

8 The BRI, logistics, and global infrastructure

New world order, the game of Go, and the disposition of *Shi*

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Introduction

I was struck by 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 of the airport. It writes: “Civilized Construction to Reveal our Elegance”.

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. 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. 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 Figures 8.1–8.5).

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 a long distance to fetch water because there is no water supply system in their districts.

I later realized through further research that China Communications Construction Company on the billboard outside the airport is in charge of the airport construction project. The Ethiopian government aims to make



Figure 8.1 The signs of China Jiangsu International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

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 million from China's Exim Bank and anticipated continued cooperation with China as part of a planned USD 3 billion 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).



Figures 8.2 A mall in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

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 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 April 2019 promises to



Figure 8.3 A hotel amidst a local slum in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

boost the Ethiopia-China relations further (*Global Times* 2019; Tibebu 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.

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, like many people, because this global infrastructure project has directly or indirectly involved different parts of the world today. 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 malfunctioning of local infrastructural construction points to more questions. Merely one person’s power could not

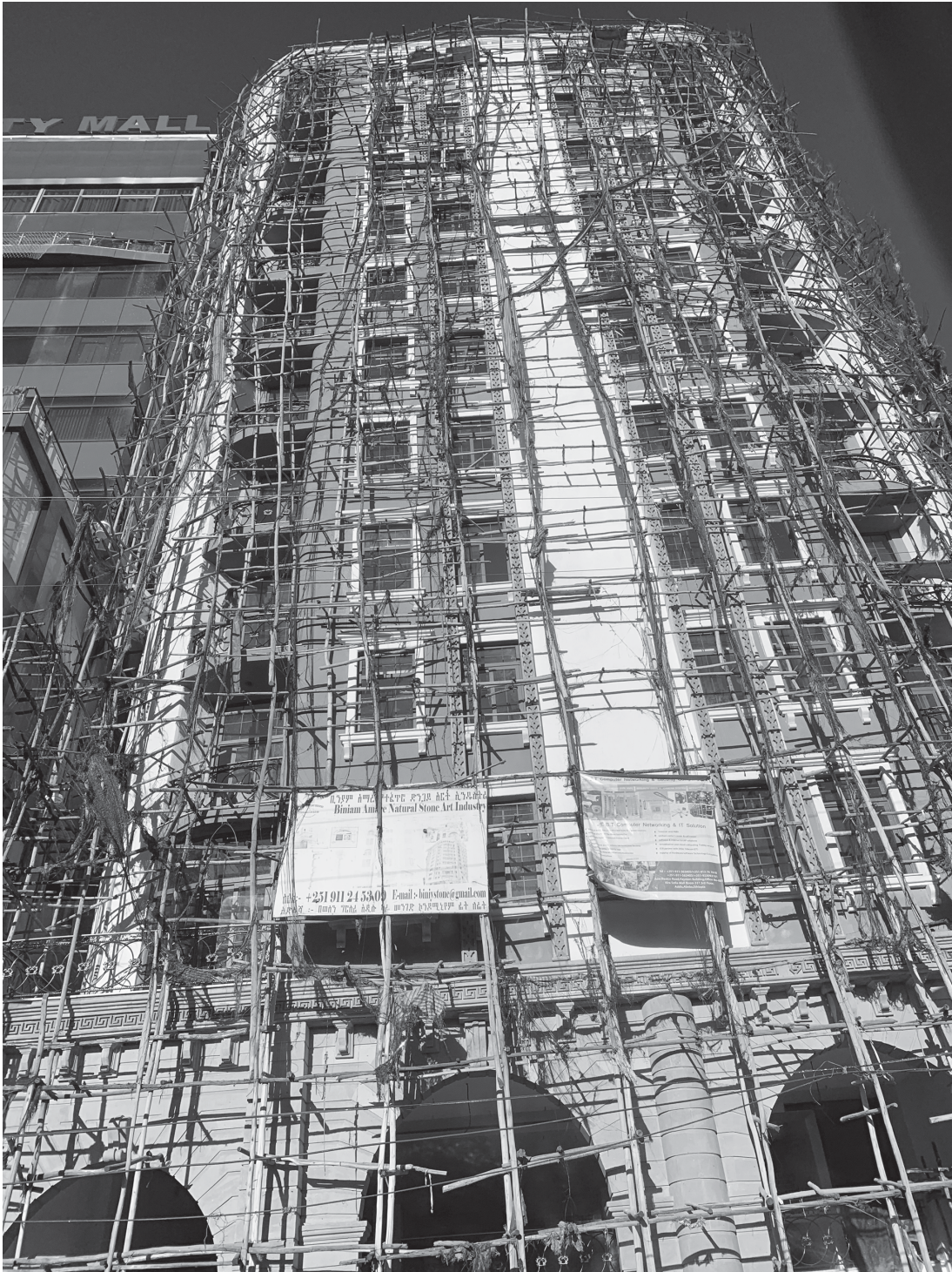


Figure 8.4 A half constructed building in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

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



Figure 8.5 The poor in the streets with advertising boards of logistics in Addis Ababa. Photo by the author.

embracing? Or, to put in Balibar’s words, what is “the infrastructure of the infrastructure” (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, following Carl Schmitt’s discussion in his book *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, 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 disposition of *Shi* (勢) in my analysis of the BRI global logistics. I argue that the Chinese concept of the disposition

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 (see Table 8.1). 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 threatens 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; Vorndick 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 2018; Rong 2019; Zhou 2019; 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.

Table 8.1 Diplomatic relations with China and BRI investments from China

<i>Year of switching diplomatic relation from Taiwan to China</i>	<i>Region Country Name</i>	<i>Year of receiving benefit of BRI investment from China</i>
Central America		
2018	Dominican Republic	2019
2017	El Salvador ^a	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 ^b	2017
2013	Gambia	2019
2008	Malawi ^c	
2005	Chad ^d	2016
2005	Senegal ^e	2017
2003	Liberia	2019
