



BOOK REVIEW

Hong Yu. *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Singapore: Springer, 2024.

Published online: 29 August 2025

To cite this article: Xiaomei, Z. 2025. Book review: Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 21 (2): 317–319. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2025.21.2.16>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2025.21.2.16>

Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative authored by Hong Yu in 2024, embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the Belt and Road Initiative (hereinafter abbreviated as BRI), a term coined by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013, which is inspired by the ancient Silk Road that originated during the Han dynasty some 2,000 years ago. This book delves into the intricacies of both China and the BRI by examining the BRI in depth and endeavouring to scrutinise the origins, motivations, and evolution of this contemporary iteration of the BRI. Moreover, it maps out the decision-making processes and domains of the BRI implementation by the Chinese central and local governments, as well as Chinese enterprises. The book also assesses the geopolitical and geo-economic implications of this globally oriented BRI for participating countries and the broader international community.

This book presents 11 pivotal findings that offer insights into various facets of the BRI. First, it analyses the underlying forces and logic driving China's pursuit of the BRI, highlighting its profound and lasting impact on both China and the global community. The book then highlights the BRI's critical role in enabling global investment and commerce, viewing it as a significant platform for China to further economic globalisation. Furthermore, an examination of China's economic relations with ASEAN countries and the implementation of the BRI in Southeast Asia reveals the Initiative's role in promoting regional economic integration and cooperation. The book uses chapters three to six to carry out a relatively detailed case study, illustrating the specific impacts of the BRI on countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Cambodia. Meanwhile, this book discusses China's BRI cooperation with Arab and Persian Gulf countries, assesses the counterbalancing effect of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment Initiative launched by the Group of Seven (G7) on the BRI, focuses on the contributions of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and analyses the adjustments and evolution of the BRI. Overall, this book provides rich material and profound insights for a comprehensive understanding of the BRI's achievements, challenges, and future.

This book presents several strengths. First, it addresses the construction of China's "global image" (p. 1). The BRI is critically examined as a strategic vehicle through which China seeks to shape its international image. By opening the initiative to all interested countries, China signals a shift from the historical and cultural narrative of the ancient Silk Road towards a more strategic vision of global connectivity, with China positioned as the central hub. This ambitious project serves as an open invitation to the international community, marking a clear departure from the ancient Silk Road, which was primarily rooted in historical and cultural symbolism.

Second, the scope and reach of the BRI are particularly notable. While the initiative invites participation from all countries, its influence has extended beyond historical and cultural dimensions to become a significant economic link connecting diverse regions of the world. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that several influential countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Mexico, Australia, India, and Japan – have not joined the BRI. Surprisingly, even North Korea, a close ally of China, remains absent from the BRI map. This highlights the fact that the initiative's openness and non-exclusivity are not absolute and reflects the complex dynamics of international political relations.

Third, the implementation of the BRI varies significantly across participating countries. Although the initiative has attracted numerous signatories, the degree of implementation differs widely. For instance, countries such as Vietnam, despite having endorsed the BRI, have yet to initiate large-scale infrastructure projects under its framework highlighting the disparities and challenges inherent in the implementation process. Moreover, some countries express only formal support for the BRI in principle, pledging cooperation with China without undertaking concrete projects. Nevertheless, this symbolic endorsement contributes to the BRI's international credibility and recognition, even in the absence of tangible outcomes.

Fourth, among the many global cooperation initiatives promoting infrastructure connectivity, the BRI stands out for its vast financial scale and far-reaching impact. This achievement reflects not only China's economic strength, political influence, and strategic acumen, but also serves as a powerful testament to its rise on the global stage. The BRI exemplifies China's expanding international influence. It functions not only as a channel for China's further integration into the global economy, but also as a platform for sharing development opportunities and addressing global challenges in collaboration with other nations. As the book highlights, the global reach and accomplishments of the BRI are such that the world can no longer overlook the profound implications of China's rise. To support this point, the book cites a 2022 report by the World Economic Forum, which states that since 2013, Chinese enterprises and financial institutions have participated in approximately 3,800 overseas projects, involving a total investment of up to USD4.3 trillion (p. 2). This data underscores China's emerging role as a dominant force in the global economic landscape.

Fifth, the favourable perception of China among developing countries is underscored by a 2022 poll conducted by the Centre for Future Democracy at the University of Cambridge, as cited in the book. The survey reveals that 62% of respondents in developing countries hold a favourable view of China, compared to 61% who view the United States positively (p. 2). Particularly noteworthy is that nearly two-thirds of respondents from countries along the BRI express a favourable opinion of China. This data marks the first time that China's favourability among the public in developing countries especially in Asia and Africa has surpassed that of the United States. These findings suggest that the BRI has played a significant role in shaping China's national image, reinforcing its reputation and influence on the international stage.

Sixth, the book presents evidence supporting the narrative of the "Rise of the East and Decline of the West" (pp. 193–205), particularly through the lens of economic and trade expansion under the BRI. For China's intellectual community, the survey data provide compelling support for the growth of China's geostrategic influence, while also indicating a relative decline in the global standing of the United States. The book further elaborates on how China has steadily expanded its economic and trade relations with other countries since the launch of the BRI. By enhancing cross-border connectivity through international trade routes, China has not only advanced the

sustainability of its own economic development but also created tangible opportunities and benefits for partner countries along the Belt and Road.

By following the analytical framework constructed in the book, readers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the BRI. Through a wealth of case studies, the book deconstructs this grand initiative into vivid and specific narratives, making complex policies and practices more accessible. Concurrently, the theoretical analysis not only uncovers the underlying logic and motivations driving the BRI but also offers valuable insights into its prospective development. In this regard, the book demonstrates both high academic value and considerable practical significance, serving as an important window through which domestic and international readers can better understand China's global strategic positioning.

It is particularly noteworthy that the supporting materials cited in the book as indicated in the Prologue (pp. v–viii) and throughout the referenced sources can be regarded as authoritative and highly reliable. The supporting evidence provides substantial reinforcement for the book's arguments, enhancing both its credibility and persuasive strength. While certain aspects may invite further scholarly debate, the book's overall academic significance and practical relevance are undeniable. From this volume, readers can also discern the continuing evolution and expansion of the BRI, whose influence and importance are likely to become increasingly prominent.

However, this book is not without its shortcomings. It exhibits a sense of familiarity in several chapters and paragraphs. This is primarily because parts of the book were previously published as academic papers. Although the author has made significant updates and revisions in preparing the volume, it is inevitable that some sections still contain a certain degree of repetition. Further revisions incorporating the most recent developments in the BRI project would help the book align more closely with current progress and offer readers more informative and reference-worthy content.

In conclusion, this book offers a comprehensive account of the origins, development, implementation, and potential impact of the BRI over the past decade. It not only elaborates on the initiative's core principles but also illustrates its concrete practices and achievements across different countries and regions through rich case analyses and empirical data. The BRI is presented as a multifaceted endeavour that reflects China's ambition to assume a pivotal role in global connectivity. Although the BRI has garnered support from numerous countries, several notable absentees remain, and levels of engagement among participating nations vary considerably. Nonetheless, the initiative's financial scale and global reach underscore China's rising prominence in the international arena.

Zhang Xiaomei

Shen Congwen Research Centre, College of Literature, Journalism and Communication, Jishou University, China and School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia