethiopian government’s embrace of the China Aid economic partnership and the mal-functioning of local infrastructural construction points to more questions. Merely one person’s power could not achieve the automatic apparatus that drives this gigantic engine. The BRI requires participation, or desire, from all sides and for different purposes. My questions then evolved into a different dimension: What is the imaginary of this global vision or total vision that everyone is so enthusiastic about embracing? Or, to put in Balibar’s words, what is “the infrastructure of the infrastructure” Balibar (2002: xiii) that undergirds China’s Belt and Road strategy? How is the global infrastructure invested, with what interest and through what

sectors? To what ends is it targeted? How does the concept of *tianxia* influence the economic strategic measures of global governance China plans to engage?

As explained by Giorgio Agamben, the word 'economy' is derived from the Latin word *oikonomia* and the ancient Greek word *οἰκονόμος*. It indicates the management and administration of the order in the household, the smallest social unit. However, the economy's activities can never be separated from the *polis*, i.e., the sphere of the state, and would always function as the political economy (Agamben 2011: 17–21). The BRI strategic economy, I would argue, refers to the management, administration, arrangement of the circulation of resources, goods, people, and information in such a strategic way that the entire networks serve the vision of China's *tianxia* with the infrastructure of the global management.

In this chapter, I want to address the above-raised questions of the BRI strategic economy through the analytic concept of logistics. I shall bring in the idea of the Chinese game of Go and the dispositif of *Shi* (勢) in my analysis of the BRI global logistics. I argue that the Chinese concept of the dispositif of *Shi*, the administration of the circumstances, and the propensities of the situation, can help us better understand the BRI strategic economy in managing this new world order and its potential development. The activities of the economy do not concern merely commerce and trading activities, and cannot be separated from politics. When the entire world is viewed as China's own *tianxia*, its own terrain, then the *nomos* of the world and the economic management of all the goods and resources belong to its business. The concept of *Shi* would then explain how China's Belt and Road strategy operates its administration of the infrastructure to prepare for the potential development of the situation. If *tianxia* is the scope of the total plan, the cartographic administration of all the threads of propensities would be all the trickier and deserve our fuller examination.

Where is Taiwan in the Picture of the Global Web?

Before discussing the cartographic administration of the global BRI, as a scholar in humanities and social sciences based in Taiwan, the first question that I need to address is: Is Taiwan part of the BRI?

The answer is yes, and no. No, because Taiwan never appears on any map of the Belt and Road projects. Nevertheless, absolutely yes, to a certain extent. It is the negative image in the picture

and reflects China's intention to control not only the situation in the Taiwan Strait but also on a much larger scale. China has long determined to take Taiwan back under its territorial control. In recent decades, all the countries that have switched their diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China have joined China's BRI. The most recent cases of Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019 indicate that China's move has extended to the so-called Third Island Chain and directly threaten the security line of the United States (Post Courier 2019).

The First Island Chain begins at the Kuril Islands, includes Taiwan and Borneo, and ends at the northern portion of the Philippines. The Second Island Chain refers to the Bonin Islands and Volcano Islands of Japan and Mariana Island. The Third Island Chain is the closest to the United States that starts at the Aleutian Islands and finishes up in Oceania, with the Hawaiian Islands. The South Pacific Islands have become a frontline in a multi-nation contest for power and influence in Greater Asia. China's move to intervene in the Third Island Chain indicates her intention of competing with the US in terms of economic, diplomatic, and security controls in the region. (Manthorpe 2019; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2018)

China's strategic moves also include countries in Central America which signed BRI agreements, such as the Dominican Republic in 2018, the Republic of El Salvador and the Republic of Panama in 2017, as well as countries in Africa, such as Burkina Faso in 2017, the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe in 2016, the Republic of Gambia in 2013 and so on (AP 2019; Koop 2019; Ortiz 2019; Rong 2019; Silk Road Briefing 2019; Zhou 2019; Kerr, David, and Chan, Han May 2018; Meick, Ker, and Chan 2018; New Europe 2018; Breuer 2017). All these countries have switched their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in recent decades.