Europe		
2001	North Macedonia	

Source: Compiled by the author.

Notes:

- ^a 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.
- ^b 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).
- ^c 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.
- ^d Chad signed a MoU on BRI-related infrastructure and construction project in 2013, renewed in 2016.
- ^e Since reverting its recognition from Taiwan to China in 2005, the total volume of China-Senegal trade increased from USD 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 2018).

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, has not happened 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 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 over the past few decades (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

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. 2018: 618). The smooth transaction from one point to the other is to satisfy customer 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 techniques were transferred not only to the Vietnam War but also to the commercial spheres in other transnational sectors – a 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).

Etymologically, "logistics" derives from ancient Greek, referring to arithmetic practice, rational thinking, reason as well as computation. In this sense, "logistics" is associated with the act of reasoning and calculating the frame and methods. 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, Ahearn, and McConnell 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 had signed 195 cooperational documents on the BRI, with 139 countries and 30 international organizations, over USD 900 billion (Wikipedia 2020). At this point, the BRI has involved not only the broader region of Asia, but also Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America. 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,¹ or the map of global maritime chokepoints,² we can see the strategic plan recurred from the imperial expansion of the maritime age to contemporary trade-military dispositions. This maritime trade route, or economic expansion, was 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, manpower, 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, 340–342). 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 disposition of these strategic chokepoints. The seizing of these chokepoints, either for energy purposes, maritime trade, or military power, shows the overlapping 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 Malacca 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, and Feydhoo Finolhu of the 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 extensively 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 its 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 Thai 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.³

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; Cabestan 2019; Gresh 2017). Geoffrey Gresh (2017: 39–40) 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". China's geostrategic move through the MSR and its adoption of Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of sea power show that the emphasis is not only on coastal defense 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 al-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 million barrels of oil passed through the strait per day in 2015, out of a world total of about 43 million barrels per day shipped by tankers (US Energy Information Administration 2019).

