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Chen, Julie Yu-Wen

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Reconciling different approaches to conceptualizing the glocalization of the Belt and Road Initiative projects

Julie Yu-Wen Chen

Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

In response to the recently rising number of academic papers that empirically examine local variances in China's Belt and Initiative (BRI) projects in various foreign lands, this paper points out the tension between attempts to theorize BRI projects. The Sino-localized approach and the assemblage theory were the two main attempts used by scholars from disparate academic disciplines to conceptualize local agency and to understand how local conditionalities, practices, and norms may affect the outcome of BRI projects. We need to examine their differences and similarities, and determine whether they are really irreconcilable. In addition, how their ontological differences lead to epistemological, methodological and analytical differences in studying BRI projects should be clarified as well.

KEYWORDS

Glocalization; Sino-localized approach; assemblage theory; BRI projects

Introduction

Many scholarly studies and public commentaries on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have looked at the topic from a geopolitical perspective in terms of China's rising global ambition (e.g. Hodzi & Chen, 2018).¹ Seen this way, China is trying to exert influence in strategically chosen locations, offering an alternative model of governance and 'globalization with Chinese characters' to challenge the Western-led neo-liberal globalization and world order. Some scholars have also deemed the BRI to be fundamentally a Chinese spatial fix for its domestic overcapacity issue (e.g. Carmody et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of these views in understanding BRI projects, a major caveat is that they tend to leave researchers equating China's geopolitical ambition with its actual impact. A significant number of recent studies now take local and grounded views as the starting point of analysis, alluding to the discrepancies between China's ambitions and its real capacity to affect the results of BRI projects on the ground. Local actors such as individuals, institutions, companies, and other forms of organization, able to mediate and translate China's proposed projects so that they correspond with local interests, norms, and practices, are being increasingly considered by scholars (e.g. Bitabarova, 2018; Chen, 2020a; Chen, 2020b; de LT Oliveira et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2019; Sidaway et al., 2020). This localization dimension of BRI projects points to the uneven and multivariate local experiences with BRI projects, thus helping to complicate popular studies and reports that perpetuate a more monolithic and 'view from above' or 'one size fits all' geopolitical analysis of the

CONTACT Julie Yu-Wen Chen  julie.chen@helsinki.fi  Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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Chinese international ambition and outreach (de LT Oliveira et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Sidaway et al., 2020).

With this new turn towards local variances in BRI projects in mind, this article intends to explore several conceptual discussions among scholars about how to theorize local agencies in BRI-recipient states, their capacities, their limits, and their connections with Chinese and foreign actors. This article explores the several tensions between these approaches, whose proponents are scholars from different academic disciplines and whose disciplinary foci thus influence them to look at local agency and its connection with globalization variously.

A relevant concept that will be explored is the notion of glocalization. Ronald Robertson (1992 & 1994) is the main scholar who brought the discussion of glocalization into social scientific discourse. In Robertson's view, globalization has to be realized in concrete forms that are local because the locals always have to generate some response towards the global influences. To the extent that recent scholarly work has indicated the existence of BRI localization and glocalization empirically, theoretically, and conceptually, there are various scholarly stances on the usefulness of looking at the BRI through this kind of global–local dialectic. This conceptual paper attempts to address these differences, asking whether these approaches can be reconciled and prompting dialogues between scholars coming from different academic disciplines.

The research design of a conceptual paper differs from that of an empirical paper. In the latter, the distinction between literature review and empirical data for analysis is clear, but in a conceptual paper, 'it is sometimes difficult to tell which theories provide the "data" and which are framing the analysis' (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 19). Jaakkola (2020) discerns four types of conceptual paper: *theory synthesis*, *theory adaptation*, *typology*, and *model*. Each differs in its methodological approach, and how arguments are structured and developed. This conceptual paper on the glocalization of the BRI is somewhere between the 'theory synthesis' type and 'theory adaptation' type. It is the theory synthesis type in the sense that it aims to summarize and integrate the current understanding of the glocalization of the BRI, but this paper can actually be a theory adaptation type, particularly for political scientists and sociologists, to learn from geographers' and anthropologists' preferred 'assemblage' thinking. In other words, by adapting the assemblage approach to their analysis, political scientists and sociologists may broaden their understanding of the BRI glocalization and even expand their methodological toolkit to BRI studies.

