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No End of History

A Chinese Alternative Concept of
International Order?

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**No End of History
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International Order?**

In the last three years, President Xi Jinping has used nearly every opportunity to announce new foreign policy initiatives. Most importantly, he emphasized the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (“China dream”) as the central goal of his political agenda. In addition, Xi described relations with the United States and Russia as a “new type of major power relationship” that should be mainly built on mutual respect and recognition of national interests. He further re-emphasized the significance of China’s neighboring countries, proclaimed the need for a “New Asian security concept,” and kicked off the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. Among all these different announcements, OBOR clearly stands out. It is by far the most comprehensive and visible Chinese initiative of the last three years. OBOR not only replaces the concept of “harmonious society/world” but also represents Xi’s central instrument to actually realize the “China dream” and turn China into a great power again. OBOR has thus the potential to grow into an alternative idea showing how the common space of international politics could be organized in the future. Consequently, OBOR challenges the still dominating Western vision of the international system and could effectively transform the existing structure of the current international order.

For this reason, it is crucial to conceptualize China’s OBOR initiative in a broader context. Instead of only focusing on specific mechanisms linked to OBOR, such as, for example, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it is necessary to develop a comprehensive analytical approach to OBOR. Before doing so, it makes sense to briefly discuss three major challenges to the existing international order (the weakness of democracy, the competition of ideologies, and the increasing relevance of everyday practices in international politics) that increase the leverage for China (and other actors) to push forward alternative ideas of international order.

In a nutshell, China’s OBOR initiative is regarded as a vision for building up a *comprehensive cultural, economic, and political network* that promotes connectivity and cooperation between countries, regions, and cities along the Silk Road. Furthermore, the OBOR initiative

is *flexible, inclusive, and open*. The geographic scope of the initiative has still not been determined, and the Chinese leadership has not yet published an official OBOR map. Thus, everyone who has an interest in the initiative – or in one of the institutions summarized under the OBOR initiative – can become part of it. OBOR itself is not an institution/organization, but as a network OBOR comprises many different institutions and mechanisms; even China's bilateral relations are increasingly linked to the OBOR initiative. Consequently, the newly established financial mechanisms such as the AIIB or the Silk Road Fund as well as already existing multilateral mechanisms (BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) are now seen as part of OBOR. In the OBOR network, cooperation is thus possible between all kinds of actors and in many different contexts.

The main risk for European countries and the EU consists of the concentration in particular mechanisms or even projects in the realm of OBOR. This could strengthen Chinese actors in playing, for instance, individual European countries off against the European Union (EU), or the EU off against mechanisms such as the Central and Eastern European forum with China ("16+1"). A focus on only specific elements of OBOR further conceals that most of these projects, mechanisms, and funds are part of a comprehensive network vision with a potential global outreach.

Hence, European countries – particularly European foreign ministries – firstly, need to start collecting and distributing information about all Chinese OBOR activities in their countries. This would make it much easier for these countries to *actively* define in what areas they want – or do not want – to cooperate. Secondly, the newly established EU connectivity platform should not only serve as a platform for identifying joint infrastructure projects; it also needs to develop into the main center for coordinating all OBOR activities of Chinese actors in the EU.

Three Challenges to International Order

In times of crises, experts and policymakers are faced with continuously new political events, an incredible amount of “facts” about these incidents happening all over the world, and an enormous as well as uncontrollable speed of information. Moments of crisis are events that require actors to immediately articulate their interpretations and preferred choice of action. Crises are thus moments of dislocation and decisions, in which the political principles, values, and understandings of actors are challenged and, at the same time, are in great need of being created again.¹

The many different international, regional, and local crises of the last years have revealed weak points of the existing international order, for instance regarding the governance capability of global institutions, the difficulty of leading powers to translate their power into outcomes, or the growing struggle to maintain national coherence. Furthermore, the focus of European governments on the management of acute crises has often prevented discussions about a more fundamental challenge, that is, the development of alternative ideas of international order by other (non-Western, non-state, etc.) actors. It is thus necessary that questions such as “What is international order?” are again discussed more comprehensively. After all, there exist many different understandings about how the space of international politics could be organized. Hence, it is crucial to seriously reflect on the question of what alternative concepts of order exist and how these concepts may challenge the existing order, its values, and its rules.

Before I show how the OBOR initiative could be regarded as an alternative Chinese concept of international order, I firstly stress three key challenges to the existing structure of the international order: the weakness of democracy, the competition of ideologies, and the growing relevance of everyday practices in international politics. These challenges increase the leverage for actors such as China to promote their own understandings of international order.

1 See Hillis Miller, “‘Taking Up a Task’: Moments of Decision in Ernesto Laclau’s Thought”, in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 217–26.

The Weakness of Democracy

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the enthusiasm about “the triumph of the West” peaked in Francis Fukuyama’s famous claim that “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such; that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”² Almost three decades later, this nearly exuberant self-confidence of the West has turned into quite the opposite. The end of history, and in particular the end of conflicting ideologies, was not achieved.³ Today, it is very obvious that democracies represent only one way to organize human coexistence; besides, they are constantly being challenged by external crises as much as being tested by threats from the inside. In this regard, the many different crises of the last years (Greece, Russia/Ukraine, the refugee crisis, the challenge of ISIS, Occupy movements, etc.) underscore the vulnerability of our democracies.

This immanent weakness of democracy was also the topic of Giovanna Borradori’s interview with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida shortly after the September 11 attacks of 2001.⁴ In their discussion about the impact of these terrorist attacks on our lives, politics, and societies, Derrida emphasized the phenomenon of “democratic autoimmunity,” which describes a specific weakness of liberal democracy. The concept of autoimmunity derives from medical science. It describes the malfunction of the immune system. Normally, the immune system of a healthy human body responds to foreign materials but does not attack the body itself. When the immune system attacks the body (cells and tissues), we are speaking

2 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History”, *The National Interest* (1989): 1.

3 See Oliver Lembcke, “Kein Ende in Sicht. Zur Rolle der Ideologie in der Politik – aus Sicht der Politischen Theorie”, *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 24, no. 1–2 (2014): 149–61.

4 Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

of an autoimmune disease.⁵ In the political context, Derrida uses this notion to highlight that democratic systems already incorporate the possibility of destruction and failure within its structure. Following this autoimmune logic, democratic governments are prone to “produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome.”⁶

This leads to two very particular weaknesses of liberal democracy: firstly, the necessary openness of democracy always puts it at risk⁷; secondly, in response to internal or external crises, democratically legitimated governments might come to political decisions that stand in contrast to fundamental democratic principles and values. In other words, to protect democracy against its enemies, democracies sometimes refer to methods that are not democratic. Giorgio Agamben emphasizes this specific aspect in his discussion about the “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*).⁸ Agamben relies on Carl Schmitt’s famous definition of sovereignty, which comprises the power to decide about the state of exception. Thus, in cases of exception (or emergency), the state is authorized to suspend the law due to its right to self-preservation.⁹ Agamben understands the state of exception as “the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension.”¹⁰ Derrida’s democratic autoimmunity and Agamben’s thinking

5 See “Autoimmunity”, *Nature Insight* 435, no. 7042 (2005), <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v435/n7042/pdf/435583a.pdf> (accessed 31 August 2015).

6 Derrida, at this juncture, mainly focusses on US policy before and after 9/11. Habermas and Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (see note 4), 99.

7 Mouffe highlights: “On the one side, we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.” Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005), 2–3. Taking a very simplified perspective, this means, for example, when democratic cities such as London, Paris, or Brussels turn into places of training for terrorists, or when young men and women who grew up in largely non-Muslim democracies suddenly decide to support ISIS. Besides, it is also possible that “the apparently suicidal political openness allows that a party hostile to democracy might be legitimately elected”. Habermas and Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (see note 4), 101.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* [1922], 8. ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004), 18–19.

