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China's Belt and Road Initiative: Mission Opportunities and Challenges

Paul Lee

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an infrastructure project proposed by China to improve transportation in Eurasia. This will bring both mission opportunities and challenges in the regions affected. God is perhaps giving Christians a unique opportunity for evangelism through this project which facilitates the movement of not just humans and products, but also the gospel.

Mainland China adopted a capitalist economic system in 1979, thirty years after adopting a communist political system. The country joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) surged from less than US\$ 150 billion in 1978 to more than US\$ 8.3 trillion in 2012 (Purdy, 2013). China has a high-speed railway network of 26,869 kilometers, a system longer than that of all the other countries in the world combined (Nunno, 2018). The globalization of production and the availability of inexpensive labor has caused China to be considered the world's factory (Lu, 2019). The production of construction materials has been particularly successful in China. This production

is consistently higher than China's internal utilization and is continually increasing; concrete production increased from 450 million tons in 2008 to 2.4 billion tons in 2017 (McCarthy, 2018). Apart from the simple need for economic development, this success concerning the production of construction materials has led to economic pressure to increase exports and undertake foreign building projects.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in Chinese, 一帶一路 (literally One-Belt-One-Road), is an economic, diplomatic, and cultural exchange plan that was proposed by the Chinese national leader Xi Jinping in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The "Belt" is a land-based "Silk Road Economic Belt" (絲綢之路經濟帶), named after to the land-based transportation network between China and the Middle East during the Han Dynasty (206BC to 220AD). The "Road" is the sea-based "Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century" (21世紀海上絲綢之路) with allusions to the seven sailing voyages of the Chinese sea captain Zheng He from China to Africa in the 13th century. The initiative integrates both the land and maritime infrastructure to form a mega-logistic network in Eurasia.

The Belt aspect of the project focuses on building a network of six transcontinental high-speed railway and highway networks from China to Central Asia and Europe (Lim *et al.*, 2016). These six land routes (Figure 1) are tentatively:

1. Beijing (China) – Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia) – Moscow (Russia)
2. The New Eurasian Land Bridge (the refitting of eight international freight rail routes to no longer require a break-of-gauge)
3. Urumqi (China) – Tashkent (Uzbekistan) – Istanbul (Turkey)
4. Kashgar (China) – Gwadar (Pakistan)
5. Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar
6. Kunming (China) – Thailand and Vietnam – Malaysia – Singapore.

The annual exchange of goods and people along the routes will increase substantially. Natural resources, such as methane and metal ores from the Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine, will be exported to China more readily. In the other direction, China can export manufactured goods and construction materials to these countries. The international trade among these countries will substantially increase.

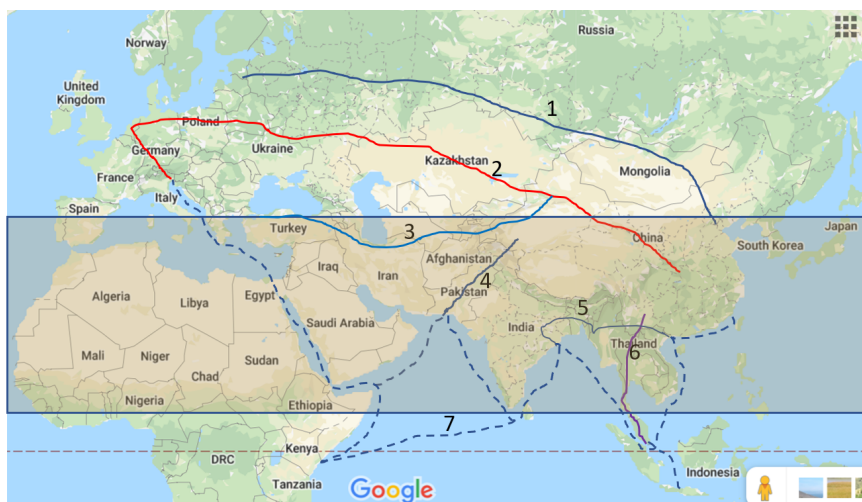


Figure 1. Combined map of the 10/40 Window and the Belt-and-Road Initiative. The framed rectangle is the 10/40 window. Solid lines numbered 1 to 6 are the routes of the Silk Road Economic Belt. The blue dotted line number 7 is the 21st century Maritime Silk Road system. The dotted line under the rectangle is the equator from Google Maps software.