With this goal in mind, the research design draws on existing literature that addresses some aspects of BRI glocalization. The majority of the existing literature and empirical cases are from other scholars while the case of the Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel as part of the Polar Silk Road was conducted by the present author, building on previously published work (Chen, 2020b).

As the purpose of this paper is theory synthesis or adaptation, readers will not find an exhaustive list of empirical cases for comparison. While the selection of cases may appear somewhat *ad hoc* for this conceptual article, they are not meant for systematic empirical comparison to discover causal relations but to substantiate conceptual discussions.

In the next section, I will begin by asking how the Chinese governmental and private actors understand local actors and their agency. Showing the Chinese perspectives first prepares the context and paves the way for our later and main discussion on scholarly attempts to conceptualize a reality that various Chinese actors already know and experience in their daily practices.

Glocalization or Sino-localization of BRI projects

In general, when it comes to BRI projects, one may consider the Chinese government, their diplomats, state-owned-enterprises (SOE), and sometimes private companies as key players. These

actors have diverse interests, motivations, and experiences in undertaking international cooperative projects (Murton & Lord, 2020, p. 2) that affect their relationship with the actors in the BRI recipient states. To start with, Chinese governmental actors and those closely linked to the state generally understand the need to operate in accordance with the BRI host state's conditions, norms, laws, and interests, even though they might not always understand the details of local conditions. Rhetorically, Beijing often openly declares the importance of third-party cooperation as well as respect for the host country's governance model. Official documents such as the Action Plan on the BRI (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015) repeatedly talk about cooperation rather than China's individual action; the term 'inclusivity' is also repeatedly used, despite its vagueness. Chinese diplomats often convey the message that they wish to work with local actors to achieve so-called win-win collaboration (Winter, 2019). For example, Blaxekjær et al.'s (2018) paper on the Polar Silk Road mentions that China's special representative to the Arctic, Mr. Gao Feng, stressed in an interview that 'Beijing does not want to push specific policies, but rather wants the Nordic partners to develop their own ideas, interests, and positions and engage with China in dialogue to develop jointly the Polar Silk Road as a win-win collaboration' (Blaxekjær et al., 2018, p. 6). This suggests that the Chinese governments and their agents, ranging from diplomats to SOE representatives, understand that they cannot achieve BRI goals without local partners and supporters. So far as they can detect local sentiments and wishes, they try to be sensitive towards local reactions.

The attention to local conditions, however, might result in different effects on local and Chinese actors. In some European Union (EU) member states, Chinese actors might be forced to comply with more demanding standards and norms because of the host states requirements and the pressures host states face to meet either EU or global norms. But in Carrai's (2022) paper on the Standard Gauge Railroad in Kenya and the Ethiopia-Djibouti railroad, she notes that the regulatory loopholes in host states give Chinese SOEs incentives to not fully implement global norms such as corporate social responsibility (CSR). The Chinese government did try to uphold CSR as a priority for China's 'going out' practices, but since the local host states are weak in upholding those norm themselves, Chinese SOEs use what Carrai (2021) coins 'adaptive governance' to adjust to local conditions.

