



THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: BETWEEN PITFALLS AND
PROMISES A PATH TOWARD A NEW HUMANISM

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When we look at the sheer size and multiple dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its related projects we may often wonder how it is possible to come to grips with such a complex beast: Six new land corridors of the “Road” and the Maritime “Belt” throughout the seas, with new spaces around the globe getting more and more connected with each other. Beyond the vast expanses, what could turn out truly as innovative when the BRI was launched in 2013 is the call for reciprocity, peace and cooperation, mutual learning and mutual benefit within it. The most recent BRI summit which took place in Beijing in April 2019 insisted on the aspect of “openness and inclusiveness,” described in Mike Thompson’s opening essay, as a source of inspiration despite growing criticism from a number of countries related to a supposed “debt trap diplomacy” and an overreliance on environmentally harmful projects. Looking beyond such criticisms, our view of the BRI will focus on its spiritual nature or perhaps better the spiritual promise of the BRI. As Yang asks: what are the conditions for fulfilling the promise of a genuine “openness and inclusiveness”? He points toward a common ground of key values and institutions reflecting the Confucian principle of reciprocity (in Chinese “shu”, 恕), a principle that is at the core of mutually beneficial business relationships and technology transfers, which should benefit all stakeholders. So far 125 countries have signed 173 agreements with China in the period between 2013 through 2018, with a total Chinese investment into BRI projects of about \$90 billion (*People’s Daily Online*, 2019).

There is a host of reasons why some countries are still cautious about involvement in this process. The legal uncertainties need certainly to be taken into account as Lo Shiu Hing’s case study on police cooperation in the fight against cross-border crimes along the BRI makes evident: Does the law of the People’s Republic of China apply or the law of the Republic of China when drug dealers, smugglers, organ harvesters operating from Taiwan are caught and put behind bars in Mainland China? How can a genuine “open access” of all possible stakeholders be guaranteed if different legal systems contradict

each other? As there is no clear definition of the BRI, it is reasonable to ask: What are the different stakeholders ultimately aiming at? There have been loud voices even among potential beneficiaries who point out the legal uncertainty that is inherent in the BRI process, who fear that in cases of conflict China would be favoured as the stronger party. The legitimacy of this fear is as old as the law of the jungle. I am reminded of the famous Melian dialogue by the Greek historian Thucydides in which the powerful state

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of Athens disregards the legitimate rights of the small island Melos and imposes law as the right of the powerful. Alternative to the cynicism of “might makes right,” Yang Hengda explores the spiritual principles that support the different forms of cooperation that are indispensable for bringing about a humanistic development in the BRI. His principles also reflect the lessons of history: “Humanism” properly confirmed with institutional economics “propagated ways of conduct or manners, that allowed reciprocity norms to work effectively, thereby limiting vulnerability to moral hazard which during the 15th and 16th century kept the returns from long distance trade low.... [S]ocieties which set incentives for information sharing and public debates in which rules secure open argumentation have a comparative advantage in the evolutionary process” (Krug 1998, p.7). Adhering to universal humane values is not only the right thing to do, it is also the likeliest strategy for success in the long run.

Progress in reaching common legal ground must rest on relationships of mutual trust and a willingness to reach compromises after truly listening to each other. In the midst of

the current trade war between the United States and China and the apparent growing success of simplistic xenophobic policies in different parts of the world, it may be crucial that the moral and spiritual dimensions of the BRI highlighted in this issue express the genuinely open spirit of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) who fully trusted his Chinese friends. Ricci generously shared his knowledge of the hard sciences as well as his faith in the Crucified and Risen Lord. A profound knowledge of Chinese language and culture made Matteo Ricci and his missionary successors in China “wise men” who could break new ground as they engaged in a genuine dialogue with China and were willing to share fully the advances of Western science in mathematics, geometry, and cartography. Along similar lines today, cultivating an attitude and behaviour of “openness and inclusiveness,” will require us to develop cross-cultural skills in order to achieve a similar respect for Chinese culture, trusting that conflicts can ultimately be solved through mutually recognised dispute resolution procedures and dialogue. Roderick O’Brien’s essay introduces readers to exemplary figures in different cultures who rightly should be considered as forerunners of the much-needed humanism, as they go beyond given boundaries in sharing core values even in the midst of setbacks and obstacles.