The Road refers to the development of the maritime infrastructure (Figure 1). From Fujian Province, off the coast of Taiwan, the Chinese government will work with local governments to build ports, container terminals, and local land roads to expedite the loading, unloading, and transportation of containers. Also known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, this project focuses on the southern provinces of China along the South China Sea and China's main trade partners in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. From Singapore, the routes pass through the Strait of Malacca westward to the Indian Ocean to India, Sri Lanka, and Kenya in East Africa. China has leased many seaports around the Indian Ocean for periods ranging from 10 to 99 years.

From East Africa, trade can be brought to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal. Trade with the West can then utilize a land route again from Italy, with a focus on reaching Rotterdam, the largest seaport in Europe. The South China Sea trade already contributes 1.4 trillion USD per year of trade for China versus 208 billion USD per year of trade with the USA (Center for Strategic Studies, 2017). China would like to diversify the options for connecting to Eastern Asia, Africa, and the West, rather than relying only on transportation through the Strait of Malacca (the passage between Malaysia and Indonesia) and the South China Sea. Another purpose of the Maritime Silk Road is to provide a shorter route for petroleum products from the Middle East, first to Gwadar port in Pakistan by ship, and then by highway and railway within Pakistan to southwestern China. This route will be significantly shorter and less costly than the current route through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea.

Sixty-eight countries along the BRI routes have signed an agreement to participate in financing these projects. A total of one hundred billion USD of capital stock and twenty billion paid-in capital were guaranteed. The overall monetary pool will be managed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB; AIIB, 2020). The AIIB and the government of the People's Republic of China have signed an agreement on taxes, legal status, and operations. (AIIB Agreements, 2015). The AIIB also has Memorandums of Understanding on cooperation and co-financing with 1) the African Development Bank, 2) the African Development Fund, 3) the Asian Development Bank, 4) the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 5) the Eurasian Development Bank, 6) the European Investment Bank, 7) the Inter-American Development Bank and Inter-American Investment Corporation, 8) the Islamic Development Bank Group, 9) the New Development Bank, and 10) the World Bank Group (AIIB Partnership, 2019). The AIIB also partners with private financial institutions and cooperates with other partners in the public and non-governmental sectors (Wang, 2014). The presidency of the AIIB will rotate among the member states. The board of directors vote on the approval of projects. This multilateral development bank is responsible for

providing the capital to fund the infrastructure projects in BRI.

The Missiological Significance of the Belt-and-Road-Initiative

In terms of strategy for world missions, one can observe that the BRI network overlaps with many countries in the 10/40 Window map (Figure 1). This means that the BRI may be the transportation network that God uses to spread the gospel to unreached peoples who have never been exposed to the gospel. Although air travel is faster than railway and sea route, it is inferior to the latter in terms of cost and its capacity to transport people and goods. This multi-hub network designed to support the industrial supply chain may be exactly the infrastructure needed to evangelize unreached peoples in many of the countries of the 10/40 Window.

The BRI requires a very large investment of capital. Although the most economically able, the United States has chosen not to invest in Eurasia's infrastructure through this initiative. China, being the second greatest economic force in the world, has been building bilateral relationships with countries in Asia and Europe to gain their support. Although China's economic growth seems to make the country able to complete this project, such growth may not be sustainable and the ability to bring to fruition the entire project is not certain. Whatever the infrastructure which is developed, it may not provide access to all the countries of the 10/40 Window, but some doors may be opened by it, permitting Christians to enter countries that may not stay open forever.

The BRI will increase globalization as more people and goods travel across the continents. Not only will there be goods and services exchanged, but the flow of humans will also lead to a substantial exchange of culture, beliefs, and worldviews. This phenomenon has been common in the West but will grow exponentially along the routes of the BRI. The presence of Africans in China (Marsh, 2014) or Chinese workers throughout Africa ([Nunoo, 2014](#)) will become a common phenomenon. As such international exchange increases, one can envision that these open doors will permit the sending of long-term missionaries and the support of local Christian workers to Unengaged Unreached People

Groups (UUPGs) along the BRI route, although creativity may still be needed to take advantage of these opportunities. Nevertheless, the goal of bringing the gospel to all UUPGs will be within reach more than ever before.

The Mission Opportunities Along the Belt-And-Road Countries

The speed and breadth of gospel sharing may increase in the 10/40 Window countries due to the ability of Christians to enter them via the BRI infrastructure. The recent political persecution of Christians in China has been forcing Chinese Christians to leave China and seek asylum in other countries (Farr, 2019), similar to the persecution of believers in Jerusalem described in Acts 8. If such persecution continues in China, those who leave via the BRI will have every opportunity to share the gospel with the people in the countries where they settle. They will join missionaries who have been sent out by Chinese house churches, including those sent in the context of the Back to Jerusalem movement (Park, 2015; Stafford, 2004), some of whom have been blocked from returning home due to political reasons. As the church grows along the BRI, these new churches will be among peoples who are culturally close to the remaining unreached. Discipleship ministries will enable them to evangelize more effectively and rapidly members of UUPGs to whom they are culturally near.

Many countries along the BRI do not grant visas to traditional missionaries. Therefore, to send evangelists and church planters to these countries, churches and organizations must figure out other platforms or legal means to obtain entry visas or long-term visas from the country of interest. Entering these Creative Access Nations (Wei, *et al.*, 2016) will require Christians to take on secular jobs, using tentmaking, business-as-Missions, or bi-vocational models of ministry. These jobs may be with either traditional for-profit companies or nonprofit Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) which provide relief and social services.

For-profit companies focused on eco-tourism (Kaarieni & Tuah, 2019) or hospitality management may be excellent platforms due to the expected growth of these sectors. The BRI infrastructure will

attract tourists to previously inaccessible regions. Restaurants and hotels can be developed that preserve the local environment and meet the needs of travelers. Eco-tourism not only improves the local economy but educates the community concerning the importance of protecting the environment.

The need for medical providers, such as doctors, dentists, nurses, and pharmacists, will also open doors for mission work. Both curative and preventative care can benefit the communities lacking such personnel. The relationships that develop between the healthcare providers and the patients can provide opportunities to share the gospel. Medical training can be provided to local Christians to make patient care and witness more culturally appropriate. Such ministries may be especially appropriate for missionaries from Asia; it is likely that the ethnicity of the medical provider, even when a foreigner, will influence the doors that will open. A bi-vocational missionary observed that Asian-American physicians are better received by people in the Middle East population than European-American physicians (personal communication, January 4, 2009).

Financial services, such as microloans and financial training, can be provided according to local needs, in compliance with local regulations. If the beneficiaries create successful businesses, they can repay their loans, creating a sustainable model that can also benefit relatives and friends, and creating opportunities to share the gospel accordingly.

Employees of state-owned enterprises can be bi-vocational missionaries to creative access nations. Project managers, engineers, legal service providers, computer system analysts, graphic designers, teachers, and researchers in academia can use their skills to secure long-term professional visas in these 10/40 window countries (Wei *et al.*, 2016). Transportation workers such as railway workers, truck drivers, automobile mechanics, gas station managers, and longshore and harbor workers are all potential missionaries. These professionals can reach out to customers or local co-workers for small scale bible study opportunities.

Cultural exchange programs that involve teachers of English

and Chinese, as well as language students can provide opportunities to live in and serve in creative access nations for relatively short periods, typically one to two years. Nevertheless, a prolonged stay with any limited-term visa is likely to be considered unethical and will arouse suspicions from the local immigration officers.