Returning to the question of why local actors matter for China, another crucial consideration is that BRI projects often require more interaction between Chinese actors (state and private alike) and local actors in host states. Unlike traditional FDI projects that allow Chinese firms to invest in host countries directly, BRI projects are mostly built upon engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contracts, build-operate-transfer (BOT) contracts, and other forms of public-private partnership (PPP) contracts. EPC contracts involve reaching a deal between the Chinese contractor and the local owner. The contractor is responsible for delivering designs, construction, logistics, transport, and other elements. If the *EPC plus operation* model is used, this means contractors have to be embedded more deeply in the host countries to operate the completed infrastructure, as in the Mombasa-Nairobi railway in Kenya and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway in Ethiopia and Djibouti. BOT and PPP are based on a concessional contract with the host government, as manifested in the Karot Hydropower Plant in Pakistan (Liu et al., 2020, p. 142). In a BOT arrangement, the contractor is responsible for the construction and operation of the finished product for a stipulated period of time, and the product is then returned to the host government. These contractual forms and cooperative models involve a much deeper and longer-term interaction between local actors and Chinese actors than traditional FDI projects.

In sum, China has no choice but to allow the interests, ideas, and norms of local actors to shape how BRI projects can be realized in their own countries. Arguably, the more the political and/or

business elites in recipient states see the benefits that the BRI can bring to themselves, their communities, and their societies, the more likely they are to help form and mobilize networks to make the BRI a reality in their countries. Such a process involves drawing together the interests of diverse actors in the recipient state. Local politics, laws, and customs give projects a local or Sino-local outlook and meaning. The term ‘Sino-local’ here entails that a compromise made between Chinese actors and those in the host state in terms of application of norms and practices make a BRI project implementable in local contexts. This ‘Sino’ element is related to the heuristic discourse of the return of the ‘Tianxia’ or Sinocized world order that some Chinese intellectuals and elites have seen as China’s role in the world (e.g. Qin, 2006; Yan, 2011). In this Sinocized world order, many practices in the international system are more in line with Chinese culture, values, norms, and practices, in distinction from the Western-led world order (Barabantseva, 2009; Callahan, 2007; Swain, 2013).

Local actors may use China as a card in their own domestic games, as exemplified by the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia, which was used to facilitate the government’s pro-Malay policy (Liu & Lim, 2019), and the Nepali government’s use of Chinese investment to advance the country’s state formation project (Murton et al., 2016). China, in this context, is *invited* by local actors to consciously or unconsciously serve certain local actors’ interests. In the end, the final project may look different from what China had initially anticipated, and sometimes, ironically, may even become antithetical to China’s interests.

The example of the Balkan state of Montenegro offers another telling story. Ruling elites are reported to have supported Chinese funding of a national highway. From China’s perspective, the highway amounted to an extension of the BRI to the Balkans. However, to win election campaigns, the Montenegrin government made a strategic decision to not frame the highway as part of China’s BRI, defining it instead as a locally driven project (Grgić, 2019, p. 47). Overall, local actors, whether state, private, individual, or collective, can be seen as a first filter before China can bring in ideas of BRI cooperation. Their interpretation of China’s proposed project and their production of a localized understanding determine whether—and how—the idea of the BRI has a chance to advance further in Montenegro.

A third vital factor to consider is that China needs local partners to help it understand and control local instabilities and uncertainties (Yu, 2017, p. 367). These, range from natural disasters, climate change, friction of terrain (e.g. Nepal), regime and leadership changes to terrorist and other security threats. All of these can stall the progress of cooperation, making previously signed agreements invalid or difficult to carry out. For example, Kowalski’s (2020) research on leadership changes explained that the shift in the Lodzkie region of Poland from pro-China cooperation politicians to skeptics was one of the main factors hindering the further expansion of the BRI cooperation. In terms of security threats, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) needs to pass Balochistan, one of Pakistan’s most volatile regions due to terrorism and extremism. Local partnerships are expected to help China comprehend the current situation on the ground to minimize potential threats to the CPEC.

In sum, the Chinese government, SOEs, and diplomats understand that they require the cooperation of local actors to help them advance their BRI projects. They know that local interests and processes affect how their BRI projects evolve. At the practical level, the localization, glocalization, and Sino-localization of BRI projects have occurred, albeit unevenly across cases. Glocalization in this sense would entail a compromise between local norms, interests, and customs vis-a-vis those from the global level. If the influence from the global level reflects Chinese rather than Western norms, we may use the term Sino-localization rather than glocalization to depict the situation more accurately.

