

China *beyond* China: Infrastructuring and Ecologising a New Global Hegemony?

Editorial

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Since the call for papers for this Special Issue less than two years ago, the world has faced a stream of existential challenges, with the background drumbeat of environmental catastrophe(s) and geopolitical tensions growing ever louder. A troubled landscape of peoples and territories has been constantly sending shock-waves of socio-political and politico-ecological exhaustion across the planet. Moreover, at this moment of unprecedented global challenges, it is increasingly apparent that the sphere of international politics and government, to which citizens would turn for action, is itself also displaying a deep crisis of structural dysfunction. Far from offering reassurance on ways forward, a community of GDP-worshipping nation-states is creating, sustaining and exacerbating a whole raft of political inadequacies and injustices.

From a narrow concern for declining growth rates and global financial instability, Bremmer and Roubini (2011) anticipated a “G0” world at the start of the 2010s. Now in the early 2020s it is clear that we have passed into a new and much more complex phase of systemic ruin that would be better called a “G-minus” world. This term connotes the emergence of an actively fragmenting geopolitics, characterised by a negative-sum game in which two nation-states – the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – vie for supremacy in ways that harmfully restructure their own domestic behaviour as well as those of other countries and intermediate power blocs in the process. This situation simultaneously exposes the absence of any geopolitical arrangement centred on either state that would have a credible claim to offer a solution-oriented, life-

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protecting and hence persuasive vision for a renewed global hegemony. At this moment of dire need for global cooperation, we find precisely the opposite to be unfolding.

For our purposes, however, perhaps the most salient factor is how China, and its ongoing but unassured geopolitical ascendancy, runs through all these developments. While the COVID-19 pandemic itself has put the Chinese state at the forefront of global affairs since 2020, a series of polarising events has triggered further instability in the geopolitical order, pushing ecological issues into a subordinate, but increasingly angry, desperate and irrepressible shadow layer of public and scientific attention. Such issues include major disruptions from war and unparalleled disturbances to transnational economic activity – e.g., from logistic bottlenecks in China’s ports – culminating now in surging global inflation, economic chaos and fragmenting and even “deglobalising” patterns of trans-continental trade. These political economic headwinds are now threatening the collapse of basic services and public goods, including health, food and fuel. These are issues that the industrialised world had come comfortably to regard as external pathologies long-since tamed and compatible with, if not dependent upon, socio-economic trajectories of constantly accelerating complexity and cross-border interconnection.

Moreover, the growing influence of China appears to be both a contributing cause and partial effect of the perceived international vacuum of the multilateral action needed to prevent and respond to such a serious moment of planetary crises. In other words, the stuttering but relentless growth in global influence of the PRC unfolds in systemic relation – a positive feedback loop – with the deeply challenging dynamics of the present. This process is being refracted through domestic politics and parallel trajectories of dysfunction across almost all (powerful) states, including even in seeming bastions of liberal democracy and in China itself. The result is that the progressive fragmentation and division in geopolitics between a US-centric West and a globally active China is now sowing a broader self-fulfilling zeitgeist of distrust and securitisation that is overwhelming their respective ranges of rule and control (Rodríguez / Rüland 2022). Most graphically, this has now broken through into outright military conflict at the European end of Eurasia; a development hailed by many as unthinkable, notwithstanding the fact that inter-hegemonic struggle and geopolitics have always been setting fires elsewhere on the global map. The long-externalised problems of contemporary political institutions are surely coming home to roost.

And, indeed, both Russia’s flagrant invasion of Ukraine and the excruciating challenges that have followed from it also bear the marks of a rising China, including challenges for China itself. Russia is explicitly a – perhaps even the closest – strategic partner for Beijing’s self-referencing vision of global multipolarity and the rebalancing of global power away from the United States. Yet

the war has not met with unqualified Chinese support because it has also come to reinforce the geopolitical uncertainties of the very interconnections across the Eurasian landmass that the Chinese state has promised to revitalise via its Belt and Road Initiative(s) (BRI), and on which the continued economic growth of the PRC – its internal *sine qua non* of regime legitimacy – largely depends.