10 Agamben, *State of Exception* (see note 8), 3.

about the state of exception represent structural elements of democracy. In times of crises, these elements could, however, turn into weak spots of democracy, which then also become visible to outsiders, for instance to China.

Competition of Ideologies: Horizontal Complexity of the World

The Eurocentric concept of international order has determined the understanding of international politics for nearly 200 years. In the atmosphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European thinkers generated a European identity “against the rest.” The idea of European superiority and the praxis of expansion grew together and created what John M. Hobson called “an imaginary *line of civilisational apartheid* that fundamentally separated or split East from West.”¹¹ However, the invention of a Eurocentric worldview alone is not quite special (every great empire tends to create a dominant and specific worldview centered on itself). But what inevitably distinguishes Eurocentrism from other “isms” is that its ideas reached out to dominate every (academic, political, territorial, etc.) realm, starting in (at least) the nineteenth century. Consequently, although many countries developed images, maps, or concepts of the world – and for a long time these different perspectives co-existed or influenced each other – it is still, as Wigen and Lewis underscored: “With the triumph of European imperialism [...] the contemporary European view of the divisions of the world came to enjoy near-universal acceptance.”¹²

In the last two decades, the Eurocentric concept of international order has clearly been challenged by a new variety of actors that are increasingly forcing traditional powers to seriously consider what they “want.” These are, for instance, states such as Brazil, India, China, and Turkey, which alone or together

11 See John M. Hobson, “Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalia towards a Post-Racist Critical IR”, *Review of International Studies* 33, no. S1 (2007): 94.

12 See Martin W. Lewis and Kären, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1997), 33. This is not only regarding the regional divisions of the world but is also the case for the emergence of international/regional institutions as well as the success of the Westphalian nation-state as the most important container of politics.

(for instance in the framework of BRICS) raise their voices and develop their own ideas about the future structure of the international order (or parts of this structure). Thus, they are no longer mere objects but (again) become subjects of international politics.¹³ In addition, the rising number of powerful non-state actors, transnational groups, and global players further challenges the principles, norms, and values of the existing international order.¹⁴

Thus, the world is not simply becoming multipolar in the sense that a fixed amount of power resources/capabilities is distributed between more than two nation-states and, following this neorealist logic, only more countries compete for the leading role in international order. In fact, the horizontal complexity of the world firstly refers to a new diversity of actors that try to dominate the political discourse from very different angles (not only at the state level). Secondly, this new complexity is further expressed in a competition of ideas/ideologies about international order and a multifaceted understanding of power. As Mouffe rightly emphasizes, “we should acknowledge that the world is a pluri-verse and realise that to accept a diversity of political forms of organization will be more conducive to peace and stability than the enforcement of a universal model.”¹⁵ In this pluriverse competition, the notion of power is no longer understood as a mere distribution of capacities; the question “What is power?” is not as important as the question “What can power do?”¹⁶

13 Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to The East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

14 Such as the unpredictable power of companies such as Google that, among others, has an interest in building cities in developing countries. See Mark Lutter, “Google’s Utopia: The Tech Giant Plans to Build Cities, Experiment with Social Rules”, *Financial Review*, 24 April 2015, <http://www.afr.com/technology/googles-utopia-the-tech-giant-plans-to-build-cities-experiment-with-social-rules-20150421-1mpmlu> (accessed 31 August 2015).

15 Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy in a Multipolar World”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 3 (2009): 554.

16 Although “power identifies a capacity”, “power is a potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized”; thus “having the means of power is not the same as being powerful”. Steven Lukes, “Power and the Battle of Hearts and Minds”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 478.

Everyday Practices in International Politics: Vertical Complexity of the World

In addition to the horizontal complexity of the world – that is, the new range of actors and the new power dynamics that highlight a competition of ideas/ideologies about the future constitution of the international order – phenomena such as protest movements, transnational migration, jihadism (returnees), the flow of refugees, and the digitalization of society underscore the growing vertical challenges to the international order. These phenomena show that *international* politics is no longer limited to traditional inter-state relations in which the crucial container of “where politics take place” is still the Westphalian nation-state. Moreover, they jeopardize the boundaries between political levels (national, regional, and global) as well as the clear-cut distinction between domestic and foreign policy practices. Hence, these phenomena lay open alternative spaces and ways of political articulation that cut across the traditional layers of international politics. For instance, phenomena such as the various protest movements of the last years might have had an impact on the domestic policy of a third country or different movements might even have influenced each other. For a long time, international politics has been mainly about “the realm of exceptional events conducted by states and statesmen, or their proxies.”¹⁷ Today, international politics is increasingly driven by the concern of “the everyday,” in other words, events or phenomena that take place in the everyday environment of people.

Consequently, we need to look beyond the well-established but somewhat limited understanding of international politics to foster our “ability to conceptualize how the ‘international’ is constituted by and constituted of a myriad of phenomena.”¹⁸ This includes the viewpoint of the “international” as “everyday practice” taking place in “everyday spaces.” Against this backdrop, it is necessary to understand how everyday practices and spaces uncover the linkages between international politics and our everyday lives.¹⁹

17 Xavier Guillaume, “The International As an Everyday Practice”, *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2011): 459.

18 Xavier Guillaume, “Unveiling the ‘International’: Process, Identity and Alterity”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (2007): 742.

19 See Matt Davies and Michael Niemann, “The Everyday Spaces of Global Politics: Work, Leisure, Family”, *New Political Science* 24, no. 4 (2002): 557–77.

This development is further increased by the digitalization of society. When something happens in the world, we (academics, policymakers, and public) rely on visual representations to believe it.²⁰ Visuals are still “one of the principle ways in which news from distant places is brought home.”²¹ Images, photographs, and video clips further represent articulations of how people approach and engage with the world. Visual images, thus, are a means of mapping, watching, ordering, and representing the world.²² This, however, was also the case in the pre-digital world. The peculiarity in our digitalized world today is that visuals are usually available in an instant, since everyone with a smartphone can share them through services such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, or WeChat. The fast pace of communication clearly diminishes the response time of policymakers. Thus, there is no time to wait when images – and along with them (often random) first statements, evaluations, or opinions – already surround you. It is something we learn from a friend of Mark Zuckerberg in the film “The Social Network”: The internet is not written in pencil but in ink. Consequently, it seems to be of utmost importance to be one of the first responders to influence a particular political debate, but at the same time, everything that is once said on the internet cannot be taken back, or even deleted.²³ Hence, the digitalization of society also questions the relationship between facts and truth, because when digitalized facts are being constantly updated, they lose their durability, which once was the major characteristic of their truth.²⁴ Furthermore, people all over the world are directly connected through social media. Together, they constitute a digital space of political communication that is detached from the traditional geographic

units of the world.²⁵ Hence, this space again highlights the deterritorialization of politics (see horizontal complexity of the world).

For example, recent protests have been quickly visualized through photographs, video clips, and art work that were usually made by demonstrators themselves. Protest movements thus still rely on a geographic space or location, but protesters further create a virtual space that detaches itself from territorial boundaries (into rather new digital boundaries). Their images and videos create the paradox of being inside (that is, being part of the movement on the streets) as well as outside of the movement (since they also produce the “data of the movement”). This situation permeates the traditional categories of world politics. Consequently, protests in Egypt, Turkey, or Hong Kong are not only visible but also accessible for everyone in the world creating growing “imagined data communities.”²⁶ In other words, we have protest communities on the ground and growing data communities that facilitate the immediate production and transportation of news (in the form of visual imagery and others) from distant places to our home as well as to our national governments and policymakers.