In November 2015, the Chinese government announced its decision to build a military base in Djibouti, completed in 2017, further displaying 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, the US, and the Soviet Union empires. In the 21st century, with the BRI, its global infrastructure project, China has undoubtedly entered the stage. Cabestan points out that the 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 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).

A recent report from the Pentagon, 2020 China Military Power Report, called our renewed attention on the total vision of China’s strategic move through the BRI. The report notes that, in addition to the missile developments and nuclear weapons, “the PRC has considered locations for PLA military logistics facilities in Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan.” The report also indicates that “the existing base in Djibouti, China’s interest in Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base, and likely outreach to Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands.” (The National Interest, 2020) How does the BRI develop into such an expansive scheme?

IR with Chinese characteristics, the game of Go, and the disposition 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. The 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; Hu 2006; Pang 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 1,500, but had never developed the colonial rule that 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 rewriting 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 (Harper, Edwards, and Gerrits 2017).

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 have 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 have 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. Sunzi writes in *The Art of War*,

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.

(Giles 2013)

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 offers 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, chapter 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 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, makes it implicated with the desired tendencies, and lets 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 disposition 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 former paramount leader 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 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 was one of the projects of the Eighth Five-Year-Plan and led 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 1,100 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 and Robertson 2008; Wójcik and Camilleri 2015; Larsen 2012; Wang, Zhao, and Wang 2007).

***Tianxia* and its reproduction system**

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*.⁴ It is a total view of the 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 disposition 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 power 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, based 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 infrastructure, 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 involve 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.⁵ We seem to look at a project aiming for the scope of *tianxia*, all under 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 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 why and how neighboring countries could coexist as the constituent members of the tributary system that lasted for centuries (Zhang and Buzan 2012; Zhang 2001; Cohen 2000).

The widespread establishment of Confucius Institutes 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 Confucian Classrooms in the Philippines, 23 Confucius Institutes and 11 Confucian Classrooms in South Korea. The total of such Confucius Institutes and Confucian Classrooms amounts to 169 in Europe, 157 in America, 110 in Asia, 46 in Africa, and 18 in Oceania (Confucius Institute Headquarters 2019). The documentary movie *In the Name of Confucius*, released in May 2017, shows that China has spent over USD 2 billion on Confucius Institutes in ten years. By 2014, there were 125 countries and regions with 475 Confucius Institutes that had been established. China hopes to complete 1,000 Confucius Institutes by 2020 (*Home: In the Name of Confucius* 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* 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 eagerly welcomed. In other countries, it is regarded with a critical reservation.⁶ 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 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 12 countries give China positive marks, with favorable attitudes most prevalent in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia (Devlin 2018). 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 expose 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 2018; Pomfret 2018). 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, and the String of Pearls area, such as Pakistan, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Kenya, as well as 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 2018; Dahir 2019; Kwatra 2018; Parker and Chefitz 2018; 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 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. Many of the BRI projects are evidence of corruption. According to reports, one Chinese state-owned enterprise was paid USD 2 billion 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 2020). Evidence shows that USD 6.81 billion of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (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 2018).

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 situation, 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 infrastructure 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 echoes 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 I 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 in 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 disposition 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 disposition of the BRI vanish like a glamorous bubble, or does it miraculously sustain itself? These final questions require further observation and research.

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Notes

- 1 The Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, Cape of Good Hope, Bab el-Mandab, Danish Straits, Suez Canal, Bosphorus, and Panama Canal (Bender 2015; US Energy Information Administration 2019).
- 2 E.g., example, Panama, Gibraltar, Oresund, Suez, Hormuz, and Malacca (Geography of Transport Systems 2017).
- 3 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.
- 4 The author has written lengthy discussions on the concept of *tianxia* and the question of Pax Sinica in other essays (Liu 2019, 2016).
- 5 This phrase is taken from the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Poetry), Poetry Number 205: “Beishan” (北山).
- 6 Compare Chapters 2, 5, 7, and 12 in this volume for examples for critical perceptions of the BRI in Asia and Europe.

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