Trade and manufacturing are also good platforms for outreach. Crafts or clothing made locally can be sold via eBay or other web-based merchandise platforms. A plan was proposed by expatriates in China a decade ago to set up Christian-based contact points every one hundred miles along the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (A tentmaking missionary in China, personal communication, 18th September 2011). These contact points can provide goods and services as diverse as fuel stations, restaurants, hotels, factories for manufactured goods, companies for the energy industry, cell phones, small commodities, restaurant supplies, and real estate consumables. These businesses enhance the local economy by providing employment and revenue for the local government. They also provide opportunities for Christians to network, both for support and encouragement and for outreach and evangelism.

Housemaids (especially those from the Philippines) are serving in homes in the Middle East and other locations typically closed to professional missionaries. Their interaction with the younger generations may sow gospel seeds to be harvested in the future.

Social services can be provided through Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). These services include, but are not limited to, poverty reduction and disaster relief. Even retirees may move to a community and serve in or fund a local nonprofit organization. Especially important services offered by NGOs in developing nations focus on wells and clean water delivery systems, providing not only the needed water but also opportunities to share the gospel in the local context. Clean water not only improves local sanitation but also expands the local arable land. Further economic development is possible through the installation of greenhouses and the introduction of vertical and organic farming. Women's shelters can be established in contexts where the need exists. The opportunities for teachers, consultants, and counselors are virtually limitless in developing countries.

For those more interested in social justice, anti-trafficking NGOs in Southeast Asia and India are needed (George, 2013; Shellnutt, 2017). Christians can cooperate with law enforcement and existing NGOs, providing services and education to the victims to help them reintegrate into society.

All outreach to the indigenous people along the BRI route should be holistic, given the great needs that exist among them. Community development and evangelism should occur simultaneously. The platforms above merely provide an entry point. Sharing the gospel and a church planting strategy that is reproducible by the national church should be emphasized from the beginning. Any local believers should be included in the initial planning and should take significant responsibilities from the beginning, with the goal of transferring all leadership responsibilities to them when possible. The initial outreach strategy may focus on a top-down approach (targeting the leaders of the local community first), a bottom-up approach (targeting the grassroots population first), or both simultaneously. Mission organizations and seminaries need to equip future missionaries with the necessary skills.

Mission Challenges Associated with the BRI

The BRI is still in the early days of its development. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has been formed, and several projects have been approved and construction has begun (AIIB, 2018). However, significant challenges remain at several levels, including political, economic, technological, and spiritual, all of which affect those attempting to bring the Gospel to the unreached.

Political Challenges

The ability of missionaries to stay in a country depends on the country's policies and international relations, especially if there is a risk of war. The building of artificial islands, airports, and military facilities in the South China Sea by China has been viewed as a military threat by the USA and several countries in South East Asia (Phillips, 2018). A small mishap could lead to a full-fledged war. All activities, missionary and non-missionary, along the maritime

route would inevitably be disrupted if a war occurs.

The decision to join or reject the BRI also elicits serious debate within the countries potentially affected. For example, the second-largest state of Australia, Victoria, has decided to join the BRI despite opposition from the national government in Canberra (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). Similar disagreements among government entities have occurred in Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and even England. Such internal division may potentially lead to political instability, especially in developing countries. The bilateral relationships that China has formed with various countries may be more fluid than solid. Whether a country honors an agreement depends on who is in power. A change in government may result in the annulment of an agreement. These factors may make it difficult to maintain a constant missionary presence and witness.

Economic and Technological Challenges

The development of technology has resulted in various interregional and transnational criminal organizations developing the potential to disrupt the functioning of any organization. Organized crime frequently focuses on cybercrimes and the trafficking of people, drugs, antiquities, and wildlife. Organized crime is especially prevalent in Russia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bangladesh. (Lo, *et al.*, 2020) The presence of such criminality may significantly slow the development of a country's economy.