Cutting off Taiwan's diplomatic relations is one of China's tactics to coerce the international sphere to acknowledge the One-China policy and to force Taiwan to submit to the sovereign rule of China. Such a strategic move, of course, does not happen only since the beginning of the BRI. Starting from the Bandung Conference in 1956 and the Non-Aligned Movement of the Third World countries, China had established its diplomatic relations with the Third World countries and won over the voting seats at the United Nations (UN). The number of countries that maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan dropped according to the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry from 70 to 15 in 2019. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan))

| Year of switching diplomatic relation from Taiwan to China | Region Country Name | Year of receiving benefit of BRI investment from China |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| Central America | | |
| 2018 | Dominican Republic | 2019 |
| 2017 | El Salvador ² | 2018 |
| 2017 | Panama | 2018 |
| 2007 | Costa Rica | 2018 |
| 2005 | Grenada | 2018 |
| 2004 | Commonwealth of Dominica | |
| Pacific Islands | | |
| 2019 | Kiribati | 2019 |
| 2019 | Solomon Islands | 2019 |
| 2004 | Republic of Vanuatu | 2018 |
| Africa | | |
| 2017 | Burkina Faso | |
| 2016 | São Tomé and Príncipe ³ | 2017 |
| 2013 | Gambia | 2019 |
| 2008 | Malawi ⁴ | |
| 2005 | Chad ⁵ | 2016 |
| 2005 | Senegal ⁶ | 2017 |
| 2003 | Liberia | 2019 |

² El Salvador signed a joint agreement on the BRI in 2018. Xi reminds El Salvador to strictly uphold the One-China principle and pledged more bilateral economic cooperation with the Central American nation

³ Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, an island state located off the African west coast, cut its diplomatic ties with Taiwan in late 2016 and established relations with the PRC. China announced to donate 146 million USD to Sao Tome and Principe in April 2017 for the construction of infrastructure (Breuer 2017)

⁴ China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), which is involved in many infrastructure projects in Africa, is currently building a 400 km railway from Chipata eastwards to Serenje, linking Zambia with Mozambique's coast via Malawi.

⁵ Chad signed an MoU on OBOR-related infrastructure and construction project in 2013, renewed in 2016.

⁶ Since reverting its recognition from Taiwan to China in 2005, the total volume of China-Senegal trade increased from \$196.7 million in 2005 to \$2.3 billion in 2015. A new Belt and Road cooperation document signed in 2018 when Xi visited Senegal (Tremann 2019).

| Europe | | |
|---------------|-----------------|--|
| 2001 | North Macedonia | |

Source: Compiled by the author

Logistics and Strategic Chokepoints

China's strategic plan does not stop with aiming to reunify with Taiwan. With Taiwan and the Pacific Islands, China intends to gain more leverage against the US over the Pacific Rim and much more on a global scale.

The study of critical logistics can help us obtain a different perspective concerning the objectives of the BRI (Chua et al. 2018; Cuppini and Frapporti 2018; Toscano 2014). Logistics refers to a wide range of circulatory processes, including goods, services, bodies, information, and capital (Chua et al. 618). The smooth transaction from one point to the other is to satisfy customer's requirements. 'Logistics' has its origins in the military sector; it refers to strategies for the procurement as well as supply, maintenance, and transportation of military equipment, facilities and personnel. During WWI and WWII, the techniques of global logistics were highly developed and employed in all military fields. After WWII, the same technics were transferred not only to the Vietnam War but also to the commercial spheres in other transnational sectors. The seamless connection from the supply line, production line, and consumption line, with the global information flow, market distribution, instant services, and financialization management. In this process, the governments around the world also have devised parallel technologies of control and administration to ensure the management of logistics (Chua et al. 2018: 618–620, 622; Cuppini and Frapporti 2018: 96; Toscano 2018: 4).

Etymological, 'logistics' derives from ancient Greek, referring to arithmetic practice, rational thinking, reason as well as computation. Basically, 'logistics' is associated with the act of reasoning and calculating the frame and methods of logistics. Thereby economic, political and not least military motivations play in. What is the prime motor behind the BRI? Who is calculating and operating the strategies and with what economic, political, and military objectives?