China, therefore, must go “beyond” China, and is doing so unstoppably, albeit in ways that reify the fragility of an unproven global power searching for safe havens within a system of constraints and possibilities already established from the rickety US-led world order. But in “going beyond China” there is also a further key connotation regarding the main theme of this Special Issue. This concerns how this process of interweaving Chinese interests, norms and imageries into the world beyond its (contested) territorial borders is changing China itself as well as the “China” that its increasingly centralised, authoritarian government is single-mindedly determined to preserve and advance.

The burning question of the age arguably concerns how China will use, expand or lose its remarkable sources of economic, political and technological influence in this system crisis scenario while attempting to stabilise (or at least not upend) its own economic and socio-political conditions in the process. How will China actually go beyond China? And what world – what world order, what planet and nature, what globe-spanning sociotechnical systems – will this singularly important but not yet well-understood phenomenon create?

This Special Issue opens up this agenda, presenting a series of insightful papers across a range of empirical sites that illuminate not only *that* profound change is underway with the (uncertain) rise of China and the global reach of its infrastructural projects amidst planetary phase shift, but also *how* that is currently unfolding. The collection of articles of this double volume foreground a set of three novel concepts that we suggest should increasingly be seen as central to the high-stakes reorganisation of geopolitics, while also thereby highlighting some of the fundamental inadequacies of contemporary orthodox readings of China beyond China. As such, in the midst of both a wholesale shift in system and, in parallel, a new emerging language, attempts to capture this perforce involve new connotations to seemingly familiar terms. In what follows we flag these through an unavoidable proliferation of scare quotes.

First, if a key challenge before us is to understand how China itself is changing, it follows that the flurry of popular and ill-equipped conceptualisations of “China” is a primary impediment to this agenda. Too often, China is still understood as a self-contained and *sui generis* political-administrative unit set against the (equally over-unified) “West” or as being a natural “leader” of the “Global South”; rather than itself a diverse, fragmented set of agencies coordinated by a constitutively authoritarian centre that is connected with, differentiated from, defended from and contested by similarly diverse agencies overseas.

This complex and dynamic landscape of interaction between “China” and the “world”, from which new systemic relations are emerging, must first be acknowledged – i.e., named – before we can then begin in earnest to work out precisely *what* it is. We thus call for research on geopolitics to engage with the now irreducibly “Sino-global” character of China as well as with the Sino-global elements of world order and power relations that this phenomenon is itself inducing. The articles in this Special Issue offer alternative perspectives by (albeit sometimes implicitly) acknowledging and starting from the Sino-globality of China as a deeply transformative phenomenon with multiple and increasingly diverse ramifications for virtually every region and ontological sphere of the world: from the Arab world through Africa to South America, from South East Asia to Europe to the global Anglosphere, from CCP-China to a “deep” China of its plural and diverse citizenry;¹ and from multilateral institutions to the competitive world market and private sector corporate power, from the global agri-food sector to medical technologies and the “health Silk Road”, and from cyberspace to terraforming in the deep sea and on the moon.²

As this list already implies, however, our second key concept brings in the importance of thinking socio-technically and onto-politically about the diverse and open-ended worlds that the strikingly pragmatic agencies of contemporary China are actually busily building. Drawing on a growing literature in science and technology studies, anthropology and geography, *inter alia*, our second keyword is thus **infrastructuring**. There is no shortage of case studies that immediately present themselves regarding issues of infrastructure and its construction across the world, especially when one turns to China going “beyond China”, most obviously in the Belt and Road Initiative(s). It also cannot be denied that these initiatives are hugely significant for the future of a Chinese-influenced geopolitics, and hence also for promising avenues for research. Yet the focus on “infrastructure” (i.e., as a noun, referring to a *structural* phenomenon) too easily licenses analysis in which what is actually being built, and how, is simply treated as a background technical detail or a stage on which familiar actors interact according to an equally familiar plot and script (e.g. the logics of capital expansion and accumulation).

Such an approach neglects the qualitative detail, techno-cultural dynamics (including socio-technical “imaginaries”, e.g. Jasanoff / Kim 2015) and productive world-building nature of these projects, which is, in fact, precisely where

1 See, respectively, in the two parts of this Special Issue Gurol / Schütze on the Arab world; Banik / Bull on Africa and Latin America; Wilkinson / Saggiore Garcia / Escher on Brazil; Galka / Bashford on the South China Sea; Huang / Mayer / Huppenbauer on Europe; Chubb on China – official and non – and the Anglophone world; Smyer Yü and Huang / Westman / Castán Broto on CCP-China; and Tyfield / Rodríguez on “deep China”.