Corruption in developing countries is among the greatest challenges the BRI faces (Balding, 2018a). Opaque transactions between the leaders of the nations involved and the Chinese government are common, especially concerning procurement and the quality control of construction. What constitutes bribery varies by culture. Central Asia government officials may believe it is completely appropriate to ask for a cash gift to approve a license application. Some law enforcement officers require a "protection fee or security fee" from business owners who risk being shut down if they do not pay (A tentmaking missionary in Kazakhstan, personal communication, 28th September 2018). However, Christians may not believe that such transactions are ethical.

Refusal to pay bribes may close the door to missionary visas, building permits, or the right to assemble. To combat bribery and corruption and to have a successful ministry in such contexts, Christians need to pray for wisdom, good relationships with government officials, and cultural transformation (Fung, 2010).

The USA-China tariff war is a manifestation of each country's desire for world dominance economically and politically (Warsh, 2018; Shan, 2019). The U.S. sanctions limiting technology exportation to China is affecting China's economy (Thomson, 2015). The USA has also made other threats to China, including revoking China's status as a developing country in the World Trade Organization (Amaro, 2018) and imposing restrictions on the US-Mexico-Canada trade agreement so that parts made in China will have higher tariffs even if they come through Mexico or Canada (Balding, 2018b). Another minor threat is to revoke the international postal service agreement so that China will have to pay more to mail packages to the USA (Lardieri, 2018). Both countries want to have greater influence upon the actions of the other, and over other countries.

Some Asian countries have realized that they might be getting caught in a financial trap as the BRI infrastructure becomes operational (Ching, 2018). One example is the container terminal port in Sri Lanka. The country received a loan from China for its construction. However, the revenue from the port has been much lower than expected and the country was not able to pay back the loan on schedule. Therefore, Sri Lanka renegotiated the loan, giving the Chinese 70% equity in the port and a 99-year lease, essentially putting the port under the control of the Chinese government semi-permanently.

Chinese state-owned enterprises sign agreements with developing countries to build infrastructure and develop their economies that often stipulate that construction will be done by Chinese companies. This means that few local nationals are employed in these projects (Hai & Cohen, 2017). These companies hire primarily Chinese workers, including Chinese farmers brought to the country to grow Chinese vegetables and produce Chinese food for the new Chinese community (A tentmaking missionary in

Kazakhstan, personal communication, October 3, 2008). Relations between local nationals and the Chinese deteriorate rapidly under such conditions.

The different railway standards among the countries have created greater technological challenges than foreseen for non-stop train service from China to Europe. Different countries have different gauge standards (Hillman, 2018; Hodgkinson, 2016). This mismatched track width inevitably creates delays. For example, the first freight train from China to England covered 7,780 miles in eighteen days, approximately 450 miles per day. If the train traveled for only 8 hours each day, the average speed was merely 56 miles per hour, slower than transportation by truck, and far from the high-speed train target of 200 miles per hour. Standardizing gauge size among the countries or advanced flexible and safe train axles has continued to present challenges.

In contrast to the German proposal of Industry 4.0 focusing on the automation of manufacturing and industrial practices (Manske-Wang, 2020), China has proposed the goal of "Made in China 2025," moving China's focus in manufacturing from cheap, low-tech products to 11 high-tech fields where China can become a leading manufacturer (Holslag, 2019). Such goals are based on the assumption that the country's economy continues to grow, but this is not guaranteed.

Because the social and political stability of the region depends so heavily on technological and economic development, these challenges may limit the development of the BRI and missionary opportunities.

Spiritual Challenges

The evangelization of the very religiously and culturally diverse peoples associated with the BRI will require numerous, focused strategies. The 10/40 Window is 9000 miles wide and home to a variety of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, and Animists. As the population becomes more mobile due to the BRI, mixed marriages will become more frequent and the future generations will have less clear religious identities. The children of a Buddhist father and a Hindu mother will likely be influenced by both

religions. With four billion non-Christians in this region, there is an urgent need for equipping a large number of professional missionaries for effective evangelism, discipleship training, and church planting in these new and developing contexts.