The major infrastructure networks of the land corridors include the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor, the China-

Indochina Peninsula Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and, until 2019, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). The major infrastructure networks of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) goes through the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean area. In addition to the above land road and sea road, there is also the Arctic Silk Road along the Northern Sea Route in the Arctic, and the Super Grid with high voltage electricity grids across China, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia (Heiduk and Sakaki 2019; Siddiqui 2019; Blanchard 2018; Sternberg et al. 2017). In response to the China-led BRI and the logistics of the flow of resources, we see the increase of the highly developed supply line and assembly line, the cartographical design and the gigantic construction of cross-continental high-speed railways, roads, ports, bridges, canals, pipelines, massive warehouses, containers, freights and so on. By the end of August 2019, China has signed 195 co-operational documents on the BRI with 139 countries and 30 international organizations, over USD 900 bio (“Belt and Road Initiative” 2020). At this point, the BRI has involved not only the broader region of Asia, but also Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Central and South Americas. The visual image of the map that the BRI network established, crossing four continents, is impressive, if not alarming.

What draws my attention in this cartographical vision of the BRI is the chokepoints this global infrastructure development project seizes. In critical logistics studies, chokepoint refers to the significant location, such as a bridge, a narrow alley, or a seaport of a strait that could control the passage of the movement of military troops or the transportation of goods. If we compare the map of these BRI ports with the route of the oil transit chokepoints,⁷ or the map of global maritime chokepoints,⁸ we can see the strategic plan recurred from the imperial expansion of the maritime age to contemporary trade-military dispositifs. This maritime trade route, or economic expansion, is also crucial for the subsequent military conquest of the Global South by the European Colonial powers. The concept of logistics, closely linked with military management of the transportation of goods, weapons, man powers, and information, can help us analyze the strategic move on contemporary geo-economic and geopolitical stage (Heiduk and Sakaki 2019: 94–99, 106–111; Siddiqui 2019: 220–231; Blanchard 2018: 333–335, 340–

⁷ The Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, Cape of Good Hope, Bab el-Mandab, Danish Straits, Suez Canal, Bosphorus, and Panama Canal (Bender 2019; US Energy Information Administration, October 15, 2019).

⁸ For example, Panama, Gibraltar, Oresund, Suez, Hormuz, and Malacca (The Geography of Transport Systems 2017).

342). The historical chokepoints such as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Cape of Good Hope, the Dardanelles, and the Bosphorus Strait all become integrated in China's BRI, and a new map of global trade and global political power has been shaped through the dispositif of these strategic chokepoints. The seizing of these chokepoints, either for energy purpose, maritime trade, or military power, shows the overlapped vision of the world order from the past to the present.

In recent years, between 2015 and 2019, China has gained more and more control in the waters and leased ownership over several critical ports: the Malaka Gateway for 99 years, the Gwadar Port in Pakistan for 40 years, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar for 50 years, Kuantan in Malaysia for 60 years, Obock of Djibouti for ten years, Hambantota of Sri Lanka for 99 years, Muara of Brunei for 60 years, Feydhoo Finolhu of Maldives for 50 years (Ghiasy, Su, and Saalman 2018; Voice of Djibouti 2015). The strategic determination of the port locations of the MSR extends far more extensive than a regional plan. It indicates China's plan to redirect the global shipping routes and to play a more substantial role in international shipping (Nouwens 2019).

In addition to the Strait of Malacca, the Kra Canal role in Thailand also surfaced in China's BRI project to resolve the Malacca dilemma. The Kra Canal is a master plan in China's BRI to link the Pacific with the Andaman Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea (Firstpost 2018). Vivek Katju, ex-secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, suggested that, for China, the Kra Canal is strategically crucial because "the Malacca choke makes China uneasy" (Katju 2018). China has been dependent on the Malacca Strait, both for its general trade and as a trade route for China's oil imports. It is, therefore, to China's benefit if the Kra Canal can be constructed. This infrastructure initiative has alarmed not only Singapore, but also other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and India as well (Katju 2018). In January 2020, the Kra Canal project has been brought up again in the parliament and won the support from both the government coalition parties and the opposition parties (Bangkok Post Public Company 2020a, 2020b). Previous concerns over national security and the controversies concerning the southern provinces were not raised.⁹

China's increasing presence at the Bab al-Mandeb, one of the world's most strategic chokepoints, and its military base in Djibouti, have attracted researchers' attention (Styan 2020;

⁹ The construction of the Kra Canal will separate the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat from the rest of the country, and it means the Muslim and Malay population of these provinces will be physically cut apart from the other Buddhist and ethnically Thai population.