20 After all, seeing is believing. See David Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea. Seeing is Believing* (London: Routledge, 2014).

21 David Campbell, “Poststructuralism”, in *International Relations Theory. Discipline and Diversity*, ed. by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 220.

22 See David Shim and Dirk Nabers, “Imaging North Korea: Exploring Its Visual Representations in International Politics”, *International Studies Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (2013): 289–306.

23 Which is very similar to what Dave Eggers emphasises in his novel “The Circle”, in which one of the pivotal principles of the company “the circle” is that “we don’t delete”.

24 Mercedes Bunz, *Die stille Revolution* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 61.

25 Still, the internet relies on physical and technical requirements. See Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

26 Nadav Hochmann, “The Social Media Image”, *Big Data & Society* (2014), 6.

China, the Menace! China, the Alternative?

In Western academia and politics, it is particularly the narrative of China's rise that questions the hegemony of Western powers (mainly the United States) in the international system. In the discipline of International Relations, this challenge is often described with the power transition theory. Power transition theory mainly deals with the (recurring) emergence of global power transformations and their effects on the structure of the international system. In this regard, power transition theory argues that the rise of China (and to a much lesser extent other non-Western powers) could lead to greater tension – even potential conflict – with the United States or the West in general. With regard to the future of US-China relations, John Ikenberry emphasizes, “the drama of China's rise will feature an increasingly powerful China and a declining United States locked in an epic battle over the rules and leadership of the international system.”²⁷ China, it seems, is the pivotal menace of the existing international order. Why is this narrative still a rather dominant one? Surprisingly, this is not only the case because of China's (still) increasing power capabilities but rather because China is, in many ways, the “absolute other” to our understanding of international order.

Firstly, China is a non-democracy, more precisely a “capitalist non-democracy” and, in this regard, the country is a denial of the liberal narrative that economic development is necessarily followed by political democratization (in a Western sense). Secondly, China is one of the emerging actors forcing traditional powers (and institutions) to seriously consider what the country wants. Thirdly, China also has to deal with new phenomena that challenge the national coherence and stability of the country and does this on its own terms. Hence, President Xi Jinping has explicitly increased the control and surveillance system within China, particularly in questions regarding the digitalization of society.²⁸

²⁷ John G. Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West. Can the Liberal System Survive?”, *Foreign Affairs* (2008), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west> (accessed 31 August 2008).

²⁸ The Chinese leadership plans a comprehensive package of security-related laws. In July 2015, a new National Security Law was already adopted by the National People's Congress

What in recent years has mainly happened in our dealings with China is that we have created a political narrative of “us” on this side and “them” on the other side. In other words, we tend to clearly differentiate “us” – our political system, political practices, thinking, and values – from “them.” Consequently, our academic and political debates about the likelihood of China rising peacefully, the country's potential threat to the international order, or the new assertiveness in its foreign policy practices somehow constitute the image of “a” China that acts outside of what we – in the West – regard as the righteous way of politics in the first place. This is not unusual, since every political and collective identity is based on the process of differentiation between an “us” and a “them.” The distinction of who belongs to us and who does not is, thus, not accidental – it is a precondition of community.²⁹ However, as Mouffe rightly claims, “it means that there is always the possibility of this relation us/them becoming one of friend/enemy.”³⁰ If we mark China as the menace, and even harsher as the enemy, it always includes the “real possibility of physical killing.”³¹ Nevertheless, it is not an imperative that the differentiation of “us” and “them” has to turn out this way. The task is to think of others not as enemies but adversaries, which, for Mouffe, are “friendly enemies, that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.”³² Hence, the crucial questions are how China wants to organize the common space of international politics and whether the Chinese leadership uses the growing leverage to push forward an alternative Chinese understanding of (international) order.

and at the end of December 2015 an anti-terrorism law passed. However, a cyber-security law and an NGO-law are also currently being drafted and debated.

²⁹ Following Carl Schmitt's classic *Concept of the Political*, the identification of a necessary outsider constitutes political groups and also helps to differentiate among them.

³⁰ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (see note 7), 550.

³¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33.

³² Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (see note 7), 13.

In approaching these issues, it is crucial to understand that the notion of international order is not much discussed in China's departments of International Relations. Rather, the meaning of political order is dealt with in other disciplinary contexts such as Linguistics, History, Philosophy, and Sociology. Chinese International Relations departments are mostly constituted by people who studied – and sometimes even translated – the most important Western International Relations texts into Chinese.³³ In addition, their scholarly points of departure – and this is particularly the case for most Chinese International Relations experts – are still the “very ideas that are the root of the modern Western worldview.”³⁴ I focus instead on brief illustrations of China's traditional understanding of order, the idea of Chinese networks, and Zhao Tingyang's political philosophy³⁵ because all

³³ What you can find in these departments are scholars who try to bridge local traditions and perspectives with key International Relations concepts and categories. For example, the work of Qin Yaqing, who points us to the importance of background knowledge (culture, experience, habits, histories, etc.) in the respective communities. Qin particularly introduces a constructivist perspective that builds on the idea of relationalism, which represents a central aspect in traditional Chinese thinking. See Qin Yaqing, “International Society As a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 129–53. Thus, he promotes a specific Chinese perspective on constructivism without “advocating a Chinese school per se”. Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, *Claiming the International* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 19. Qin and others have written extensively on this. See Song Xinning, “Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 61–74, and *Zhongguo guoji-guanxi yanjiu (1995–2005)* [Chinese IR Scholarship, 1995–2005], ed. Jisi Wang et al. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Tickner and Blaney, *Claiming the International* (see note 33), 3. They cannot think out of the box because they are educated in the box.

³⁵ Zhao Tingyang has been increasingly noticed in the West, especially since he has also published in English. During a research trip from August to December 2010 in Beijing, I met with Professor Zhao personally and at different conferences in Beijing and Xiamen. In the Beijing academic circle, particularly within Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Zhao is very well-known and respected, although his conception of *tianxia* has also created a broad debate among Chinese academics, especially historians and philosophers. Regarding the issue of *tianxia* (all under heaven), Zhao has published two books, many Chinese articles, and two English articles. See Zhao Tingyang, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia)”, *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (2006): 29–41; Zhao Tingyang, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)”, *Diogenes* 56, no. 5 (2009): 5–18. In the chapter on Zhao Tingyang's philosophy, I mainly refer

highlight elements of Chinese political practice that might also be helpful to understand the main characteristics of Xi Jinping's OBOR initiative.

Traditional Chinese Understanding of “Order”: *Tianxia* and *Chaogong Tixi*³⁶

The ideas of *tianxia* (all under heaven) and *chaogong tixi* (tributary system) derive from the early Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100–256 B.C.) and have accompanied Chinese politicians, philosophers, and thinkers ever since. Consequently, there does not exist *one* definition of *tianxia* or *chaogong tixi* but many interpretations. Following John J. Fairbank's famous attempt to identify the essence of the Chinese World Order, I only highlight key characteristics of both concepts.

The notion of *tianxia* constitutes the core of the Chinese traditional concept of political order. As Edward Wang points out, “Zhongguo [the Middle Kingdom, China, N. G.] indicated the center of the world, hence the ‘central state’ or ‘middle kingdom’, while *Tianxia* referred to the extended Chinese world, despite its ecumenical claim.”³⁷ From a Chinese perspective, *tianxia* comprises the whole known geographic space. Furthermore, “the Confucian conception of *tianxia* refers to an ideal moral and political order admitting of no territorial boundary – the whole world to be governed by a sage according to principles of rites (*li*) and virtues (*de*).”³⁸ This sage stands for the Chinese Emperor, who is appointed by heaven (*tian*). He holds the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), which legitimizes his authority. Thus, the Emperor is the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) and he likewise represents the highest level of morality. His authority essentially depends on this virtue and his ability to act in the terms of the Mandate of Heaven. Ideally, the Emperor rules and attracts

to Zhao Tingyang, *Politics of Everybody [Mei ge ren de Zhengzhi]* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2010), and chapter 4 of Zhao Tingyang, *Investigations of the Bad World: Political Philosophy as First Philosophy [Huai Shijie Yanjiu: Zuowei diyi zhexue de zhengzhi zhaxue]* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmindaxue Chubanshe, 2009).