Beyond the need to reach the unreached, there is also an urgent need for a concerted effort from Chinese churches and non-Chinese organizations to help the persecuted Christians in China. The Chinese Communist Party passed a law in February 2018 that put the house churches under extreme scrutiny, requiring registration with the local government offices (World Watch Monitor, 2018). This ordinance has been regularly enforced since June 2018. Sales of the Bible through online stores and non-church bookstores have been forbidden (Johnson, 2018; Sandeman, 2018) and children under eighteen have been prohibited from attending these churches. Millions of surveillance cameras are installed in different cities throughout the country. They are used to identify church leaders and those associated with them. Thousands of Chinese house church leaders are either under persecution, have been forced to leave the country, or are prohibited from returning to the country under the new policy (Cheng, 2019). The working visas of many Western missionaries have been terminated (Yan, 2018; Yu, 2017). This has created a leadership vacuum. There are few who have the necessary experience and are able to coordinate missionary work within China, such as linking exiled Chinese Christian leaders with Western organizations and providing missionary training to those in the underground house churches. Nevertheless, Chinese churches have envisioned sending twenty thousand missionaries from their own communities to evangelize the least reached by 2030 (Zylstra, 2016). This number of Chinese missionaries can only be mobilized if there is better coordination from outside the country as indigenous sending organizations are illegal within the country. This coordination should be done not just by the Chinese outside of China but should include Western organizations to benefit from their expertise.

Moreover, the quality of theological training provided to potential missionaries by Chinese churches is not comparable to the training available in Western countries (Breimert, 1999; Ruokanen,

1999). Typical missionary training schools admit students with only a high school diploma and a passion for missions. Training typically includes a two-year internship and teaching in a local church. These graduates are then sent as missionaries to rural areas of China or to foreign countries, often in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Seminaries which offer bachelors-level and graduate-level training are limited in China. Although many Chinese Christians go overseas for seminary training, those who return to China are too few to respond to the need. The limitations of existing training will make meeting the goal of sending twenty thousand missionaries by 2030 difficult. However, if high-quality online training programs or other creative educational approaches from the West can be developed, reaching the goal may still be possible.

Outlook and Conclusions

Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5 speak of "making the most of the opportunity," emphasizing the importance of making good use of every door that opens. There are four billion non-Christians with various worldviews, cultures, and religions within the 10/40 Window. We need wisdom concerning how to share the gospel with them strategically. However, good strategies are not enough; planting churches also requires the Holy Spirit's guidance and protection. We need to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

We do not know to what degree the BRI will come to fruition and to what extent it will link the world to China. Similarly, we do not know how long the open door that now allows Christians to enter countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan will remain open. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the doors closed in less than ten years, as Muslims rose in rank in these countries' administration (Kim, 2014; Mounstephen, 2019). Factories in China are now moving out of the country because of economic factors associated with the tariff and trade war. No one can foresee the changes that will occur due to the evolution of economic forces and international relations in Eurasia. The equipping of Chinese missionaries cannot be sustained if the economy or international relations deteriorate. Therefore, we need to make good use of the

current openness of these countries. The flow of Christians and Christian materials should be promoted to evangelize pre-believers, equip disciples, and plant indigenous churches. Once a country's government believes that openness to outsiders is no longer a good policy, the window of opportunity for evangelization will be closed, and the persecution of Christians may even follow.

The current leaders of the Communist Party in China have created hurdles which hinder the spread of the gospel, but which have also alienated the population. After COVID-19, there is increased opposition within China to the ruling party (Wang & Hernández, 2020). Perhaps this opposition, combined with forces from outside the country, may motivate the Chinese Communist Party to reform its policies due to disillusionment with Communist ideology and the desire for greater human rights. If China were to embrace human rights, the surveillance, control, and persecution of Chinese Christians would come to an end. This would enable Chinese churches to train thousands of missionaries, either via external help or with the help of returning Chinese expatriates, enabling the fulfillment of the vision of sending out twenty thousand missionaries by the year 2030 (Zylstra, 2016). If China becomes a missionary-sending country, and the infrastructure of the BRI permits the exchange of people, goods, and ideas throughout Eurasia, perhaps, the gospel can be preached to all the nations sooner than foreseen.

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