

BOOK REVIEW

The Belt Road and Beyond: State Mobilized Globalization in China, 1998–2018

Min Ye. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 240 pp. £89.00; \$105.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781108479561

One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World

Eyck Freymann. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021. 439 pp. \$28.00; £23.95 (pbk). ISBN 9780674247963

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Amid the torrent of books and articles on China's much-publicized and now much-studied *yidai yilu* (Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] / One Belt One Road Initiative [OBOR]), these are two must-haves on the shelves for all who claim either expertise or simply passing interest in China's outward bound "project of the century." Both books are exhaustively researched, both are eminently readable, and each takes up a fundamentally different perspective on the BRI/OBOR. Min Ye considers the BRI from the inside out; Eyck Freymann from the outside in. Each in its own way significantly contributes to the ever-expanding literature on China's engagement with the developing world.

Min Ye's *The Belt Road and Beyond* is a thoughtful, framework-heavy and academic monograph that seeks to explain the all-important *hows* of the BRI, and not surprisingly she is largely focused on the *domestic* drivers of the initiative, locating the repertoires and activities of the BRI within China itself. She proposes a framework she calls "State-Mobilized Globalization (SMG)," whose core elements consist of the internal policy fragmentation of the Party-state in a "system that consists of political leaders, national bureaucracies, local governments, and SOEs in a complex and interactive web of roles and relationships" (p. 11). To this fragmentation is added a campaign style of political mobilization and globalization, the latter especially important because globalization and outward investment has been so essential for continued economic growth, and a continued high rate of economic growth has been the *sine qua non* for continued Party legitimacy in a system that taxes growth rather than income.

Ye then turns her keen analysis to some 15 years of globalization-oriented industrial policy prior to the launch of the BRI: the Western Development Policy (chapter three), China's Going Global Policy (chapter four), and only then the announcement of the BRI, which significantly drew much of its inspiration and models from the prior two initiatives. Indeed, Ye points to the ways in which BRI's signature repertoire of investment in infrastructures was first practised *inside* China with hefty infusions of investment for stalled rail projects (pp. 139–141). Chapter six describes local variation in three cities: Chongqing, Ningbo and Wenzhou. Within the same national framework that privileged markets and opening up, local leaders have attempted to leverage their geographical, technocratic and economic profiles in ways that demonstrate how easily local implementers could and did reframe SMG in the light of their own interests, with significant

deviation from central guidance and from each other. Private capital-oriented Wenzhou focused on export markets for existing industries, economic bureaucracy-heavy Ningbo strengthened the local state by reinvesting in industrial upgrades, and SOE-dominated Chongqing strengthened its own SOEs through capture of infrastructure financing (p. 150 and *passim*). Chapter seven considers an even more local level of analysis, the SOE itself. Marshalling an impressive list of case studies, here Ye argues that not all SOEs are created equal, and that far from being either crony capital that captures the state or strategic capital that does the bidding of the state, SOEs are economic actors that are both commercially oriented *and*, over time, becoming more dependent on the Chinese state, with a concomitant strengthening of corporate nationalism.

The conclusion suggests that while the past 20 years of the China Western Development programme, China Going Global and the BRI have been successful at maintaining economic growth, their political outcomes are significantly less certain: staking so much on a globalized economy also exposes China to volatility and potential sudden downturns. Combining “nationalist ideology, powerful party policies, and robust market tendencies” (p. 226) may well be successful for the national economy within China, but not travel especially well to circumstances outside China. Ye’s superb work ultimately points us to the fault-line between national and international. National interests that prompted the SMG in the first place may well unintentionally trigger less positive international interests.

In contrast to Ye, Eyck Freymann considers the BRI from the outside in, and his “outside” is unabashedly from the perspective of US interests. The first hints of this are to be found on the cover, with the title “One Belt One Road” or OBOR, emblazoned across what seems to be an AI representation of Xi Jinping in an emperor’s robes. In the forward, Eyck further states that the Chinese government’s unilateral change of translation in English from OBOR to the more neutral sounding Belt and Road, suggests that “Beijing seems to want to communicate different interpretations of the *yidai yilu* concepts to domestic and foreign audiences” (xvii).

In an engaging and accessible manner, Freymann devotes the first four chapters to laying out OBOR’s antecedents, deconstructing the rhetoric surrounding OBOR, and unapologetically labeling OBOR a brand that is tied to Xi Jinping’s emperor-like demands for obeisance domestically and tribute-like relations with weaker countries. Based on a formidable set of documents and interviews, the second half of the book concentrates China’s actual experiences in the realm of port development in three very different locations: Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Bagamoyo (Tanzania), and Piraeus (Greece). In Freymann’s view, the Sri Lankan government’s relations with China are characterized by “strategic promiscuity” (chapter five), one in which by virtue of their exposed geopolitical position and their own economic miscalculations, Sri Lankan politicians all eventually have to turn to China for infusions of capital, ultimately paving the way for the Hambantota port to be leased to China for 99 years. Chapter six investigates an opposite circumstance: a stalled Bagamoyo port project in Tanzania, finding that it has been something of a political football in Tanzanian domestic politics; first supported by a President from the area, then backed away from by a newly voted in President from a different area who did not favour that kind of patronage going to the network of a political rival. Chapter seven details China’s “eagle’s nest” strategy (“build the nest and the eagle will come”) in its rescue of insolvent and troubled Greek governments through its ultimately very successful redevelopment of Greece’s major port in Piraeus.

In all three cases, Freymann paints a surprising picture of close to irresistible Chinese capital and expertise in infrastructure development that results in recipient countries drawing closer to China over time. He presumes throughout, and his oral sources everywhere agree, that China’s investments are nothing more than China pursuing its own interests as these domestic governments pursue theirs, even in cases where insolvency, political turmoil and re-negotiations resulted in China’s full takeover of important ports on very long leases. Freymann’s other key takeaway from these three projects is that “when a recipient country gets cold feet, China is content to let it wait on the margins, neither in nor out, believing that in time it will return to the fold” (p. 159).

Chapter eight turns to a more discursive survey of OBOR in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. He concludes with a startling policy recommendation that since OBOR “will continue to expand as long as companies and institutions see political incentives to associate themselves with it” (p. 233) and, as it cannot compete with China in the realm of infrastructure, the US and its partners should put pride aside, joining OBOR in order to “shape it from within” (p. 240). Country specialists might well quibble with some of Freymann’s details: within Sri Lanka there was from the start a great deal of domestic controversy over the profoundly political and patronage-based Hambantota port. One might wonder whether Freymann’s choice of focus on highly capital-intensive ports relatively isolated from local societies leads him to a slanted view of the OBOR infrastructural juggernaut. Certainly, there is a wealth of ethnographic work that suggests that Chinese actors run into no end of trouble in Africa and Latin America, when roads, dams, power plants and mines are much more visibly present to local populations, often upsetting customary land-use rights or leading to environmental protests.

Despite these quibbles, Freymann has written an ambitious and accessible book with wonderful detail, clear arguments and a novel policy recommendation that will cause much thinking in policy circles. Taken together, Ye and Freymann bookend much of the current thinking on China’s BRI and both will find well-deserved places on the syllabi of all courses that cover the subject.