³⁶ These paragraphs are partly taken from Nadine Godehardt, “China and the Definition of the Asian Region”, in *Regional Powers and Regional Order*, ed. by Nadine Godehardt and Dirk Nabers (New York: Routledge, 2011), 119–21.

³⁷ Edward Wang, “History, Space, and Ethnicity: The Chinese Worldview”, *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2. (1999): 287.

³⁸ Joseph Chan, “Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism”, in *Confucian-Political Ethics*, ed. Daniel A. Bell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 69.

all under heaven (*tianxia*), because “if people under your reign are happy, people will be attracted to come from afar.”³⁹ In this sense, his authority surpasses territorial boundaries and his moral superiority is simultaneously a prerequisite for his selection, the grounding of his authority, and also serves as the leading principle for his actions. Put differently, the Emperor’s morality (personality) cannot be distinguished from his authority (office). Herrlee G. Creel explicitly emphasizes the centrality of *tianxia* for traditional China: “The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven became the cornerstone of the Chinese empire. Henceforward China was a state – and, since it ideally embraced ‘all under heaven’, the only state – created by, and maintained under the direct supervision of, the highest deity, Heaven. Its ruler was the Son of Heaven. His office bestowed the highest lorry [sic] possible to man.”⁴⁰

The Emperor exemplifies the core of the Chinese empire. His authority is not constrained by territorial boundaries. Consequently, foreign relations in the *tianxia* are rather a reflection of internal relations. As Fairbank underscores, the “Chinese tended to think of their foreign relations as giving expression externally to the same principle of social and political order that were manifested internally within the Chinese state and society.”⁴¹ Instead of territorial boundaries, relations between different entities are better expressed by a hierarchical relationship between the center (Emperor) and the periphery (tributary states). In this regard, Edward Wang rightly argues that “in the Chinese perception of the world, there was always a center-periphery consideration that helped situate the *zhongguo* in the known world, the *Tianxia*.”⁴² The Chinese understanding of hierarchy, therefore, stands for a specific distribution of power, that is, the acceptance of the largest power by independent sovereign states (or kingdoms) that remain fully functional on their own terms.⁴³

The tributary system (*chaogong tixi*), therefore, organized and structured the co-existence between the different entities in the Chinese *tianxia* system. However, the tribute system was not only one-sided; it was based on a mutual exchange of payments that – especially in periods of weakness – were more expensive for the Chinese Emperor than the tributaries.⁴⁴

It is further interesting that foreign kingdoms could only establish contact with the Chinese empire by following the rules of the tributary system. After all, the Chinese empire was the only accepted political order. In fact, the existence of other political orders would have been contrary to the very idea of the *tianxia* system – at least following Chinese logic. Peripheral countries were perceived rather as being either vassal states or barbarians that lacked the cultural prerequisites to establish an independent and sovereign political order. Nevertheless, each of these units still kept a certain amount of self-determination and autonomy. But the implementation of sovereign policies would have been equated with an internal rebellion against the authority of the Chinese Emperor that could justify a punitive expedition. As Zhao emphasizes: “The hegemonic nature of Chinese culture in the region gave rise to a false security among the Chinese emperors that world hierarchy was universal. There were no other hierarchies and no other sources of power on the international scene. [...] In modern parlance, one might say that all states were ‘satellites’ of China. Within the satellites, a great deal of ‘self-determination’ existed, but opposition to China was considered rebellion against the established order and the traditional values, and should be dealt with accordingly.”⁴⁵

39 Confucius, *Analects of Confucius* (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Printing House, 1994), 13, 16.

40 Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, vol. 1: *The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 93.

41 John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3.

42 Wang, “History, Space, and Ethnicity: The Chinese World-view” (see note 37), 290.

43 David Kang, “The Theoretical Roots of Hierarchy in International Relations”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58 (2004): 348. Kang further describes this as a feature of Asian international relations. He emphasises that, in contrast to the

European tradition, which was dominated by formal equality and informal hierarchy, the Asian (particularly Chinese) traditions highlights formal hierarchy and informal equality (Kang 2006, 339–40).

44 See Wang Gungwu, “Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay”, in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, ed. by John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). With regards to the long history of Chinese dynasties, the margin between claim and actuality concerning the idea of superiority were often enough impossible to bridge.

45 Zhao Suisheng, *Power Competition in East Asia: From the Old Chinese World Order to Post-Cold War Regional Multipolarity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 19.

Chinese Networks or the Differential Mode of Association (*Chaxu Geju*)

Fei Xiaotong introduces the concept of *chaxu geju*, which he regards as central to understand China's traditional social order.^a This concept is characterized by a pattern of circles surrounding a core.^b Fei compares this pattern with "the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it."^c Although each person is at the center of his/her own network (egocentrism), all networks are interrelated. In contrast to the Western mode of association, which, following Fei, presumes the autonomy of individuals and consists of clear boundaries between self and others (inside/outside, subject/object, public/private, etc.), the Chinese mode of association builds on "overlapping networks of people linked together through differentially categorized social relationships."^d This again underscores that there are no clear-cut boundaries between different networks. A person is part of strong as well as weak relationships, with very different demands and duties in each

specific context. The relevance of other people depends on their position within the concentric circles of one's own network. People do not need to decide between networks, for instance because of differing interests. Networks can exist in parallel. Hence, the traditional Chinese social order is based on flexible networks without clear boundaries. "This is a society in which considerations of order, not laws, predominate; and in this context, order means [...] that each person must uphold the moral obligations of his or her network ties. Otherwise, the entire social system collapses."^e

Fei's differential mode of association (*chaxu geju*) is an important point of reference for the following discussion. Although it should only be applied carefully to modern Chinese society and politics, it, however, highlights that the Chinese concept of network might help us to understand the main features of the new OBOR initiative.^f

a See Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil. The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1992). Fei Xiaotong was the first social scientist that introduced "features of the Chinese social network with the concept of differential order, as illustrates by the concentric circles". Hwang Kawang-Kuo, "Chinese Relationalism: Theoretical Construction and Methodological Considerations", *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30, no. 2 (2000): 136.

b Fei, *From the Soil*, *ibid.*, 60–71.

c *Ibid.*, 62.

d Hamilton and Zheng, "Introduction", in *ibid.*, 20.

e *Ibid.*, 24.

f Furthermore, it again becomes apparent that most of the important Western political concepts such as community, legitimacy, sovereignty, or even the idea of the Westphalian nation-state, which we also use in our analyses about Modern China, have no roots in Chinese culture and traditional thinking after all.

Revival of Tianxia: Zhao Tingyang's Political Philosophy

In his work on rethinking *tianxia*, Zhao Tingyang develops the traditional Chinese idea of *tianxia* into a contemporary political theory – a theory of "worldness."⁴⁶ Zhao introduces his own *tianxia* ideal-type of the world. He is not so much interested in the philosophical debates about the evolution of *tianxia* in

Chinese thinking. Zhao rather extracts and *perspectivizes*. As Callahan rightly points out, he aims to "transcend the historical limits' of Chinese tradition."⁴⁷ With reference to one of the most ancient notions of Chinese philosophy, Zhao constitutes a Chinese picture, theory, and view of the world.⁴⁸

In *Politics of Everybody*, Zhao unfolds his ontological assumptions, which are essential to his work on

46 See Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhaxue Daolun [The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution]* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005); Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35); Zhang Feng, "The Tianxia System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia", *Global Asia. A Journal of the East Asia Foundation* 4, no. 4 (2009): 108–12.

