

Book Review

*Silvia Tieri**

LIM Tai Wei, Henry CHAN Hing Lee, Katherine TSENG Hui-Yi, LIM Wen Xin. 2016. *China's One Belt One Road Initiative*. Imperial College Press, xiv-340 pages, ISBN: 978-1-78326-931-0.

China's One Belt One Road Initiative is a collection of essays focusing on the homonymous initiative promoted by the Xi government, also known by the acronyms OBOR (One Belt One Road Initiative) and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). The book is edited by a team of four Singapore-based scholars and comprises 19 chapters written by researchers from Singapore, China and Malaysia.

The BRI is a development strategy which aims at creating a network of overland and maritime infrastructure spreading from Asia – specifically China – to Europe, in order to boost connectivity and economic cooperation across the two continents. Since its first announcement by President Xi in 2013, the project has been received with extremely diverse reactions, and a burning debate about its possible geopolitical and economic effects has developed.

This edited volume provides an explanation of the Chinese initiative in terms of its historical background, the development of its maritime and overland routes, and its potential impact on different regions involved in the connectivity network it plans to develop.

Leaving the Introduction and the Conclusion aside, the remaining 17 chapters are divided into four main sections. The first section, titled "The History of Zheng He (Cheng Ho) and the Maritime Silk Road," contains five chapters which look at the so-called ancient Silk Road – a network of trading routes linking China and Europe across Eurasia from 130 BCE to 1453 CE – and the travels of the Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He (1371-1433 CE).

Obviously, the BRI is a project deeply rooted in the economic and political reality of contemporary China and its global context. How then is ancient history relevant to its understanding? The reason is that both the ancient Silk Road and the explorations carried out by the legendary eunuch-admiral are regarded as some of Chinese history's most glorious chapters. They are often evoked by the Chinese government as historical precedents of the ongoing connectivity project, a sort of ideational foundation of the same. Such parallelism

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between past and present supports the ambitions of the BRI, proving that China can pride itself on a long tradition of developing transnational trade, building bridges among nations and exercising influence on them through pacific means.

Hence, this part of (not only) Chinese ancient history remains very relevant today, and its discussion is pertinent to a study of the BRI. However, the way history is addressed by the book benumbs its pertinence. Themes which are most critical to understand the BRI – e.g. the historical narrative used by the Chinese government in its propaganda, or a comparison between "ancient" and "new" Silk Roads, to mention just a few – are overlooked. Old trade routes and Zheng He are delineated as histories per se, disconnected from the real focus of the book. Consequently, the section is long and repetitive, and scarcely interesting to readers concerned with today's BRI.

The rest of the volume looks at more contemporary issues. The second section deals with "The Maritime Silk Road." However, Chapter 7 is again centred on Zheng He, this time on his various representations and cults which developed in the countries that his legendary explorations had reached. Chapter 8 focuses on the different ways in which the BRI has been received and interpreted. On one hand, the author exposes the various goals of the Belt and Road from a Sino-centric perspective: to accelerate the development of China's Western regions (p. 115), to increase China's "blue water naval capability" (p. 116), to support the country's "economic restructuring" (p. 117) and to strengthen President Xi's control over the same. On the other hand, the problematic aspects of the initiative are mentioned. These are, for example, geopolitical instability affecting specific regions; lack of details on the implementation and funding of the project; the presence of regional hegemony reluctant to open their "backyards" to China; and unsettled disputes involving China itself. Chapter 9 deals with the major of these territorial disputes: the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. The chapter maintains that the creation of a China-led Maritime Silk Road (MSR) has the potential for resolving the impasse, but how this could happen remains unclear.

The third section turns to the "The Overland Silk Road." Chapter 10 focuses on "The One Belt One Road Narratives" (p. 151), replicating the questions of Chapter 8. The issue of how the connectivity project will be funded is finally addressed in Chapter 11 and contextualized within the broader picture of China's domestic financial landscape. Chapter 12 and 13 look at BRI-related opportunities for transnational cooperation in the railway sector, and the exports of Chinese High Speed rails.

The last section, as the title suggests, is a "Region Specific Section – Country Case Studies." Chapter 14's point is that "Europe is vital in China's OBOR strategic plan" (p. 247), an interesting but unconvincing thesis. The following chapters focus on specific areas: Central and South Asia (15), Pakistan (16), Malaysia (17), and Japan (18). These "case studies" offer an overview of the set of interests and risks which are intrinsic to potential partnerships developing between China and the above-mentioned stakeholders under the BRI.

The book succeeds in providing an introduction to the complex reality of the BRI. However, a more critical problematization, in particular of its most controversial aspects, would have been a valuable contribution. The overall impression is that the book takes a positive stance on "China's One Belt One Road Initiative": nowhere is the BRI's legitimacy or its potential impact questioned, and while some essays support the enterprise rather implicitly, in other papers the authors seem to empathize with Chinese leadership more clearly. At the same time, much of the underlying reasons are taken for granted. Especially in light of Beijing's debated growing hegemony and a possible future of indebtedness for BRI beneficiaries, it is not clearly explained why China's One Belt One Road Initiative should be considered –as maintained in the book– a good deal also for partner countries other than China.