While glocalization or Sino-localization is a *modus operandi*, scholars differ in terms of how they theorize such developments. In the next section, I stress the need to re-visit the key elements of the Sino-localization approach. Specifically, I examine the works of those scholars who have adopted the assemblage theory to examine BRI projects on the ground, and compare them to see how the gaps in their analysis of the BRI might be overcome.

The Sino-localized approach: what it is and what it can learn from the assemblage theory

Within political science international relations (IR), scholars have noted the limits of examining the BRI from a purely geopolitical perspective. The turn to local circumstances and the power of local actors in affecting BRI development was exemplified in the aforementioned study on Malaysia. Liu and Lim (2019) were two of the very first scholars to establish a conceptual framework for their case study. They pointed out the three most important variables undergirding the BRI in Malaysia: 1) the interplay involving domestic ethnopolitical goals and Chinese interests, 2) state-federal contestation, and 3) convergence of geopolitical goals (2018: 7). The problem of their framework is that it is only applicable to Malaysia.

In this paper, I propose that a generalized Sino-localized theoretical framework can be deployed to scrutinize the development and implementation of BRI and other Chinese cooperative projects in recipient states, regardless of their geographic locations. This approach considers the interplays between Chinese (state and private) and local actors (state and private) in addition to their ideas and actions in making the cooperative project a reality in a foreign country (Chen, 2020a & 2020b).

This framework is inspired by sociologists Fligstein and Doug's (2011) meso-level theory of strategic action fields (SAFs). A SAF is a field 'where actors (individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules' (Fligstein & Doug, 2011, p. 3). The idea of an SAF is somewhat consistent with Bourdieu's conception of *habitus*. The latter is a 'repository of feelings and motives as well as a repertoire of actions and strategies' (Fligstein & Doug, 2011, p. 7). It is a socially constructed arena where actors constantly pull their interests regarding a particular space and issue because of their contentious or unclear nature (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Looking at a particular SAF across time, one can observe the field's nature, the coverage of actors, and their relations, which can be established, broken, reestablished, defined, and redefined. In the case of China's BRI, fields would emerge as a result of the interaction and dynamism triggered by local actors' reactions to the potential opportunities the BRI. In some countries, the field can be more organized than in others, in the sense that actors might have clearer framings than in other countries. Actors may also have more resources and concrete plans for carrying out BRI projects than in others.

By introducing 'field' thinking, it acknowledges that many of the variables that Liu and Lim (2019) observed are constantly changing and may exhibit different dynamics and effects in different contexts. Field thinking is similar to the thinking of 'becoming' in assemblage theory, which we will turn below. In an SAF, many differently positioned actors thus play the roles of co-constructing a BRI, and thus, it is inevitable that stakeholders will have various and even contradictory discourses and interests in constructing the SAF.

In the following, I will elaborate on four roles that local actors play in forming SAFs for BRI projects. *First, local actors encode and decode China's intentions and initiatives in the cooperation.* They then produce a localized understanding of what the BRI project might mean for their

countries and societies (Chen, 2020a). This is evidenced in the Montenegrin case mentioned above where local actors utilized intercultural communication to turn the BRI into Montenegro's own development scheme. This is also similar to the aforementioned Nepali case, where local politics were articulated through infrastructural developments and vice versa (Murton & Lord, 2020, p. 2).

Historical experiences, memories, and legacies may be reactivated in the process of giving meaning to the BRI (Rippa, 2020; Winter, 2019). At times, legacies may prompt the process, while at other times, they may have a counter-productive effect. Let us take Kazakhstan, a pivotal BRI country in China's plan, as an example. In fact, given Kazakhstan's geographic location, the concept of the Silk Road has historically been used by the Kazakhstani regime to brand the country and justify its development of transport infrastructure linking with China. Kazakhstan has often perceived itself as a crucial node in the vaguely conceived modern Silk Road. The first train that travelled from Kazakhstan's former capital, Almaty, to China's Urumqi was called the *Silk Road* (Bitabarova, 2018, p. 161). Because of these historical connections both in conceptual and practical terms, Kazakhstan's government is quite supportive of Chinese cooperation and finds it relatively easy to push its ideas forward. It is also no surprise that the ambitious vision of the BRI was announced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in 2013 (Chen, 2015).