2 See, respectively, Banik / Bull on multilateralism, Wilkinson et al. on the world market and corporate power in the agri-food sector; Chubb on diverse parties across Chinese and international government, business, consultancy and academia; Gurol / Schütze on digital and health-related BRI initiatives; Huang / Mayer / Huppenbauer on cyberspace; and Galka / Bashford on terraforming.

the real change unfolding in the global system is actually taking place. The term “infrastructuring”, by shifting registers to a verb or ongoing and active social process of doing, instead refers ideally to the thoroughly socio-cultural and political process of construction of socially-enabling connections via infrastructures, whether physical or digital – indeed, expanding and redefining what “infrastructure” itself is, as is currently happening, not least due to rampant digitisation. Infrastructuring the BRI is thus the active and long-term process of building and harnessing social networks of interaction through physical infrastructures that not only transform the affected peoples and territories in uneven ways but also aim to strengthen and reproduce the output-oriented dynamics of authoritarian hyper-modernism with “Chinese characteristics” that the CCP claims for itself and its own nationalistic vision of “China”.

Our third concept is likewise dynamic: **ecologising**, as opposed to ecology or ecological, and not least “green” or “sustainable”. In an age when ecological challenges are becoming increasingly insistent, prevalent and profound issues at the very top of political and governance agendas, it is obvious – though curiously still under-acknowledged (e.g. Willis 2020, Wainwright / Mann 2018) – that issues of the environment are going to completely transform political processes, constitutions and agents in ways that are only just beginning to be recognised. Certainly, if a rising China and boom in (digital) infrastructure are both already key elements of the ongoing system transition and the current global turbulence, then the manifest inadequacy of current political settlements to tackle climate change, predominantly, but also biodiversity, nutrient cycles and water and soil exhaustion, is another key factor.

Moreover, “ecologising” signals acceptance of the fact that there is currently no clear example or template of what “sustainable” societies look like, what “ecological” actually means. Rather, there is only “ecologising” as an ongoing experimental process, with much uncertain learning still to happen. “Ecologising” is thus, most abstractly, the challenging road ahead by which human societies rearrange themselves (socially, technologically and politically) such that they become capable of supporting, and even actively regenerating, flourishing ecologies – i.e., simply, life – rather than being locked into dynamics of active depletion, death and relentless self-destruction.

Yet “ecologising” is both a normative term, invoking this broad emergent telos of government, and also a descriptive one, inviting empirical investigation of precisely how such goals are taken up. Turning to China, then, “ecologising” denotes the processes – intended and unintended – by which the Chinese party-state engages in the large-scale transformation of nature-society relations (and the associated historical records of environmental and/or techno-cultural policy) to achieve political targets and sustainable transition goals. As the articles in these two volumes show, however, Chinese state-led ecologising unfolds mostly as a top-down project of power. This process is ready to praise and promote

technological innovation and environmental protection in the name of national rejuvenation, but is also equally ready to combat and repress any kind of environmental politics that lies outside of the state machine and party control. Instead of endogenising life into state-society relations, the state is ready to kill that social life and use environmental protection or techno-ecological change if that is what is needed to ensure that social life remains party-led life (see Li / Shapiro 2020).

Where, then, does this lead? In short, to confrontation with the fact that we know the identity *but not yet the substantive meaning* of several novel keywords for the (early) 21st century; and that this includes not just the (irreducibly Sino-global) ecologising and infrastructuring that together constitute transition, but also, and crucially, “China” itself. This Special Issue thus primarily aims to initiate a programme of research that is explicitly engaged with investigation and substantiation of these concepts, recognising also that, as a new emergent system with internal relations of mutual hermeneutic definition between them, they will need interrelated interpretations and exploration. We also hope thereby to enrich transdisciplinary debates across science and technology studies, political geography, environmental history, global environmental sociology, and international relations beyond dominant West-centric theory, including critical and neo-classical approaches. While, in methodological terms, by highlighting the transregional and multiscalar dynamics of Sino-Global phenomena from the local to the global and vice versa, this collection also invites us to think about China beyond an “area studies” approach.