The memories of the unique breakthrough through genuine friendship by Ricci and other missionaries still resonate in many layers of Chinese society. Michelle Andersson deepens our exploration of this dialogue in the art created in China by the Jesuit brother and court painter from Milan, Italy, Giuseppe Castiglione S.J., who was a privileged friend of three Emperors of the Qing-Dynasty. The gaze of the artist on different features of court life including the Emperors and their wives and concubines, as well as the beautiful objects that surrounded them, certainly left a wonderful mark on China’s cultural history. All his amazing artistic achievements would not have been possible without the constant support and care of dear friends in high places. As these missionaries were among earlier travellers along the ancient Silk Road, we need to recognise in the BRI an amazing opportunity to learn from

past successes in merging Western elements with Chinese elements, a fresh chance to develop a web of interaction and bonds of friendship with Chinese people.

Dwelling on such memories of the ancient Silk Road should not distract us from the fact that dialogue with China needs to be oriented to the future. Rather than evoking nostalgic feelings, the main challenge of the BRI is whether such massive economic and financial projects can be developed in a sustainable model of growth: As Mike Thompson explains, the BRI’s goals can be achieved only if economic growth is based on mutually shared values of honesty, reliability and integrity. We may consider that a BRI lacking a commitment to ethical values has the potential to end up in a criminal abuse of the environment, and a brutal disregard of human dignity and human rights.

A key litmus test for this approach to “social” innovation is the way BRI participants view the religions along the different roads and belts which cut through large areas which are home to Islamic communities. It is not uncommon that this religion which may count roughly as many believers as Christianity all too often is regarded as a threat to security due to some extremist groups and their increasing visibility in other cultures. Dennis McCann’s essay on “Islamic Business Ethics” may help allay such fears, by suggesting not only the religious integrity of Muslim morality, but also the way in which Muslim business norms seem to resonate well with Confucian values: there seems to be a wealth of experience and insights concerning a communitarian approach to finance and trade from the point of view of Islamic ethics. Rather than just reaping benefits for privileged groups, Islam’s witness of faith in *Allah*, who is invoked in prayer five times a day, is intended even to benefit the larger society. A distinctively Islamic approach to the acquisition of wealth and financial transactions resists widening the gap between the rich and the poor and seeks to unite all stakeholders together in a common attempt to restrain dishonest and unfair practices which harm the disadvantaged. It is crucial to recognise a chance to learn from different wisdom traditions,

as an opportunity for spiritual growth in the whole dynamic of the BRI.

The different wisdom traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity seem to agree on the importance of respecting the dignity of each human being. The core of human dignity is to recognise the intrinsic value and integrity of each person. However, respecting human dignity is not restricted to the individual. Francis Nwachukwu's discussion of the BRI in Africa alerts us to the needs of a whole continent in which China on all levels has been most active since the opening of its economy in 1978. The special bond of friendship between Chinese companies and government agencies with their African counterparts features a distinctively pragmatic and business-like approach which is an alternative to Western approaches to "development

may come about. Therefore the challenge of the BRI in Africa and elsewhere may finally open a new way to demonstrate the relevance of Matteo Ricci's approach to friendship and reciprocity for business—namely that the best hope for sustainable business success may be realised only if the partners of the BRI manage to establish a genuine basis of mutual understanding and trust. As Nwachukwu suggest, this advanced level of commitment to mutual learning and appreciation often seems completely absent. For that reason, the Spiritual Principles for BRI Construction, outlined by Yang Hengda, seem truly indispensable and practical, if the BRI is to benefit the larger society. But does Yang appear just as a lonely voice crying in the desert? What can be done to ensure that his proposals become truly transformative?