Cabestan 2019; Gresh 2017). Geoffrey Gresh suggests that China's "far sea" strategy in recent years through the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century has demonstrated its desire for "blue-water expansion" and "thirst for energy" (Gresh 39, 40–41). China's geostrategic move through the MSR and its adoption of Mahan's concept of sea power show that the emphasis is not only on the coastal defense and but also on far sea defense to protect the country's transportation routes. The maritime chokepoints along global sea lines of communications (SLOCs) are strategic locations to secure trade routes and energy routes. The Bab-el-Mandeb, located between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa, linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, is one of these strategic points (Gresh 2017: 39). According to the statistics of the US Energy Information Administration, an estimated 3.3 mio. barrels of oil passed through the Strait per day in 2015, out of a world total of about 43 mio. barrels per day shipped by tankers (US Energy Information Administration 2019).

In November 2015, the Chinese government announced the decision to build a military base in Djibouti, completed in 2017, further displayed Beijing's need to protect its security interests in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean and to compete with the "West-dominated world order" (Cabestan 2019: 2). Close to Djibouti, Egypt's Suez Canal economic zone also has integrated with China since the beginning of the BRI. The Suez Canal has always been a strategically crucial chokepoint and was the cause of rivalry between several great powers during the colonial period in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the British, the French, the German, and the US and the Soviet Union empires. In the 21st century, with BRI's global infrastructure project, China has undoubtedly entered the stage. Cabestan points out that Djibouti Base, initially as "logistics support facility", providing "rest and rehabilitation" for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and "base for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian rescue", has rapidly turned into a "full-fledged naval and army base, able to conduct all sorts of missions, including combat operations" (Cabestan 2019:1, 16). Djibouti's case also shows the impact of the debt-diplomacy that has been debated and criticized (Styan 2020: 201–202).

Other cases are the Strait of Hormuz where a third of the world's liquified natural gas passes through also a quarter of the total global oil consumption. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will link the southwestern port of Gwadar via the Strait of Hormuz to Kashgar in China's northwestern autonomous region Xinjiang. This corridor will shorten the distance by

12,000 km (Lin 2017). The Panama Canal in Central America that connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans is another chokepoint that China's Silk Road has secured. China established its diplomatic ties with Panama after Panama ceased its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan in June 2017. Five months later, China and Panama signed 19 bilateral cooperation agreements. These agreements affirmed that "Panama adheres to the Chinese Silk Road Initiative, enhancing its role as the 'great connection' with the Panama Canal, (...) and further strengthening world maritime trade" (Garzon 2017).

IR with Chinese Characteristics, the Game of Go, and the Dispositif of *Shi* (勢)

Contemporary scholarship has offered diverse interpretations concerning the China-led BRI. Chinese International Relations (IR) scholars try to develop IR 'with Chinese characteristics'. A whole group of Chinese scholars also employ Western IR language in their interpretation of China's rising status in international politics. These Sinicizing of IR theory labeled as 'IR theory with Chinese characteristics' or 'a Chinese IR school' is modeled after the practice of the Sinification of Marxism and Socialist Society with Chinese characteristics advocated by Chinese political leaders (Yang 2011; Johnston 2008; He 2007; Pang 2006; Hu 2006). The *tianxia* system initially indicates an idea of the Sino-centric hierarchical relationship among unequal partner states that was practiced through the observance of rituals in the world of a *Pax Sinica*. Now it is believed that Chinese scholars aim at theoretically constituting a world order 'better' than the Westphalian system (Dreyer 2015). Confucian scholar James C. Hsiung stressed that China had dominated the world economy for at least one thousand years before the West's rise after 1500, but had never developed the colonial rule as the West did. The rapid revival of the economic powers of East Asian countries proved that "those Asian societies that are the most heavily imbued with Confucian influence fared the best and recovered the fastest" (Hsiung 2002: 112). Hsiung also insisted that the China-led system, inspired by "Sinic virtues and values", was characterized by formal hierarchy but informal equality, which is contrary to the formal equality and informal hierarchy practiced in the Western tradition (Hsiung 2012; Hsiung 2002: 112). In this wave of re-writing IR theory as an alternative to the Westphalian system, *tianxia* trope was primarily used and suggested an earnest reconsideration of international order in China (cf. Liu 2017, 2016).