A new global hegemony?

With this cluster of emerging concepts, we also can begin to open up and re-define other key but more familiar terms already supposedly doing a lot of work in the strategic apprehension of the changing world, such as transition or hegemony. A key question, for instance, is whether China is on the way to ecologising and infrastructuring a new global hegemony. We can provide no conclusive answer in this brief editorial and the articles that follow likewise do not provide a singular and settled response. But they do provide thoughtful contributions to question the very idea, necessity and purpose of a geopolitical project of such scale and top-down ambition, especially under current planetary conditions. For they present a dynamic and contested arena of infrastructuring and ecologising – by diverse, cosmopolitised Sino-global agencies – that is busily creating and destroying new worlds, intentionally and unintentionally.

In particular, China and Chinese subjects, of party-state and private interests alike, together present a contradictory picture, ripe and rife with internal tensions: between initiatives of seemingly singularly concentrated and self-serving

(state) power for the expansion of global influence of the CCP; and equally striking turbulence, backfiring overreach or self-defeating geopolitics, hence of strategic ironies and inversions. Similarly, across the articles we find rich evidence of emerging models of Chinese infrastructuring and ecologising, which seem primarily to augur a deepening system crisis and retrenchment of existing pathological state forms and power relations; as well as evidence of multiple examples of reconstructive and profound reimagining, including some that reconnect to ways of thinking – often of (neo-)traditional Chinese origin – that depart starkly from modern Western paradigms (including those, ironically, of the Leninist party-state itself).

Indeed, these striking tensions confront us with an equally arresting conclusion: that at the centre of all the systemic change demanding these conceptual innovations is not so much (a contemporary crisis of) the geopolitical system of nation-states, but the problem of the state itself, at least in its currently dominant form.

Certainly, we cannot hope to understand how China will go beyond China from a state-centric perspective, since this rules out precisely the most important questions at issue. In naming the state the central problem with which we are concerned, however, we are going much further than this. We argue that insofar as the early 2020s have been a paroxysm, or constant series of fits, of death – of social and sociable life, of cordial international relations and a stable geopolitical order, of domestic political stability and democratic norms, of human victims of both the pandemic and the pandemic-related lockdown, and, relentlessly, of diverse ecosystems – all these are symptoms of a deeper relation of the modern state and death, which is now manifesting itself relentlessly.

Not only is the state the primary purveyor of death – most visibly, now, in the form of actual war – but its long-witnessed biopolitical power (Foucault 2008), over death and *life*, is also mutating increasingly towards being an agent overwhelmingly of the former because (and as) it is itself dying. This is not least because the techno-cultural systems and constantly expanding growth logics around which state-society relations are currently organized, exacerbate pollution, resource overconsumption, global warming and the emergence of pandemics. In short, in failing to reorient its institutions and productive forces towards the genuinely harmonious revitalisation of nature-society relations, the modern state, and not least its Chinese party-led manifestation, undermines the socio-political and material conditions of its own existence in the era of ecological breakdown (see Tyfield / Rodríguez in Part Two of this Special Issue).

A turn to the exploration of the actual, unfolding process of China going beyond China is particularly illuminating in this regard, and not (primarily) because this brings into focus a uniquely problematic and dysfunctional state or one that is exceptional in the extent of its intervention on these issues. Undeniably, there are specific, unsettling and exceptionally striking problems with the current Chinese party-state and its trajectory of increasingly uncompromising,

powerful and centralised authoritarianism. But these problems, paradoxically – from the broader lens of Sino-global infrastructuring and ecologising – simply make contemporary China one of the most graphic illustrations of the broader exhaustion of the dominant (modern, Western) state form *per se*.

Most states (and certainly all of the most powerful ones), regardless of their ideological or constitutional specificities, are firmly and explicitly committed to the same geopolitical competitive game of maximising national GDP and (military, technological, energy, food, etc.) security *vis-à-vis* other such states. And the clear unpalatability of both the incumbent US and the “ascendant” PRC, as the two pre-eminent options for hegemony, manifests and entirely conditions the broader dysfunction of the entire global geopolitical system of such states. Moreover, the self-destructive paralysis regarding increasingly urgent need for global climate action (as well as the unfinished global effort against COVID-19) is thereby significantly illuminated. For there seems little prospect indeed of meaningful progress towards an expedited, deep – let alone “just” – transition in a world overwhelmingly organised as, and run by, such states. Rather, the precondition and key missing piece for socio-technical transition towards sustainability is the need for a simultaneous transition in the predominant form of the (nation) state, and in the globally dominant states especially.