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aid" for Africa. Rather than consider Africa as an aid recipient, China revolutionised an approach to its African counterparts as business partners. If the business deal is successful, both sides win; a failure reminds each party that something in their business model needs either to be fixed or altogether abandoned. From the perspective of Confucian ethics, the BRI in Africa offers a chance to develop its pragmatism while also highlighting the communitarian dimension of dignity as it relates to a whole continent.

But unless there are no attempts to curb different layers of pervasive corruption in the partners' business practices, it is most likely that the enormous gap between the rich and the poor in Africa will keep widening and that only a small fraction of society will profit. Without a comprehensive recognition of African local cultures, laws and customs it may also be likely that the Chinese will come to be regarded as colonial Masters, much as their European predecessors were as they grabbed territories in Africa: The Master and Slave relationship may be recreated, no matter how many material benefits

The main ethical challenge for the partners in the BRI process seems to be whether they are willing share basic common values such as dignity, honesty, truthfulness, reliability and integrity. In order to bring about a sustainable business model based on reciprocity and fairness, we at the Macau Ricci Institute believe the wisdom traditions of China have a decisive role to play. In the midst of unprecedented business opportunities and sometimes a cut-throat culture of business competition Buddhist voices seem to be perfectly tuned to Christian, Muslim, and Daoist insights which advocate cultivating genuine solidarity and compassion. Benoit Vermander offers an inspiring view of the achievements of Christian Cochini who devoted his whole life to becoming a true friend of Buddhists while opening new ways of dialogue with them. The careful analysis of his last book on 50 Masters of Buddhism describes fascinating journeys in search of wisdom, individuals leaving behind their comfort zones and becoming gradually transformed by encounters and insights from a culture that radically differed from their own. The itineraries

of these 50 Masters in their search for wisdom and compassion should be inspiring for stakeholders in the BRI process. They have the opportunity not just to become partners in technological and economic advances but also to consider the example of Buddhist Masters who devoted their lives to taking care of the sick, the disadvantaged and the poor. The project of an entrepreneurially driven solidarity, inspired by the ideals invoked for the BRI process, would translate into fair trade and business opportunities which give equal access to all those who respect the rule of law.

In this context we should value the proposal by the economists Margit Osterloh and Bruno S. Frey who argue for a new and innovative approach to the immigration crisis as they suggest a policy for enabling the migrants to enter into countries in Europe in a legal way, and to offer them quick employment opportunities. Another key concept from Osterloh and Frey which may be most relevant for the institutionalisation of the BRI is the “FOCJ, i.e. Functional, Overlapping and Competing Jurisdictions” which respond to actual social problems, and are organised to deal with the corresponding issues in an efficient and inclusive manner. This differs considerably from the project of building the European Union on the basis of pre-existing nation states. As the BRI process cannot solely rely on central governments, it is certainly a key question if economic and spiritual insights may be helpful in creating structures and bringing about changes of mind which take to heart the legitimate interests of all stakeholders.

All the contributors to this issue agree that it would be short sighted to limit the project of the BRI to a mere alliance of trade and commerce. There is no doubt that Christian values of solidarity, subsidiarity, mutual help and learning as well as the orientation to the Common Good have profoundly shaped a unity within a wide variety of cultures in and beyond Europe. The mostly peaceful coexistence of the different member countries of the European Union and their advanced social security systems reflect a culture that has for centuries been influenced by Christian social values with its distinctive care for the vulnerable and poor. As there seems to be

an awakening to spiritual values in China, it may also be realistic to hope that the BRI may in one way or another be shaped by common values of integrity and trustworthiness for the benefit of the larger society.

If the BRI follows the old paradigm of exclusive focus on economic growth with its consequent neglect of the environment it may carry very serious and devastating consequences. China as the main driver in the BRI has a chance to learn from the very negative consequences that follow from an exclusive focus on economic growth and the failure to take into account the risks of ecological disasters involving water, soil and air pollution. Therefore the key test of the BRI is its consistent commitment to a sustainable approach to economic development which must entail also a commitment to create the necessary legal and institutional framework.



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