
AN APPRAISAL OF BRI IN ASEAN AND AFRICA IN THE LIGHT OF POPE FRANCIS' INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

以教宗方济各整体生态的视角评价 东盟和非洲“一带一路”倡议

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ABSTRACT

The world is witnessing yet another global geopolitical shift, the most significant since the successful implementation of the Marshall Plan or the European Recovery Program, for the postwar reconstruction of Europe (1948-1951). This third millennium witnesses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is integral to the “China Dream”. The explanation of the vision and goals of BRI is presented in section one in relation to China’s collaboration with ASEAN and Africa, with Ethiopia and Pakistan as two case studies. These allow an appraisal of how China intends her foreign aid program to improve the quality of life of countries of the global South with its integrated assistance programs. As a basis for the appraisal outlined in section 1, we propose the model of a new integral ecology, derived from Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’ (LS)* and *Fratelli Tutti (FT)*. These provide a constructive critique of the foundational presuppositions of the foreign aid policies of the BRI.

I. Vision and Goals of BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative or BRI (一带一路, *Yi Dai Yi Lu*) launched by China in 2013 is an economic framework related to the “China Dream” with multiple initiatives to improve relationships between China and Europe, Africa, Latin America, and ASEAN. BRI encompasses the overland and maritime routes reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road (Lau, 2020, Hinck, Manly, Kluver, & Norris, 2018). BRI promotes international economic integration and cultural inclusion, informed by the multilateral principles of openness, mutual trust, and tolerance in business initiatives, joint developments, and sharing of ideas (Lau, 2020) through developing infrastructure, transportation, and economic corridors embracing the physical, digital, financial, and social aspects. By the end of January 2020, China had signed 200 bilateral agreements for the joint actualization of BRI with 138 countries and 30 international organizations (Wenling Municipal People’s Government, 2020).

BRI relies on bilateral and multilateral agreements between China and partner countries to conduct fair and peaceful development. These interrelated projects envision the “building a community of shared future for humankind” (人类命运共同体, *ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*) which is an important goal of the “China Dream” that defines China’s contribution to the whole world. China’s contribution aims to solve the world’s crises, based on the Confucianist wisdom that declares that “our world is the only commonplace for the human being (天下为公世界大同 *Tian Xia Wei Gong Shi Jie Da Tong*) (Romar, 2002).” This ideal recognizes that humankind inhabits a common world which thus binds us together with a shared future (An, Sharp, & Shaw, 2021; Jung, Wang, & Cho, 2020), encouraging “Win-Win Cooperation (合作共赢,

He Zuo Gong Ying),” and valuing cooperation and solidarity rather than domination and hegemony (Xinhuanet, 2018).

1.1 China-ASEAN Collaboration

The BRI partnership between ASEAN and China, features multilateral cooperation in politics, economy, culture, science, and technology, and health which encourage youth exchanges and international tourism. Since China and ASEAN launched the free trade area process in 2002, the bilateral trade volume has increased from US\$54.8 billion in 2002 to US\$641.5 billion in 2019. ASEAN has become China’s second largest trading partner, with a two-way investment of US\$15.8 billion in 2018. The cumulative total reached US\$205.7 billion (Ministry of Commerce People’s Republic of China, 2019). In the first eight months of 2019, trade has reached US\$ 230 billion, with the establishment of 25 economic and trade cooperation zones creating over 100,000 jobs¹.

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1 China, ASEAN embrace shared future along Belt and Road, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/104316.htm>

China and ASEAN have achieved commendable economic and intercultural-religious benefits through the promotion of industrial parks, ports, and railways (Xinhuanet, 2019). Mutual visits between the two sides increased from 3.87 million in 2003 to nearly 57 million in 2018. As of October 2019, there are nearly 4,000 flights between China and ASEAN countries every week, and the two sides have exchanged 200,000 overseas students, thus fostering greater intercultural-religious harmony between the nations (Xinhuanet, 2016). Moreover, China has initiated the “Health Silk Road” (HSR) with the global South that aims to establish in the developing and underdeveloped nations vaccine factories, supported by permanent, science-based, knowledge-sharing hubs, to cover regional and multilateral vaccine production demands. The “Health Silk Road” aims to overcome the vaccine inequity between the global South and North. Indeed, BRI has stimulated further economic growth in ASEAN (Jiang & Guo, 2021) through “Win-Win Cooperation (合作共赢, *He Zuo Gong Ying*)” to achieve shared prosperity together (Xinhuanet, 2018). This is illustrated in the case study of the collaboration between China and Pakistan.

1.1.1. Case of China-Pakistan Collaboration

Being the greatest trading partner of Pakistan, China invested some \$25 billion by 2017 (Chung, 2018) with the Pakistani government introducing favorable policies for investors to encourage FDI (Menhas, Mahmood, Tanchangya, Safdar, & Hussain, 2019). These measures include three aspects: the first aspect concerns the protection of energy supply in terms of the power and natural gas supply in the special economic zone. The second aspect touches on the import of production equipment

with duty-free privileges, while the third aspect is a one-stop service for investors who intend to invest in special economic zones, including providing investors with detailed information about preferential policies (Boni, 2019).

According to a Pakistan-based academic study conducted by Menhas et al., (2019), a survey of 500 questionnaire participants was gathered, showing that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the six corridors of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) (Menhas et al., 2019), has improved the quality of life, stabilizing the electricity supply, improving health and education, which can enhance the sustainability and socio-economic status of Pakistan. A stable infrastructure and society can result in alleviating the poverty of Pakistan, not to mention the FDI (Ibid.). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor’s flagship projects will further increase connectivity between China and its neighbors. In addition, CPEC includes a 2,000 km transport network between China’s Kashgar to the Gwadar port in Pakistan (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). The cross-border energy pipelines between China, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey have shortened the time of the bringing imported crude oil from West Asia to the above countries by 85% (Guo, Huang, Wu, 2019).

1.2. China-Africa Collaboration

Since the 1950s, China has contributed to the development of Africa (Gurtov, 2013) and has overshadowed America to become the continent’s largest world trading partner since 2019 (Ighobor, 2013), as BRI has beefed up the quality of sustainable infrastructures in Africa, raised the level of African livelihoods, in such fields as telecommunications, energy power, and highways (Oyeranti, Babatunde, & Ogunkola, 2010), and thus improved the quality of life,

ecological environment, and sustainability of the society in Africa (Lau, 2020).

“To promote harmony between the natural and human world, China will have to incorporate into its “China Dream” a spirituality for ecological conversion... Based on Confucian wisdom, and confirmed by *Laudato Si'*, “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves” for “We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.” ”

The “Ten plus Ten collaboration” in agricultural scientific research institutions in Africa provides substantive assistance to the Agricultural Modernization Cooperation Plan that implements the “Agricultural Enrichment Project” in one hundred African villages, dispatching thirty teams of agricultural experts to Africa (Chen, Badiane, Zhang, Collins, & Zhou, 2018) for the long-term benefit of the natural environment (Zhao, 2013). Furthermore, through the China-Africa Green Development Cooperation Project, the “China Dream” also facilitates the utilization of one hundred wildlife protection and clean energy projects, eco-friendly agricultural projects, and astute city development projects in Africa. Through the China-Africa Collaboration for Reducing Poverty Project, China has set up two hundred “Joyful Life Projects” aimed at reducing the level of poverty in Africa, with a focus on providing benefits to children and women in Africa (Chunying, 2019). The China-

Africa Public Health Collaboration Project allows both China and Africa to explore cost-effective solutions, methods, and medications based on anti-malarial artemisinin in twenty hospitals in both China and Africa (Tambo, Ugwu, Guan, & Wei, 2016). This is illustrated by the case study on Ethiopia.²

1.2.1. Case of China-Ethiopia Collaboration

According to Chen (2016), the research conducted by the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) and the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of the Johns Hopkins University, HydroChina’s contribution to the Adama Wind Farm is not only remarkable in terms of technology transfer, job creation, environmental and social impact but has outperformed Vergnet, a comparable sized French energy company. Furthermore, Chen (2016, 6) states that such contribution “warrants more in-depth research because of their significant potential in mitigating climate change, their reputational gains to China as a global renewable energy leader, and their place in the broader context of growing trade between China and Africa.” Hence, Chen (2015, 20) posits that western countries should recognise the improvement and strengths of the Chinese companies in the China-Ethiopia Collaboration or China-Africa Collaboration and try to seek “Win-Win” collaborations with Chinese companies in Africa in the future.

2 These are the China-Africa Agricultural Modernization Collaboration Project, China-Africa Infrastructure Collaboration Project, China-Africa Green Development Collaboration Project, China-Africa Collaboration for Reducing Poverty Project, China-Africa Industrialization Collaboration Plan, China-Africa Financial Collaboration Plan, China-Africa trade and investment facilitation Collaboration Plan, China-Africa Public Health Collaboration Project, China-Africa Humanities Collaboration Project, and China-Africa Peace and Security Collaboration Plan.

2. Integral Ecology: A Critical Appraisal of BRI

The BRI is avowedly driven by the “China Dream” aiming at the shared prosperity of humanity with a common future. This noble dream is deeply enshrined in the “technocratic paradigm” (LS 2016: pars.106, 108) of the global neo-liberalist economic model (LS 2016: pars 51, 56) that has facilitated the meteoric rise of China in the last four decades. Innovation through science and technology as the integrative “technocratic paradigm” of China’s 14th Five-Year Plan (Xinhuanet, 2020) is disputed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*. This paradigm is lamentably motivated by “an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm ... which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery, and transformation (LS 2016: par. 106) that aims, “in the final analysis neither for-profit nor for the well-being of the human race” but ultimately at “power [as] its motive – a lordship overall” (LS 2016: par. 108).