47 William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?", *International Studies Review* 10 (2008): 753.

48 I focus particularly on Zhao's argumentation, without all his many (often too narrowly considered) comparisons to "Western approaches", since I rather aim to highlight the particular strengths of his approach.

rethinking *tianxia*.⁴⁹ He argues that humans do not exist independently from each other. They are always placed in the world and, thus, are always acting in relation to others, which is why the world is not simply a “world of things,” that is, a world of autonomous objects.⁵⁰ According to Zhao, people cannot live in isolation because from the moment they exist they act, and when they act they always do so in relation to others.⁵¹ Consequently, Zhao strongly underlines an “ontology of coexistence” (*gongzai zunzailun*) instead of an ontology of things (or an ontology of existence). Hence, there is nothing outside of coexistence, which emphasizes the point that coexistence comes even before existence.⁵² In Western thinking, Zhao's idea could be best described in the words of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy.⁵³ In his essay “Being Singular Plural,” he emphasizes that there is no existence without coexistence, since I always relate myself to others and others are only in relation to me.⁵⁴ “That which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists. [...] the world is the coexistence that put these existences together.”⁵⁵ Thus, “I” cannot come before, and, furthermore, cannot be independent of “we.” As Nancy points out, “From the very beginning, then, ‘we’ are with one another, not as points gathered together, or as a togetherness that is divided up, but as a being-with-one-another.”⁵⁶ In a similar way, Zhao emphasizes that people are embedded in the world and that they always exist in relation to others. They live in plurality, together *with* each other, and only because they do, it gives meaning to their existence.⁵⁷ Zhao's understanding of world thus refers to a world of coexistence and relationality.⁵⁸

Following Zhao, the key to understanding the political problems of our world lies in seeing the world as a “failed world.”⁵⁹ He understands the contempo-

rary world as a “non-world,”⁶⁰ since we have not yet developed a political worldview that has constituted an effective political world order, world institution, or simply a world entity. He states that “the failure to create a world entity is basically due to political ignorance of the idea of *mundus qua mundus*, a lack of political philosophy from the viewpoint of the world as a whole, as opposed to that of nation-states.”⁶¹ In his view, Western approaches “lack a vision of world-ness,” whereas Chinese theory understands the “world from its world-ness.”⁶² This is not to be mistaken as a plea for a “holistic approach”; Zhao rather points us to an alternative starting point of thinking. Here, the world is comprised of interrelated and co-existing entities. The understanding of the “world from its world-ness,” thus, refers to a perspective that always looks at the whole picture and not only parts of it (for example, individual entities such as nation-states).

In his discussion about the notion of *tianxia*, he stresses three components.⁶³ First, *tianxia* refers to the topographical expanse, everything under the sky, or simply the geographical world. Therefore, the first meaning gives reference to the geography of the world. Second, the social understanding of *tianxia* refers to the necessary support of the “hearts of all people” (*minxin*). *Minxin* secures the political legitimacy of the *tianxia* and mostly depends on virtuous governance. Therefore, the relationship between the common agreement of the people (*minxin*) and the rule of virtue (*dezhi*) is co-constitutive.⁶⁴ Third, the most important meaning of *tianxia* is the establishment of a world institution (*shijie zhixu*⁶⁵), and only with the creation of such a world institution will the *tianxia* system be fully accomplished. Consequently, Zhao's conception of *tianxia* represents an understanding of the world as a material geographic entity, a social collective supported by all people, and a world order. Zhao particularly emphasizes that the world is not simply an autonomous object; rather, the world only becomes our world when we – all people in coexistence – build a world institution.⁶⁶

49 Zhao, *Politics of Everybody* (see note 35).

50 Ibid., 163.

51 Ibid., 167.

52 Ibid., 172.

53 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

54 Thus, “Being is singularly plural and plurally singular”, Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (see note 53), 28.

55 Ibid., 29.

56 Ibid., 96.

57 For instance through the type and contexts of their relationship.

58 His focus is primarily on the relations between A and B.

59 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 6.

60 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35).

61 Ibid., 6.

62 Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-heaven’ (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 31.

63 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 9–10.

64 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 98.

65 The Chinese word *zhixu* can also be translated as “order”

66 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 9.

Alongside these three relatively broad meanings, Zhao mentions a set of important principles that further explain the features of the *tianxia* system. The first is the principle of “all-inclusiveness” (*wuwai*), which states that every person, family, or state is part of *tianxia*. Nothing is considered to be outside, since we are all embedded in the world anyway. Nobody is excluded. *Tianxia* becomes the common interest of every person; this interest is in line with the many existing personal interests because of the underlying conformity of both.⁶⁷ Thus, the “inclusion of all” describes the world as a family of – and a home to – all people. As Zhao emphasizes, “‘all-under-heaven’ is meant to be of all and for all, and never of and for anybody in particular.”⁶⁸ The condition of *wuwai* also secures peace and prosperity among the countries in the *tianxia*; it refers to the transformation of many states into one world entity by attraction rather than coercion.⁶⁹ World Order prevents conflict and chaos and “should be as extensive as possible, thereby contributing to a worldwide political system in which all are included and protected, and in which nobody is treated as an outsider.”⁷⁰

In a *tianxia* system, in which every place is internal, Zhao characterizes relations between different entities as relations between the close and the distant (*yuanyin qinshu guanxi*). Zhao refers to what is generally described with the image of core-periphery relations that originally indicated the difference between the core and the periphery in cultural and geographic terms. Later, this image often changed into an idea of discrimination of the core toward the periphery, or simply a pre-supposed supremacy of the core toward the periphery.⁷¹ However, it is crucial that the relation between the close and the distant is not understood in a purely geographic sense. Closeness and distance can also be perceived in cultural terms; thus, the “core” could also be identified as a mutual understanding of certain values or ideas independent from the geographic location. The development of these relationships is a process of constant change and transformation. Consequently, “all-inclusiveness” does not simply stand for enforced conformity.

67 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 90.

68 Ibid., 11.

69 William A. Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order” (see note 47), 752.

70 Ibid., 752.

71 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 92.

The second principle deals with the institutional character of the *tianxia*, specifically the issues of order (*zhi*) and disorder (*luan*). *Zhi* represents the Chinese quest to establish a good social order that is accepted by the people; on the other hand, *luan* stands for the absence of any social order.⁷² A successfully constituted *zhi* comprises institutions that are credible and, thus, foster social trust. In addition, the institutions should facilitate cooperation and keep the possibility of conflict low. Zhao further argues that “maximizing cooperation is even more important than minimizing conflict, since the former contains the latter, but the latter does not contain the former.”⁷³ In addition, cooperation in the *tianxia* is based on two political strategies. First, the strategy of virtue (*de celüe*), which, from a long-term perspective, seems to be more effective than the use of force, since it builds mainly on the common agreement of all people (*minxin*). This strategy essentially refers to the differentiation between the people, who get more benefits, and the sovereign, who then obtains the power to rule.⁷⁴ Second, Zhao introduces the strategy of harmony (*he celüe*), which focuses on the question of how to build cooperation out of differing interests. Cooperation is here inevitably linked to harmony. Harmony (*he*) is seen as the most essential principle in Chinese thinking: “the necessary ontological condition for different things to exist and develop.”⁷⁵ In contrast to the idea of sameness (*tong*), harmony refers to the diversity of things that make cooperation possible. It follows that harmony grows out of the improvement and transformation of differences, whereas “sameness reduce[s] possibilities to only one thing.”⁷⁶ Hence, harmony (*he*) represents an ontological principle, whereas sameness (*tong*) stands for a psychological effect (in other words, all simply merge into one). The two should not be confused.⁷⁷ This distinction is crucial because harmony is contrary to sameness, in that it does not refer to an enforced conformity that would destroy the substance of culture in the first place. Culture develops – and is shaped

72 Ibid.

73 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 106 (transl. N. G.).

74 Ibid., 114.

75 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 14; Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 117.

76 Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)” (see note 35), 14.

77 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 118.

by – relations within the *tianxia*.⁷⁸ The concept of harmony again reveals the underlying ontology of Zhao's theory. In this regard, Zhao points out three criteria. First, "relations determine things."⁷⁹ Therefore, defining a thing as such cannot determine its ontological condition or its very existence. A thing can only be defined in relation to other things.⁸⁰ Second, the harmonious relationship between things is the necessary condition for the survival of things. "Coexistence is, therefore, the precondition for existence."⁸¹ Third, the mutual relationship between people also facilitates conditions whereby everybody benefits from these relations. According to Zhao, this principle highlights the differences between harmony and cooperation, since "the principle of cooperation could be seen as being 'live-and-let-live,' whereas harmony is a stronger principle meaning *live-if-let-live* and *improve-if-let-improve*."⁸² Ideally, harmony thus creates a game where common success is inevitably linked to the reciprocal relationship between actors. A can only gain benefits if B also benefits, and vice versa.⁸³ Harmony is in fact the premise on which a successful world institution should be established. In summary, Zhao develops a specific perspective of the world by highlighting the ontology of coexistence, the need for cooperation and harmony, and the embeddedness and relationality of all actors. In this sense, he reframes the notion of *tianxia* as a way to highlight a Chinese philosophical concept of political (and international) order.

⁷⁸ It also refers to Qin Yaqing's understanding of Chinese dialectics, where A and non-A, in the process of exchange between A and non-A, are constantly redefining their identities. See Qin Yaqing, "International Society As a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 129–153; Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no 3. (2014): 285–314.

⁷⁹ Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 118 (transl. N. G.).

⁸⁰ Ibid.; Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)" (see note 35), 15.

⁸¹ Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 118 (transl. N.G.).

⁸² The idea of live-and-let-live refers to a rather pure "existence", in other words "I live and let you live". Harmony, however, puts everyone in a conditional relationship to each other or "coexistence", that is "I live if I let you live, and I improve if I let you improve". Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)" (see note 35), 15.

⁸³ Zhao also calls his harmonious strategy "Confucian improvement" (*kongzi gaijin*).

The Chinese OBOR Initiative: An Alternative Concept of International Order?

In early September 2013 President Xi Jinping first announced the “Silk Road Economic Belt” as an economic initiative to deepen cooperation and expand development in the Eurasian region.⁸⁴ A month later, Xi visited Indonesia and prominently introduced the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” which complements the Silk Road Economic Belt and is supposed to link China across the Indian Ocean and Africa to Europe. Although the Chinese Silk Road initiatives, now officially the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, were, particularly at the beginning, very vague in content, they are not simply just a hasty manifestation of another Silk Road image.⁸⁵ In fact, since Xi’s speech in Kazakhstan, the “One Belt, One Road” phrase has quickly penetrated the Chinese academic, political, and public discourse. It is, thus, repeatedly mentioned in all possible contexts. In a very short time, the Silk Road initiatives grew into a dominant representation for China’s foreign policy practices, regional neighborhood relations, as well as some domestic issues, especially regarding China’s economic development. Interestingly, it has never been defined officially what the OBOR initiative geographically actually comprises. All maps that have been published either by Chinese or other sources only present interpretations of official statements or documents. Most maps do not even show national borders, but rather various corridors, regions, and cities.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ For more information about the initial Chinese discourse about the Silk Road initiatives, see Nadine Godehardt, *Chinas “neue” Seidenstraßeninitiative. Regionale Nachbarschaft als Kern der chinesischen Außenpolitik unter Xi Jinping*, SWP-Studie 9/2014 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2014).

⁸⁵ The image of the Silk Road has been used quite extensively in international politics, not only with regard to foreign policies of many different nation-states (examples, Central Asian states, Turkey, etc.), the US-led New Silk Road strategy concerning the future of Afghanistan, and several Eurasian land-bridge projects (transport projects). It has also been used in China’s past, in particular to describe China’s infrastructure policy towards the Western regions. Thus, even in the Chinese political discourse, the idea of the Silk Road is not completely new; however, it was never successfully implemented as a comprehensive policy tying China’s foreign (neighboring) and domestic policy closer together.

⁸⁶ I am thankful to Maximilian Mayer for highlighting this aspect to me.

This repetition of an (at first) “empty political phrase” is, however, in many ways characteristic of the introduction of new Chinese (domestic or foreign) policies. Other examples are, for instance, concepts such as “harmonious society/world” and “peaceful development.” In this context, the reference to the ancient trade route of the Silk Road is similarly difficult to classify. The Chinese leadership usually intends to provide as little concrete information as possible about what these political labels actually mean when they are firstly announced.⁸⁷ This vagueness, however, often creates space for vivid debates in academia, the media, or, generally, in the public. Most concepts initially only offer starting points for discussion; they are not yet comprehensive and well-thought-through political programs. In fact, these concepts depend on the work of scholars, experts, or policymakers who develop concrete ideas of implementation and try to further flesh out the contents of these political labels.

Consequently, the Chinese leadership has encouraged think tanks, research institutes, and different governmental branches⁸⁸ as well as provincial governments to host international workshops and conferences to stimulate the debate. In the case of the OBOR initiative, there has been a tremendous demand for discussion. Since Xi’s speech in Kazakhstan in September 2013, already dozens of Silk Road events have been organized all over China, several specific OBOR research institutes were founded, and in late March 2015, the government even set up a “special leading group” that oversees the coordination and implementation of different projects under the framework of the OBOR initiative.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ As William Callahan has also prominently shown in his analysis about Xi Jinping’s “China Dream”. William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸⁸ Most likely, all branches under the management of the State Council, and regarding the OBOR, also the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in particular.

⁸⁹ For example: China’s OBOR Strategic Research Institute at the Beijing International Studies University, <http://obor.bisu.edu.cn/>, or the OBOR Research Institute at the China Institute of International Studies at Beijing, http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/node_544601.htm. See also, “China Sets Up Leading Team on Belt and Road Initiative”, *Xinhuanet Online*,

After the announcement of the new Silk Road initiatives, the reactions of Chinese experts were initially rather cautious and general. They either emphasized the geopolitical (in contrast to US efforts) or trans-regional significance of the OBOR initiative. This emphasis has changed slightly since mid 2014. The many Silk Road forums as well as the number of newly setup research projects show two further developments. Firstly, most forums were organized in different Chinese provinces, thus many local cadre also participated. Their involvement clearly added a stronger domestic and socio-economic dimension to the Silk Road initiatives. Secondly, the often very diverse composition of participants also led to vastly differing ideas of potential areas of cooperation for the countries along the Silk Road. However, it became clear that the OBOR is not only about traditional infrastructure programs (although this is still a major aspect), but should also, for instance, include environmental issues, questions of urbanization, and the build-up of partnerships between key cities along the Silk Road.

The recently published official report *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* absorbed many of these ideas that have been discussed between scholars, experts, local cadres, journalists, and entrepreneurs.⁹⁰ However, the authors of the report also seem to have included every suggestion that was mentioned between September 2013 and March 2015. After a careful look at the report, it seems the vagueness of Xi's speech was replaced with a listing of "everything" that was mentioned at different occasions, turning OBOR into one of the most ambitious political visions of the last years.