Other scholars have referred to the theory of the World-Island and the Heartland by Halford John Mackinder to interpret China's BRI. Such an approach suggests that Mackinder's theory of geopolitics pitted naval powers against land-based powers for control of the Eurasian heartland. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the US appeared to gain complete control over Eurasia and the so-called World Island, China is now replacing the role of Russia and assuming the role of a hegemon. China has prepared this path from the 20th century and had a lasting influence over Eurasia for the past century (Nordin and Weissmann 2018; Harper, Edwards, and Gerrits 2017; Fallon 2015).

The strategic disposition of the chokepoint locations along the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the MSR, is, to me, much more comprehensive in connectivity than the projects of the other great powers in the past. On the map, we seem to see a Game of Go that ancient Chinese philosophy of military tactics suggests. The game of Go, *weiqi* (圍棋), literally meaning "a game of encircling" or "a game of besieging", is a battle for territory. When the player's region is all surrounded by the opponent on all sides, with no corners alive, then he is doomed to be captured and loses the game. We perhaps can see the BRI as a response to former US President Barack Obama's rebalancing strategy, as some colleagues in this volume suggested. The US and Japanese Open and Free Indo-Pacific strategies, on the other hand, as indicated by other authors, can also be viewed as a reaction to the BRI.

China's BRI, however, cannot be considered as the game of Go. There is no immediate opponent player counter-acting China's move step by step. On the contrary, when the stone is placed strategically at the board, such as the chokepoints that I've discussed previously, the host countries and the surrounding infrastructures are ready to embrace the move. China's strategic move is like a one-person game of Go, or a gigantic game of Go in *longue durée*, *arranging all possible potentiality for future development*. Instead, I argue, we should see the strategic economy of China's 'BRI game' as the disposition of the *Shi* to control and maneuver the situation's propensities in the beginning, as the Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sunzi (孫子) says. The art of war, according to Sunzi, is to know how to manipulate the situation and the circumstance, *Shi*, through well-planned tactical dispositions so that the flow of energy is to one's favor. Sunzi¹⁰. writes,

¹⁰ Sunzi Bingfa 《孫子兵法》 Bingshi 〈兵勢〉, "Energy" in *The Art of War*, translated by Lionel Giles. Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://ctext.org/art-of-war/energy>

The clever combatant looks to the effect of combined energy ... in the way that the situation would be as smooth as the momentum of a round stone rolled down a mountain thousands of feet in height.

This passage indicates that if the energy is well maneuvered at the first moment, then the combatant general can win the situation without any further effort.

The French sinologist and philosopher François Jullien offer a rather thorough interpretation of Sunzi's art of war and the concept of *Shi* in his book *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China* (Jullien 1999). Jullien points out that Sunzi's notion of military strategy is well-known for his minimizing armed engagement to seek victory at the earliest stage. On this notion, Jullien explains, the leader of the army needs to know how to intervene "when dispositions [*shi*] and maneuvers are still depending on our initiatives and to be adjusted at will" (Jullien 1999: 27–29). According to Jullien's explanation of the concept of *Shi* and its circumstance, the reality is a process of transformation in its totality with the inherent tendency, inclination, and propensity. The propensities of things lie within every element and the very "configuration or disposition of things." In the process of history, for example, we see "the tendencies resulting from particular situations in history and the propensity that governs the overall process" (Jullien 1999: 14).

Jullien stressed that "from ancient times, China has conceived a strategic thinking": "evaluating the advantage in such a way as to adopt it, I create from it a potential of situation that will assist the external conditions" (Sunzi, ch. 1; quoted in Jullien 2020: 170). Chinese emperors, army generals, and the general population knew perfectly well the techniques of governmentality through the manipulation of *Shi*. The mechanism functions automatically so that the manipulator is entirely inconspicuous. The people are not forced to obey, but would spontaneously follow the dictate of the emperor (Jullien 1999: 60). Jullien also points out that it is crucial to conceive *Shi* in its "totality" because the reality of things "only exists – and thus only manifests itself – in a totality, through the force of propensity that links its various elements as a whole" (Jullien 1999: 99).

To Jullien, the Chinese wisdom of the manipulation of *Shi* contributes a particular mode of

absolute immanent governmentality. He explains, “the potential of the situation” (*jizhishi* 幾之勢), that is, the first moment of conception, is the primal embryonic point, the point that is far antecedent to the happening of the event (Jullien 2004: 109–110). Jullien stressed that the Chinese ruler knows how to manipulate the situation in the very beginning, made it implicated with the desired tendencies and let the transformation take place on its own. This immanent “pure dispositif”, in Jullien’s words, could accomplish the development of things, leaving the rest to the inclination of things, *laisser advenir l’effet* (Jullien 1996: 143). The propensities of things are determined in the configuration of the broader situation. Every element in the total picture, even the potential power of each and everyone in the scheme, has been implicated, measured, calculated, and prescribed in the first place.

When is the first moment for China’s dispositif of the *Shi* for its economic and political control of the situation? In retrospect, it is long before 2013. As early as the policy of reform and opening, implemented by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the strategy of expansion had started. It was followed up with the full launch of the series of Five-Year Plans since 1991. Since then, China launched its military strategy of opening coastal and border areas along the northwest borders, selecting 13 cities to open to economic cooperation and 241 open ports. It is one of the projects of the Eighth Five-Year-Plan and leads to the “Go Out Strategy”, promoted by former President Jiang Zemin. It was reinforced in the Ninth Five-Year Plan, through policies such as opening up 1100 border cities and establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The open border cities project has been regularly renewed and expanded to the northeast borders over the past 25 years, with the prospect to complete it in the year 2025. Together with the Five-year Plan of 1992, Beijing started to build a national financial center in 1993. Shanghai’s World Financial Center started its construction in 1997. Since then, the urban space of Beijing and Shanghai, and the mode of life of people in these cities, as well as many other cities, have undergone drastic alterations (Katz 2008; Wójcik and Camilleri 2015; Larsen 2012; Wang, Zhao, and Wang 2007).

***Tianxia* and its Reproduction System¹¹**

The administration of the chokepoints and the Silk Roads on land, at sea, and through the cyber network, I want to emphasize, is undergirded by a vision of *tianxia*. It is a total view of the

¹¹ The author wrote lengthy discussions on the concept of *tianxia* and the question of *Pax Sinica* in other essays (Liu 2019, 2016).

expansive space, similar to the concept of *Großraum* proposed by Carl Schmitt but much more aggressive, that functions as the infrastructure of the infrastructure, i.e., the motor behind the project. *Großraum* refers to the more expansive space beyond the European continent, as rivalry against the US, while *tianxia* refers to all the spheres under heaven. The preparation of the second coming of the *Pax Sinica* in the 21st century has taken up a more contentious dispositif of infrastructure with a global vision of the control of *tianxia*. This global infrastructural management, of both trade routes and energy routes, with security controls, leaves its imperial trademarks around the world, not through military occupation, but with promises of development and construction aids, as well as soft powers such as Confucius Institutes.