Nevertheless, legacies may not always foster BRI cooperation. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), for instance, some countries are used to the conventional bilateral framework or the 16 + 1 network for dialogue and cooperation with Beijing. Even though China has wanted to push cooperation through the new BRI framework, this is not always favoured or widely used in the CEE context (Chen, 2020a). An interesting example is the region of Lodz in Poland. In this case, actual BRI cooperation did not start from the state level of 16 + 1 meetings. Rather, it was a local logistics company, Hatrans, that initially worked with the Chinese side to envision a rail freight project in response to local demand for fast, cheap, and reliable connections in the region. The cooperation was endorsed by the local regional government and created more cooperation and exchanges between Lodz and China's Sichuan province in particular. Inevitably, the project required the blessing of central authorities but it was rejected at the state level over concerns about state security and possible pressure from the US (Kowalski, 2020).

Another example where local actors initially took the lead was the Helsinki (Finland)–Tallinn (Estonia) tunnel project. This project was vigorously promoted by the Finnish entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka, the former Angry Bird founder. Vesterbacka had striven to brand the tunnel as part of China's Polar Silk Road, with the aim of attracting China's financial and technical support to complete this project. Currently, the Finnish and Estonian states are evaluating Vesterbacka's proposal, but there has not been much progress to date (Chen, 2020b).

In addition to being carriers/transmitters of BRI ideas, *the second role played by local actors is the garnering of supporters to advance their cause*. Supporters are important because they may bring in resources, useful contacts, and even symbolic help, such as signalling to the government and the public that the idea is worth promoting. Local actors may take various stances ranging from opposition to support towards the potential opportunity. In the process of garnering supporters for their side, local actors inevitably have to find means to accommodate groups or individuals with divergent views. In their SAF theory, Fligstein and Doug (2011) describe this process as a construction of compromised identities among *field makers*, enabling collective values, norms, and positions to be formed. It should be added that this is a dynamic process that transforms the identities of stakeholders, determining whether there will be sufficient collective support to push the BRI idea to the next stage of development.

Field making is not easy. When there is sufficient motivation to go ahead, local field makers are then needed to translate existing rules, regulations, interests, and resources into the production of the BRI field. This field may be completely new, or a current one that has somehow been related to the existing cooperation with China and is being incorporated into the BRI framework. As previously noted, existing projects can be rebranded as BRI projects. This malleability of field making is similarly observed by scholars looking at the matter in terms of assemblage theory, where anticipation, negotiation, and re-orientation is constant (Murton & Lord, 2020). These parallels with assemblage theory will be discussed below.

Returning to field making, we also consider opposition forces in analysis. Not all oppositions are powerful influencers, but some are. In Safdar's (2022) study of the Main Line-1 railway project in Pakistan, he found the military to be essential veto actors whose decision would significantly stymie cooperative projects from proceeding. In other studies, non-governmental opposition has been found able to prevent BRI cooperation. For instance, in 2019, a massive campaign led by local Kenyan non-governmental organizations and stakeholders meant that the Lamu coal-fired power plant initially planned to be built by the Chinese had to be scrapped. Interestingly, the Lamu project was originally proposed by the Kenyan government, which was seeking financial and technical support from China. Activists brought the case to court over environmental concerns. Kenya's National Environmental Tribunal eventually ruled that the construction had to be halted (Wang, 2019). The Chinese side subsequently learned to be sensitive to local wishes and agreed not to push forward with the project.