Striking are three aspects of the report. Firstly, the authors quite prominently emphasize the *inclusiveness* of the initiative and the chance to create win-win cooperation that is beneficial to all participating countries along the Silk Road.⁹¹ The major goal is to strengthen *connectivity (hulian hutong)* by building up traditional infrastructure and establishing a network

of key cities. These parts often read like a revival of China's Great Western Development Strategy, only that this time the focus is on the development of regions outside of China.⁹²

Secondly, the authors emphasize the close relation between the OBOR and different economic corridors such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Furthermore, they refer to many recently announced financial institutions, such as the AIIB, the New Development Bank (formerly known as BRICS Development Bank), and the Silk Road Fund as parts of the OBOR initiative. In this regard, they also mention the Chinese intention to follow up on negotiations about an Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Bank. This, moreover, underscores the Chinese willingness to build up a strong financial backing for OBOR mainly through multilateral investment banks or funds, but also through the support of domestic financial institutions such as the Export-Import Bank or the China Development Bank.⁹³ Thirdly, OBOR also has a domestic and socio-economic dimension, in particular regarding the increasing focus on China's borderland regions. In other words, the report identifies key provinces, such as Xinjiang, Fujian, Guangxi, and Yunnan, that should strengthen cooperation with their neighboring countries. This is not a new element of Chinese politics, but it is clearly new that all these different areas of Chinese politics (domestic, foreign, regional, etc.) are now set under the framework of the OBOR initiative.

Key Features of China's OBOR Initiative

The OBOR initiative is not (yet) a "grand strategy" that presents itself as a counter-model to all established mechanisms, rules, and values characterizing the existing international order. Thinking in an either/or manner is not very helpful at this juncture, since it conceals that the constitution of a counter-narrative is nothing that the Chinese can simply pull out of the hat. Besides, China also is part of the existing international system, incorporated in global net-

29 March 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/29/c_134107435.htm (accessed 1 September 2015).

⁹⁰ *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, issued by the NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China with State Council authorization (March 2015), http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html (accessed 1 September 2015).

⁹¹ "Inclusiveness" (*Baorongxing*) is repeatedly used by Xi Jinping. On every official occasion, he refers to the inclusiveness of China's new initiatives – not only referring to the Silk Roads but also BRICS development bank and AIIB.

⁹² Great Western Development Strategy is a plan of the Chinese leadership to develop the Western part of China, particularly through building up infrastructure. It started in the year 2000.

⁹³ The fact that the report was also published by the NDRC shows that the OBOR has a clear internal dimension, particularly regarding China's borderland provinces.

works, and – regarding building up the OBOR – also dependent on a stable international order. Nevertheless, OBOR can be regarded as a proactive Chinese response to the growing complexity in the world that definitely has the potential to turn into an alternative concept of how international politics could be organized in the future. It represents a loose political concept in which new mechanisms of cooperation are created, or already existing institutions and ongoing projects are integrated.⁹⁴ In this regard, OBOR is in fact very different from our rule-based Eurocentric model of international order.

Firstly, the OBOR initiative is mainly about *building up and strengthening cooperation* among the countries along the Silk Road. The goal is to create networks of cooperation in many areas and on many different political levels. The guiding principle echoes Zhao Tingyang's abovementioned description of a successful order in which "maximizing cooperation is even more important than minimizing conflict, since the former contains the latter, but the latter does not contain the former."⁹⁵ This also reflects the Chinese debate about OBOR, which focuses mainly on common benefits and economic opportunities, but less on security threats and difficulties.⁹⁶ It also points us again to the rather simple Chinese understanding of stability, which refers to the absence of chaos.

Secondly, the OBOR initiative is *flexible, inclusive, and open*. The geographic scope of the initiative is, thus, not determined and remains vague. As highlighted in the official report of March 2015, OBOR is increasingly perceived as being beneficial for people and countries around the world.⁹⁷ The aspect that the Chinese leadership still has not published an official OBOR map fur-

ther underscores its "global" openness and inclusiveness. Every country that has an interest in the Silk Road or in one of the institutions related to the OBOR initiative can become part of it.⁹⁸ Despite this inclusive orientation, the success of the OBOR and its related institutions also relies on the diversity of the countries along the Silk Road. Following Zhao Tingyang's argumentation, inclusiveness does not simply stand for enforced conformity. In this sense, successful cooperation also builds on diverse interests and capacities. It is crucial, however, that the Chinese emphasis on win-win cooperation does not underlie the condition of parity. A win-win situation can also emerge when, economically, shares are unequally distributed.⁹⁹

Thirdly, the main task is to build up a *comprehensive economic and political network* that promotes the *connectivity* between countries along the Silk Road. In this regard, the OBOR initiative, on the one hand, comprises all kinds of actors within China, including provincial and city governments, banks, Confucius institutes, as well as national universities. Most external activities of these actors are now summarized as part of OBOR.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, cooperation also takes place in very different arrangements, such as multilateral mechanisms initiated by China,¹⁰¹ other multilateral institutions,¹⁰² and bilateral relations. Thus, China clearly represents the core of OBOR. Due to the growing network of cooperation, countries are increasingly bound to China, and the significance of each actor is defined by its specific position within the Chinese OBOR network.

⁹⁴ At the simultaneous Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS summits in July 2015, even the Russian initiative of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was linked to – and actually even integrated in – the OBOR initiative. From the Chinese perspective, this is not a contradiction, it rather represents the very idea of inclusiveness that marks the Chinese initiative.

⁹⁵ Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World* (see note 35), 106.

⁹⁶ This does not mean that Chinese experts and policymakers are not aware of the security issues, but it is not the main narrative regarding the OBOR initiative.

⁹⁷ As General Qiao Lang emphasised in a speech at the University of Defense: "As a rising great power, 'one belt, one road' is the initial stage of China globalization. As a big country, the process of rising must be about the plan for advancing globalization." Qiao Liang, "One Belt, One Road", *Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*, 17 July 2015, <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/one-belt-one-road/2070> (accessed 1 September 2015).

⁹⁸ In this context, Chinese experts and officials usually point to the increasing interest of other countries in participating in the OBOR initiative since it was announced. Several meetings of the author with Chinese experts and officials in 2015.

⁹⁹ For some countries a disadvantaged relationship with China might still be of interest because usually China's economic relations are not tied to any political claims.

¹⁰⁰ This is even the case for the cultural exchange along the Silk Road which is a crucial part of the initiative. The main goal is to increase the awareness of Chinese culture and language in the countries along the Silk Road, as a representative of the Foreign Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference highlighted to the author.

¹⁰¹ These are for instance the AIIB, the 16+1 mechanism, which is the meeting between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries, and several trilateral meetings, such as the recent one between Russia, China, and Mongolia.

¹⁰² For example BRICS, the EEU, and the EU.

What Is All the Fuss About?

Over the years, many countries have created a dense network of cooperation with China. For example, Germany and China alone make use of more than 60 cooperation mechanisms that foster the relationship between governments, political parties, parliaments, academia, and think tanks. After all, China is the biggest trading country in the world. The interest of other countries in building up economic relations with China has never waned, despite all the hesitations about China's real intentions or new assertiveness in its foreign policy. This justifies the slightly cynical question of what all the fuss concerning the Silk Road and OBOR is actually about.

