

Preface

Narratives, Dreams, and Perspectives in Area Studies

The time of writing this preface is marked by a couple of violent conflicts that have impacted contemporary international relations to a significant extent. The aggressive war by Russia against Ukraine, along with equally brutal conflicts elsewhere on the globe, are occupying huge parts of the daily media coverage in and beyond Europe. Against this backdrop, the People's Republic of China (PRC), the country forming the center of attention in this book, is a remarkably quiet political actor—given the role it plays both regionally and globally. China is expanding its economic and political strength and influence, soft-footed and peaceful, it seems. The PRC's comprehensive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a flagship of the country's massive move into numerous regions and localities of Asia, Africa, and Europe. While the BRI causes suspicion among observers, particularly from outside China, the actual harm that the infrastructure project is doing has yet to be substantiated empirically—in economic and political regards alike. It is the perspective one takes that leads to positive or negative critique. What is barely shallow water to the camel is an ocean to the mouse, as an ancient Sufi adage says. Similarly, what is considered a fierce competitor project by some is a welcome investment project for others. Challenging the BRI with the project of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is one reaction; accommodating Chinese investment for the sake of lifting up the local economy is another. Japan proactively promotes FOIP, whereas Pakistan embraces the promises of a China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for a brighter future.

The above topics relate to what is conventionally studied, analyzed, and discussed with regard to the BRI, i.e., the project's economic and political impacts and repercussions. The economy- and politics-related publications on the BRI are multitudinous and probably uncountable when we include studies in the different languages of the world that do not automatically enter the dominant online data banks and search engines. The present book publication departs from such works in a refreshing manner. It directs its gaze at the cultural dimension of the BRI project, looking through the lens of the narratives that come along with it and drawing the bigger picture of a geocultural landscape that is created by China's cultural policies, both domestically and internationally. Two anchor notions form the rallying points for the editors, namely, the imagery of the New Silk Road and the projection of the Chinese Dream. The relevance of culture in studying the BRI forms the center stage and the vantage point for analyzing the BRI "as a new geocultural and transcultural developer," as the editors reveal. Yet the perspective is always a local one, i.e., the scale is narrowed down and zooms into individual accounts of people who are affected in one way or another by the meaning-making of Silk Road and Dream narratives. Literary manifestations of reflecting on China in Africa, the role of language as a means of cultural policy, or the impact of Confucius Institutes in conveying and shaping cultural heritage shed light on the *cultural* infrastructure that is built up in the framework of the BRI. Some views are Sinocentric in their interpretative approach, while others share a bottom-up perspective on, for instance, the implementation of the Chinese Dream in Tanzania. The overarching bracket spans the scope of what is designated as the emotional architecture of China–Africa relations. With this intentionally culture-based approach, the editors and authors provide a rare and valuable collection of case studies, informed opinions, experiential accounts, and dialogical reflections on and of the (meta-)narratives that embed the BRI.

The book is a result of three years of work in a German research consortium that strives to unfold local perspectives on transregional infrastructure projects. Abbreviated with the acronym De:link//Re:link, the scholars in this consortium intend to bring *local insights and new knowledges* ("l-i-n-k") to the surface. The local is the lens that is looked through; it is a perspective rather than a designation of a particular geographical scale. This comprehension of the local is one feature of the consortium's take on "doing Area Studies." Living up to the task of epistemic decolonization and theorizing "from the South" are prime concerns that have translated into the contents of this edited volume. Thanks to the funding of their research initiative by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), scholars in the consortium can contribute to making local views on the BRI from Asia, Africa, and Europe known to a wider public. The readers of this volume are a welcome part of this wider public and will

hopefully enjoy browsing through its chapters. In my capacity as the speaker of the De:link//Re:link consortium, my special thanks go to Jamila Adeli and Linda Amman for their relentless efforts in putting this book together and editing it with great commitment and care.

Claudia Derichs, Berlin, April 2024