The third role played by local actors is determining the level of local participation and activism and gradually making the BRI a reality in their countries. Camba et al.'s (2021) study on strongmen in the Philippines and Malaysia alludes to how the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009-2018) used the BRI to reward business allies directly, giving them directorships and subcontracts to implement the BRI in Malaysia. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-present) used the BRI similarly to reward his cronies, allowing them to further the BRI agenda. The vital role of political and business elites in pushing forward local participation has been mentioned in numerous studies.

Another indispensable level is the host-state participation. State actors' roles can involve being a filter, regulator, endorser, facilitator, cooperater, or supervisor. In developing countries such as Nepal and Kenya, many state actors are experienced in luring foreign donors and investments to their countries, navigating tenders, and filtering and brokering deals for their own countries' benefit.

The Finnish case noted earlier on is also a case in point. The Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel was initially proposed by a private entrepreneur who negotiated with Chinese SOEs to bring in Chinese funding and technical support. However, Vesterbacka ultimately had to submit his whole plan to the Finnish and Estonian governments, which then evaluated whether the deal matched both governments' development plans and assessed financing and environmental sustainability risks (Chen, 2020b). Tensions between the private businessmen and the two governments are ongoing. The latter have been assessing the project for some time and have not given a green light to the deal. Vesterbacka has, on various occasions, indicated that government involvement has slowed down and delayed his plan. At any rate, this case shows that the ultimate power in determining how fast a project can progress is in the hands of elites and, as here, bureaucrats. Previously, I mentioned the case of a rail freight project in Poland, which was also proposed by a private company but later rejected at the state level (Kowalski, 2020). In both cases, bureaucrats possess agency enabled by the states to determine the level of local participation.²

Finally, *the fourth role played by local actors is promoting public acceptance of the BRI project*. In this way, the project not only matches the interests of elites but can also be accepted at the public level, thus dispelling the accusation that Chinese projects are self-serving economically and deflect mass opposition (Grant, 2018 & 2020). This dimension is connected to the soft power strategies that China and its partners often try to craft. Shakhanova and Garlick's (2020, p. 98) research, for example, points to the cooperation between the Kazakhstani state, its (state-controlled) media, and the Chinese Embassy in promoting the BRI to the Kazakhstani public. The Chinese Embassy offered propaganda materials to the local press, and local journalists were invited to visit China. As a result, the BRI has been widely discussed in the media, and Chinese President Xi Jinping has been mentioned more frequently in relation to BRI topics, compared to former Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020, p. 98). In addition, there were scholarships offered to students in Kazakhstan to participate in exchanges with or study in China (Chen, 2015; Grant, 2020), demonstrating that China's development projects not only bring jobs and economic prosperity but also cultural, educational, and other 'softer' kinds of human interactions (Grant, 2020). In Han and Webber's (2020) study in Ghana, they similarly observed that the Chinese private company Sinohydro organized activities to offer donations of cash and goods to local communities in the hope of garnering local support when the Bui dam was constructed. Furthermore, Sinohydro and the Chinese embassy attended an academic workshop at which researchers discussed the impacts of Chinese-involved dams but they avoided attending activities organized by local NGOs, showing that while the Chinese side wished to be seen as engaging in local discussion and building up their acceptance, they also shrewdly avoided situations where they would confront opposition and expose their credentials to public scrutiny.

Overall, the Sino-localized approach eschews static variables and causal relations and proposes that field thinking reflects the BRI's ever-changing and evolutionary nature. We now turn to the assemblage theory, comparing its ontology, epistemology, and methodology with the Sino-localized approach.

Assemblage theory compared

Assemblage thinking originated with Deleuze and Guattari (1988), whose ontology of the world is relational. They see relations as open and external. Relations in their views are also diffused and multi-directional in nature. They are always in the 'becoming' mode, not static mode. This results in messiness of networks and the study of them can be complicated. Some scholars have been inspired by such thinking and believe that it can liberate political geographic analysis from the trap of always looking at power as exercised through some institutions within a clearly bounded territory (de LT Oliveira et al., 2020; Dean, 2020; Spies & Alff, 2020). Other scholars have taken this further to study BRI (e.g. Alff, 2020; Han & Webber, 2020). Such approaches foreground a particular 'from the ground' approach to BRI that illuminates some of the contradictions with and ramifications of official BRI narratives.