The polite response to this is as follows: It indeed makes a difference that China's relations with other countries are increasingly connected to the OBOR initiative. After all, most newly established or already existing multilateral cooperation and financial mechanisms – as well as many bilateral relations – are now seen as part of OBOR.¹⁰³

For instance, Xi Jinping's visit to the port of Duisburg in March 2014 also underscored how the Chinese side had already linked his visit of the completion of Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe International Railway¹⁰⁴ to the vision of building up a Silk Road between Europe, particularly Germany, and China.¹⁰⁵ Right

103 The only exception is China's relationship to the United States, which traditionally possesses a special status within China's foreign relations. With reference to OBOR, Chinese experts like to highlight that OBOR is also open to the United States (at some point) and, further, that it should not simply be regarded as a Chinese strategic response to the US rebalancing to Asia, particularly to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, of which China is not yet a member. This is partly true and partly false. Thus, OBOR is clearly not only a response to US activities in Asia – that would be a very simplified perspective of the OBOR initiative – but it is still also a response to the TPP trade agreement and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the proposed free trade agreement between the EU and the United States, which both (until now) exclude China.

104 It is part of a wide net of transport routes for moving goods and people from Asia to Europe. The railway could have been made operable already in 2011.

105 See the headlines of the following news articles and statements on governmental websites: "President Xi Calls on China, Germany to Build Silk Road Economic Belt", *CCTV*, 30 March 2014, <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/03/30/ARTI1396137868612808.shtml> (accessed 1 September 2015); "President Xi Jinping Visits the Port of Duisburg, Germany", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 30 March 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/

from the beginning, the Chinese leadership used the Silk Road initiatives (and later OBOR) to successfully reframe its relations with many states and institutions – or even long-standing infrastructure projects – as now being a crucial part of establishing OBOR as a global network of cooperation and connectivity.¹⁰⁶

This is also the case in China's relation toward Europe. Although there are already many established dialogue formats between China and the EU, the former Chinese leadership decided to announce a new dialogue mechanism between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries¹⁰⁷ in April 2012 ("16+1").¹⁰⁸ Today, 16+1 is seen as a crucial element of OBOR; this was also evident at the latest meeting in Suzhou, the first one in China.¹⁰⁹ In addition, China also maintains very good bilateral relations with the Central and Eastern European countries. In June 2015, Hungary was the first EU member state that signed a memorandum of understanding promoting China's OBOR initiative. Shortly thereafter, China and Poland decided to sign a cooperation agreement linked to the OBOR. The agreement promotes stronger bilateral ties between the two countries and mainly focuses on the development of joint railway projects.¹¹⁰ At first sight,

xjpxcxdsjhaqhfbfwhlfgdgbshlhgkzbbomzb_666590/t1164914.shtml (accessed 1 September 2015).

106 The BRICS forum is another example. This forum was once established as an organisation that could challenge the existing global financial structure, and it is most likely still perceived as such by most members, but certainly not by China. From a Chinese perspective – and this is made very clear in the official report on China's OBOR vision – BRICS, and particularly the New Development Bank, are now summarised under the OBOR initiative. This was also discussed at the international conference "BRICS: Political Ambitions and Opportunities" in Moscow, organised by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Moscow and Deutsch-Russische Auslandshandelskammer (30 November – 1 December 2015).

107 Of the 16 members are 11 EU members. The 16 countries are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania.

108 Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's Charm Offensive in Central and Eastern Europe: The Implementation of Its '12 Measures' Strategy", *PISM Bulletin* 106, 4 October 2013, https://www.pism.pl/files?id_plik=14927 (accessed 1 September 2015).

109 See "For China, Central and Eastern Europe, Is 16+1 Really Greater than 17?", *Global Times*, 13 December 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/958133.shtml> (accessed 15 December 2015).

110 Conversation between the author and representative of the Polish Embassy in Germany. See also "China and Poland to Sign 'One Belt, One Road' Cooperation Agreement", *Global Times*, 17 June 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/927483.shtml> (accessed 1 September 2015).

these documents might only look like another bilateral agreement between an individual European country and China, but in China these activities are perceived as another successful step for building up China's OBOR network of cooperation.

Hence, European governments (and others) need to be aware that OBOR has an impact on their current and future relations with China. Most European countries are already considered as being part of the OBOR initiative, either through bilateral agreements or their membership in one of the existing formats (16+1, the AIIB, the EU, etc.). It seems that many European governments have already (albeit implicitly) acknowledged China's new vision, without realizing that OBOR could indeed have the potential to effectively transform the structure of the existing international order.

Conclusions

OBOR is China's most ambitious and visible foreign policy initiative of the last three years. Still, OBOR is difficult to describe. Explanations often remain diffuse and vague. The biggest challenge is to use a language – or more precisely an interpretation – that works in Chinese as well as in Western languages. This is exactly why the imagery of OBOR as an inclusive, open, and global *network* of cooperation has been introduced here. Firstly, this idea very much stems from Chinese traditional thinking about the organization of society and political order. Secondly, the imagery helps us to understand the different layers of OBOR, which consists of (at least) three dimensions. First, OBOR is not an organization with defined rules but a political vision that is flexible, inclusive, and open. OBOR represents a loose framework that still can be modified by its participants.

Second, the main goal is to strengthen cooperation and connectivity between China and OBOR members. In this regard, already existing cooperation formats – both bilateral and multilateral – have been increasingly linked to OBOR. Other financial mechanisms, such as the AIIB or the Silk Road Fund, were newly established to help finance OBOR. Furthermore, from a Chinese perspective, it is not a problem when affiliations of certain actors overlap, such as, for instance, in the case of Poland, which is a member of the EU, 16+1, and the AIIB, and has growing bilateral ties with China (all of these affiliations are now summarized under the OBOR initiative). Ideally, actors do not need to decide between different mechanisms, not even when these mechanisms are based on very different rules or interests. Third, OBOR is about concrete infrastructure projects (communication, energy resources/power grid, and transport) that also involve various Chinese actors (state-owned enterprises, banks, provincial governments, etc.). Consequently, every railway project – no matter if it was already initiated long before OBOR – investments in seaports, for example in Gwadar and Piraeus, or China's move to set up Special Economic Zones in Africa can now easily be linked to OBOR.

Following this interpretation, the main risk for European countries and the EU in their relations toward China is the concentration on individual infrastructure projects, specific financial mechanisms such as

the AIIB, and bilateral negotiations without realizing that – from the Chinese side – these are all linked to OBOR. Thus, a focus on only specific elements of OBOR conceals that most of these projects, mechanisms, and relations are part of a comprehensive Chinese network vision with a potential global reach. In addition, the existing ignorance of the broader context of OBOR could strengthen Chinese actors in playing individual European countries off against the EU, or the EU off against mechanisms such as the “16+1” forum.

In response to OBOR, European countries – in particular European foreign ministries – firstly need to start collecting and distributing information about all Chinese OBOR activities in their countries, and maybe even in all of Europe. This would make it much easier for these countries to *actively* define in what areas they want – or do not want – to cooperate and how they could actually benefit from OBOR. It could also minimize the puzzled reactions of European countries and the EU, such as, for instance, when Chinese representatives proposed the idea of a digital Silk Road for Eurasia at the last EU-China summit in June 2015. Secondly, the focus of the newly established EU connectivity platform, which defines a first European response to OBOR, is mainly on the identification of joint infrastructure projects. However, it is important that this platform develops into the dominant coordination center for all OBOR activities of Chinese actors in the EU, particularly since China will also continue to conduct bilateral (infrastructure) projects with individual European countries. In short, the EU connectivity platform can only be of real value to EU members when it turns into the leading EU hub for coordinating OBOR activities between Chinese and European actors.

Abbreviations

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| AIB | Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank |
| BRICS | Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (association of five major economies) |
| EEU | Eurasian Economic Union |
| EU | European Union |
| NDRC | National Development and Reform Commission |
| OBOR | One Belt, One Road |