Modern Socialist China, in light of the challenges outlined in Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti* (FT 2020, par. 122), needs to critically scrutinize this paradigm as it aims “at the amassing of wealth by a few” to ensure that “human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples” who are China’s minorities be fully recognized. The reason, as *Fratelli Tutti* (FT 2020: par. 168) explains, is that this model reproduces itself “by resorting to the magic theories of spillover or trickle as the only solutions to societal problems,” with “little appreciation of the fact that the alleged spillover does not resolve the inequality that gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society.” Moreover, “in addition to recovering a sound political life that is not subject to the dictates of finance,” there is a need to reinstate

“human dignity back at the center and on that pillar build the alternative social structures” of a modern socialist China (Ibid.).

As attested by the two case studies, “socialist capitalism” must continue to alleviate poverty within China and in the nations of the global South, to ensure that “the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combating the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land, and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money” (FT 2020: par. 116). Moreover, BRI must ensure “the right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all” (FT 2020: par. 112).

Though China has practiced the spirit of neighbourliness with nations of the global South, China’s national policies need to overcome the growing crass individualism within China and countries related to BRI. Akin to the Confucianist *Junzi* philosophy, human fraternity, social friendship requires that the “well-off” in China embrace “the bruised and abandoned person on the roadside” whom s/he did not regard as “a distraction, an interruption from all that,” or as someone “hardly important, a “nobody,” undistinguished, irrelevant to their plans for the future” (FT 2020: par. 100). Moreover, the BRI should resonate with *Fratelli Tutti* (FT 2020: par.112) to ensure that “the right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all.”

China, as the world's second largest economy, responsible for the world's top greenhouse gas emissions (Newburger, 2021; Reuters, 2021), is not absolved from what Patriarch Bartholomew called the ecological sins that "degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate," for to "commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God" (LS 2016: par. 8). If China is committed to the Race to Zero announced on November 12, 2021 in the COP26 Summit in collaboration with the US, certainly a modernized Socialist China has to be a counterhegemonic force to resist the lordship of global capitalism, and reverse the straight-jacket of a "tyrannical" and "excessive anthropocentrism" (LS 2016: pars. 68 & 116), relativism (LS 2016: pars. 106, 122, 123, 184), consumerism (LS 2016: pars. 218 & 222), the "throwaway culture" (LS 2016: pars. 16, 20-22, 43), the wanton destruction of the earth (LS 2016: pars. 2, 20, 21, 33, 34, 35, 39, 40, 51), global warming/climate change/crises (LS 2016: pars. 23, 24, 25), the desertification of soil and extinction of species (LS 2016: par. 86).

To promote harmony between the natural and human world, China will have to incorporate into its "*China Dream*" a spirituality for ecological conversion. This ecospirituality entails an "experience of conversion, or change of heart" (LS 2016: par. 218), "a community conversion" (LS 2016: par. 220), to achieve the Confucianist ideal of inclusive harmony of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, a harmonious order. This peaceful order must enable citizens of China and the global South "to grow in transcendence, solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care of the poor and creation" (LS 2016: par. 210) and influence all "individual and communal activity" (LS 2016: par. 216) so that all grow in "a relationship existing between nature and the society." Based on Confucian

wisdom, and confirmed by *Laudato Si'*, "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves" for "We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (LS 2016: par. 139).

Moreover, with a BRI influenced by the wisdom traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, China is poised to promote an integral sustainable development that is "more attentive to ethical principles" (LS 2016: pars. 189, 210) of the United Nations, with the related principles of *Laudato Si'* such as "more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment... the rights of future generations" (LS 2016: par. 109), "promoting an economy that favours productive diversity and business creativity" (FT 2020: par. 168), protection of the "global commons" (LS 2016: par. 156, 174), like clean air, climate (LS 2016: pars. 23-26) and water (LS 2016: pars. 27-31, 164, 185) in the campaign against world hunger and poverty (LS 2016: par. 109).

Conclusion

The global geopolitics of a multiculturalism inspired by the "*China Dream*" will enable emerging developed nations like China to contribute towards the shared future of humankind. This vision is more inclusive intercultural-religiously of the many excluded poor who are vulnerable yet resilient in the many nations of the global South and North. At the same time, the shared future must include a recognition of the non-negotiable requirements of our global common home, Mother Earth, by being more responsive to her cries in terms of the mitigation and adaptation efforts of the global South that exacerbate the climate crises that affect mostly the poor. Sustainable development needs

to promote the global commons of air, climate, and water for all humankind and other living beings, the practice of circular economy, adoption of sustainable lifestyles, systematic reforestation and irrigation of arid land, programmatic “deplasticization” of the rivers, seas and oceans, resolute “definancialization” of the non-renewal natural resources and decarbonization of the earth’s atmosphere to ensure the fuller flourishing of the global society and the earth.



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