And, again, China is exceptionally illuminating in this regard, but indeed not uniquely so. Specifically, in the PRC party-state we find a political organisation that is exceptionally committed to, and empowered regarding, a project of intrusive preservation of its own “life” above that of all other things. As such, it is strikingly enabled *vis-à-vis* infrastructuring to that end, while also fundamentally constrained in the forms of ecologising it can even conceive, much less deliver (see Huang et al. in this Special Issue). This is thus a highly dynamic situation revealing the foundational incompatibility of the new politics of planetary regeneration that is so urgently needed with a globally-powerful form of political agency committed only to its own “life”. This tension, however, lies primarily in the constitutive – that is, parasitic – rationale of the *state* of the PRC, a factor shared with all other modern nation-states. It does not lie in its specific *party-state* form, contrasted with the “liberal democratic” states that are too commonly – and, in their own assessment, self-evidently – represented as the apex of human political organisation. At most, China’s specific form of state simply renders the underlying tensions particularly stark.

The fundamental challenge of contemporary geopolitics is thus perhaps best understood not as the destabilisation of a particular regime of global hegemony and its uncertain transition to a new one. Instead, what is crucial is the now unstoppable death of the form of state upon which the current geopolitical arrangement as a whole rests. It is thus destabilised not primarily because “China” is “rising” while it is America’s inescapable fate and time to decline; but because its institutional foundations are thoroughly rotten and actively

disintegrating, and indeed toxic and suffocating of diverse types of “life” and of vital, lively attempts to defend and preserve that life.

For our purposes and our three key concepts, then, what is specifically needed is the unpacking of the dynamics of state/capitalism formations (systemic, interdependent formations of state and of capitalism, as opposed to “state capitalism”), not least of China and global capitalism, in the context of contemporary dynamic innovation or knowledge economies. For the latter connotes the new and enduring context in which such “innovation-as-politics” (Tyfield 2018) – and, as a key specific form of that, infrastructuring – is now the very nexus of the relentless and accelerating mutual transformation of the political order and socio-technical facts on the ground. Moreover, such open-ended processes of (re-)infrastructuring the state are not only no longer limited to action within their national territorial borders on the Earth’s surface. They also furnish a crucial lens onto the actual activities associated with the state’s ongoing (for the foreseeable future) experimental interventions of ecologising.

What emerges clearly from this perspective in the ensuing discussions is that those institutional foundations of the state – and the geopolitical order with it – will only be rejuvenated, fit for the challenges of the 21st century, insofar as they are “given life” or themselves become “lively”, “life-oriented” and “living”. What must be sought, therefore, is evidence of such life and productivity – evidence that, in fact, abounds regarding China (and the underestimated potential for innovation of its firms and citizens) once one looks from an appropriate perspective.

And such “life” means that these are polities that are precisely and self-consciously ecologising, infrastructuring and Sino-Global, while the specific dynamics of how China thus goes beyond China are key to the survival and stability of both China and the globe. For what is evidently needed (both in and beyond China) is a re-purposing of the state as, respectively: constitutively oriented to life, including in its own operations and ways of working, i.e. itself living; constantly building and rebuilding the techno-socio-natural preconditions of individual-societal-planetary flourishing (as such civilizational “life”); and expressive of productive, not mutually self-destructive, relations and tensions between “China” and (the existing modern Western-globalised) “world”.

A new agenda thus emerges, for the engaged and ongoing exploration of openings for a productive reimagining of states in a world of deepening Sino-global entanglement, infrastructuring and ecologising. It is our sincere hope that these pages make a positive and constructive contribution to averting the self-confirming dynamics of polarised and partial analyses that feed the total breakdown of global order, and hence the catastrophically inadequate action on climate, pandemics, transition, conflict and other issues; and instead support the realisation of a future that is more collaborative, regenerative and full of life, respectively.

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