In this line of thinking, the non-human infrastructure is an assemblage of relations among human influences, and political effects can be manifested in the continuous formation of these infrastructural projects. This way of looking at power and influence is 'flatter' (Oakes, 2021) than the Sino-localized approach and other conventional social scientific approaches, which see power and influence as either coming from above (i.e. global or Sino forces) or from below (i.e. local forces).

It is possible that actors in one assemblage are also members of others. One concrete example is the aforementioned case study conducted by Han and Webber (2020), who observed an assemblage which they term the 'Chinese Water Machine'. Actors in these loosely connected networks have

tried to bid for several hydropower projects internationally. Actors for building the Bui dam project already had pre-existing relations from other projects, or assemblages. Furthermore, the opportunities that the Bui dam project spawned have helped them to form further assemblages. Chinese companies gained experience through local cooperation in the Bui dam project, building up more capacity to work with various non-Chinese governmental and business networks. As a result, they have a better profile to form other assemblages to bid for other international projects such as later in the Ivory Coast project. The same pattern was observed in the Balkan case studies conducted by Rogelia (2020).

Hence, one may observe not just one single assemblage, but rather messy networks of intersecting assemblages, making it difficult to discern whether power or influence is from above or below. That said, the assemblage theory possesses a flat ontology rather than a spatially hierarchical ontology. This has parallels with Marston et al.'s (2005) work on 'human geography without scale,' whose work echoes much of the assemblage thinking. They advocate not looking at scales of politics but interactions between actors. This renders the study of relations and networks vital. Epistemologically, the focus is then on the interactions between actors and BRI infrastructures in a multiplicity of sites, without having to knit vertical or horizontal dynamics in any systematic way. They believe that any scalar concept would create unnecessary imaginaries of the local-global duality.

Assemblage theory and the Sino-localized approach converge in their understanding of BRI realization as an evolutionary process. They nonetheless diverge greatly in their ontological views. The Sino-localized approach examines players and structures in a scalable hierarchy. Scale from the local to the global or vice versa is still relevant. Glocalization or Sino-localization is a rescaling process in which influences exerted by actors within territories can transfer impacts upward (to the global) or downward (to the local) (Swyngedouw, 1997). This sets the Sino-localized approach apart from the assemblage theory's flat and relational ontology as well as its non-scalar epistemology.

Methodologically, these two approaches are similar in the sense that they both encourage mixed methods, particularly qualitative methods such as interviews, in-depth field work, ethnography, and discourse analysis to enable contextually rich and detailed analysis. But with the assemblage theory's focus on relations, network analysis and other related theories such as actor-network theory are more salient for assemblage theory than for the Sino-localized approach (Dean, 2020; Ghoddousi & Page, 2020).

Can these approaches cross-fertilize each other?

The assemblage theory and the Sino-localized approach dwell on different ontologies and epistemologies. Logically, one would then think there is no need to ask if it is possible to reconcile them. However, judging from the existing empirical studies that have employed assemblage thinking, there is not any methodological or analytical toolkit that assemblage theorists have used which non-assemblage theorists have never used. Furthermore, epistemologically speaking, even among scholars using assemblage thinking, their findings do not necessarily simply depict a flat world of relations between actors and non-human objects. In fact, some authors (e.g. Han & Webber, 2020) admit that the complexity of the tension between the forces of globalization and glocalization is still there. Their work was to move away from the local–global dialectic discourse, as such a binary view cannot capture the messiness of the politics and power relations in BRI projects. Another scholar advocating assemblage thinking, Henryk Alff (2020), also believes that multi-scalar analysis is relevant because for a BRI project to take place, there must be actors negotiating at various scales from the local to the global.