The project of the BRI, through the global network as a whole, appears, as discussed above, like a gigantic one-person game of Go in *longue durée* with Chinese characteristics, more on the manipulation of *Shi* that could be beneficial to China. The purchases or leasing of seaports and securing of particular chokepoints on the road and at sea, already indicate the military strategies behind such a global vision. The large projects of infrastructures, such as the construction of pipelines, railroads that cut across Southeast Asia and Central Asia, artificial islands in the South China Sea, also indicate a new form of resource appropriation and global control of internet information security through cyber-networks. These encompassing bilateral trade deals often end up either as debt traps or involving corruption on both ends. All these gestures seem to reveal the reawakening of the mentality and the vision of the ancient empire of *tianxia*, i.e., all-under-heaven belongs to the sovereign; everyone under heaven is my subject.¹² We seem to look at a project aiming for the scope of *tianxia*, all-under-the-heaven, a borderless realm, with no outside.

The revived interest of Confucianism in China since the 1990s, after the prolonged suppression of Confucianism during the first 30 years of socialist China, and the establishment of the Confucius Institutes around the world since 2004, indicate another dimension of this vision of *tianxia* in terms of knowledge production. Chinese scholars have been seriously devoting their energy and their time to the studies of classical Confucianism to reduce the Western influence. According to their interpretations, the moral purpose of the state, in the Confucian

¹² This phrase is from the *Minor odes of the Kingdom* (*xiaoya* 小雅) of *The Book of Songs* (*shijing* 詩經). Chapter of *Decade of Bei Shan* (北山之什. No. 205, “Beishan” (北山)). (*Minor odes of the kingdom* n.d.)

worldview, should carry out the ideal moral and political order observing the Confucian conception of *tianxia*. According to the idea of *tianxia*, the whole world has no boundary of the territory. It is to be governed by a sage king according to principles of rites and virtue, under the order of cosmic harmony. Such a concept of *tianxia*, they argue, explains the reason why and how neighboring countries can co-exist as the constituent members of the tributary system last for centuries (Zhang and Buzan 2012; Yongjin Zhang 2001; Cohen 2000).

The widespread of the establishment of the Confucius Institute demonstrates a different mode of ambition. According to the Confucius Institute Headquarters in Hanban, in Asia, for example, there are four Confucius Institutes and two Confucian Classrooms in Pakistan, four Confucius Institutes and three Confucius Classrooms in the Philippines, twenty-three Confucius Institutes and eleven Confucius Classrooms in South Korea. The total of such Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms amounts to 169 in Europe, 157 in America, 110 in Asia, 46 in Africa, and 18 in Oceania (“HanBan-Confucius Institute/ClassRoom-About Confucius Institute/ClassRoom” 2019) A documentary *In the Name of Confucius*, released in May 2017, shows that China has spent over USD 2 bio. on Confucius Institutes in ten years. By 2014, there were 125 countries and regions with 475 Confucius Institute that had been established. China hopes to complete 1000 Confucius Institutes by 2020 (“Home: In The Name of Confucius - English” 2019). As one article pointed out, the strategy China uses through the “soft power” of the “development aid” by establishing the Confucius Institutes is, on the one hand, “to mark their territory on the African landscape and this becomes a visible, symbolic marker of the Chinese power and presence on the continent.” On the other hand, these “gifts” “soften the general populace into paying ‘tribute’ to those who become perceived as powerful benefactors.” (*New African Magazine*, May 21, 2015)

The reception of the BRI and the impact on local societies, however, is controversial and complex. In some countries, it is favorably and even eager welcome in most states. In other countries, it is regarded with a critical reservation.¹³ Though there are quite a few disputes about the debt traps or corruption, the considerable benefit of these projects for most states, as well as for local financial elites, that China offers are irresistible. According to the Pew Research Center, a global median of 70 percent say China plays a more critical role in the world

¹³ Compare contributions 4 and 5 in this volume for examples for critical perceptions of the BRI in Asia and Europe.

than it did ten years ago. Across the 25 countries polled in a recent survey, a median of 45 percent has a favorable view of China, while 43 percent hold an unfavorable view. Majorities in twelve countries give China positive marks with favorable attitudes most prevalent in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia (Devlin 2019). For example, according to Breuer (2017), 76 to 78 percent of the respondents in Nigeria, Kenya, and Senegal viewed China favorably.