Claiming that the ontological views of the two approaches can be reconciled might be overblown. But in conducting analysis, scholars using either approach can learn from the other to improve their work. The Sino-localized approach can learn by acknowledging that if it is too rigidly bounded by national territories in teasing out local agency influences, it will not be able to reliably identify some aspects of BRI glocalization where things get too messy and fragmented for empirical generalization. Following Doreen Massey's (1991) logic that to understand the 'characters' of globalization, one needs to look at 'places' and 'places beyond' (Massey, 1991, p. 29), I would agree that scholars using the Sino-localized approach should examine multiple sites in their research design. They should not just concentrate on the typical arena where local interest groups interact with Chinese counterparts to get a particular BRI deal done but also check other 'relevant sites' where these actors might meet, interact, and affect the outcome of the BRI. An example may be the aforementioned case study of the Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel project. Some (but not all) actors in this particular assemblage (to adapt the terminology from the assemblage theory) have previous cooperative experience in other assemblages. Vesterbacka has worked with various Chinese actors in the educational, gaming and entertainment as well as real estate sectors (Chen, 2020b).³ The tunnel that he plans does not simply incorporate the transportation infrastructure but also artificial islands where he wishes to bring in a lot of Chinese residents. This will inevitably afford various businesses opportunities, bringing actors in the real estate industry, the educational sector, and even entertainment industries to the islands. Hence, further research should not just examine the tunnel project's SAF per se, but the connections between these actors across different assemblages in sectors such as real estate, education, and entertainment.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper points out the tensions between the various attempts to theorize the Sino-localization or glocalization of BRI projects. Ontologically and epistemologically, the Sino-localized approach and the assemblage theory are different, but their differences might not be as great as they appear. In reality, many of the variables and factors under examination for BRI cases would be considered by scholars using either approach. Their major difference is that convention political scientific approach and the Sino-localized approach tend to look at these factors in a relatively more static way, seeking to identify causal relations between variables. The assemblage theory has something to contribute to political science, that is, reality is messy and far more complicated beyond traditionally territorialized units of analysis bounded within national borders. Deterritorialized relational and network thinking will help. Analytically, that would mean the inclusion of more relevant sites for analysis than sticking to a conventional arena in which key actors contest and bargain.

At the conceptual level, this leads us to ponder the global-local dialectic debate within the social sciences. Exactly how much is global and how much is local in BRI projects, and is it even useful to ask this question? The assemblage theory would see it as less meaningful to engage in this discussion because of the messy nature of BRI politics. I also agree that empirically, this will be challenging. This is a topic that future research should delve into.

Notes

1. It is not always to simple single out or specify what a BRI project is. China does not offer a clear and fixed list. For the theoretical and conceptual purpose of this paper, this is not so much of a problem as long as we do understand there are broader and narrower definitions of the BRI. The former would

include all China-related projects, such as Chinese foreign direct investment (FDIs), Chinese-financed projects, and other types of international cooperation projects. The latter would be limited to projects that are really included in the cooperation and negotiation between China and specific BRI countries. And often these kinds of projects would involve far more complicated cooperative modes and financing structures than convention FDI projects (Liu et al., 2020, p. 139).

2. Discussion on state enabled agency can be found in Brown (2012) and Safdar (2022).
3. As an example of his connection to Chinese real estate actors, Vesterbacka's office at the We+ co-working space in Helsinki is actually a Chinese-owned share-space office.

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Notes on contributor

Julie Yu-Wen Chen is Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Chen is the academic liaison for the University of Helsinki at the Nordic NIAS Council based in Denmark as well as the Nordic Centre in Fudan University, China. She is currently representing Finland in 'COST ACTION: China in Europe Research Network' (European Cooperation in Science & Technology funded by EU Horizon 2020 EU). Chen formerly held academic positions at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan), University College Cork (Ireland) and Academia Sinica (Taiwan).

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