It appears that China's BRI operations penetrate local societies and exposes their weak points in political and economic dimensions. The high dependence on the Chinese funding and the potential debt trap, for one thing, have been described as debt diplomacy and debt colonialism (Daniel 2019; Pomfret 2019). This debt diplomacy has led to China's acquisition of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port through a 99-year lease. China gained similar control of Zambia's national electricity supplier and the rebuilding the Mogadishu seaport in exchange for exclusive fishing rights along the Somali coast. According to several analyses, the potential targets of China's Belt and Road debt-book diplomacy involve the Mekong Delta countries and the South China Sea area, including Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, the String of Pearls area, such as Pakistan, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Kenya, the Second Island Chain and beyond, such as Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA) states, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, as well as Mongolia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, the Maldives, and Montenegro (Buchanan 2019; Dahir 2019; Kwatra 2019; Parker and Chefitz 2019; Hillman 2019).

Besides the threat to the sovereignty, the flipside of the debt trap often links to the infrastructure of local governmental corruption. The Philippines is not the only case in Southeast Asia. The projects of the BRI in Malaysia in the past years have also proved to be the opportunities for corrupt regimes to gain their profits. The scandals of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak have been exposed in recent months after he was voted out of office in May 2018. According to several sources, Najib had granted China exceptional access to Malaysia. Still, many of these BRI projects are evidence of corruption. According to these reports, one Chinese state-owned enterprise was paid USD 2 bio. in advance for two Malaysian pipeline projects, but the constructions have barely started. The cost for Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), another BRI project, was also clearly artificially inflated (Hillman 2019; "FDD | Below the Belt and Road" 2020). Evidence also shows that USD 6.81 bio. of the 1MDB fund has been transferred to Najib's account, and Najib could not provide a clear explanation for it. These

reports further indicated that not only in Malaysia but the leaders of other BRI-recipient countries also seized the project as opportunities to sustain and legitimize their corruption (Doig 2019). Other countries involved in cases of fraud associated with the BRI are located in South and Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Chin 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the driving motor behind the global infrastructure of the BRI is the vision of *tianxia*, an expansive sphere encompassing all under heaven. Even though Taiwan is not on the map of the BRI, it has already been implicated in China's vision of *tianxia*.

The seizing of the chokepoints in the logistics chain, as the dispositions of *shi*, awaiting the potential development of the situations, including the small islands Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, the Panama canal, and other countries in Central America, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, proves to be the geostrategic manipulation and administration of the vantage points. These chokepoints, with the infrastructures such as airports, seaports, pipelines, railroads, military bases, etc., can facilitate potential development and secure the path for the grabbing and circulation of resources, production, and information. The correspondence between the seaports of the Maritime Silk Road and the oil transit chokepoints echo the geostrategic moves in the colonial age. The revival of the Confucian studies and Confucius Institutes, both domestically and globally, also manifests the multifaceted aspects of the *tianxia* vision behind the BRI.

The ambivalent feelings of the receiving countries revealed the vulnerable aspects of their societies. The investments of infrastructural constructions can easily attract not only corruption and debt traps but also the internal power conflicts within the government. The poverty gap in various communities, however, remains high and even exacerbated due to the BRI projects in these countries as what I have observed in Addis Ababa.

I do not intend to offer any surmise on whether China's BRI will succeed or fail or about the duration of the new world order of *Pax Sinica*. My intervention aims to provide critical analyses of the strategic move of the BRI. Through the angle of logistics and the disposition of *Shi*, we can perceive the total picture with the vision of *tianxia* desired by China. Behind

these analyses, the most pertinent question for me is, how does this global infrastructural project penetrate and attract local sub-systems of corruption as the cases of debt traps? How does this BRI quicken and intensify the unequal distribution of wealth in local societies? Through what local institutions and logistical lines? The operations of the dispositif of *Shi* have been arranged at all critical locations and chokepoints, as on a one-person Game of Go of *longue durée*. The propensities of these seeds will flow and develop as time moves on. My curiosity is, in this gigantic global mechanism, what is the weakest link that might trigger implosion on itself. At the moment of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the global connectivity and the international financial system are severely threatened to the point of collapse, does the strategic dispositif of the BRI vanish like the glamorous bubbles, or does it miraculously sustain itself? These final questions require further observation and research.

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