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In the name of the nation: Authoritarian practices, capital accumulation, and the radical simplification of development in China's global vision

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the nationalist, business-centric, elite-led and labour-subsuming logics of development in contemporary China are mirrored in contingent and locally-mediated ways in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In China's present 'de-revolutionary' moment [Wang, 2006], non-elite populations are conceived as labour inputs to be used and moulded in the pursuit of national development through market means. This same developmental ethos, mediated by a plethora of Chinese and non-Chinese actors, underpins the authoritarian tendencies of BRI-branded projects across the world. While authoritarian practices in China have both Leninist and capitalist genealogies and drivers, I argue here that Global China's most tangible and remarkable impacts on international authoritarianism are found in the practices required to secure capital accumulation along the BRI.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarianism; Belt and Road Initiative; nationalism; development; Global China

> (W)ith the final curtain-fall on China's revolutionary century, the radicalism of both the French and the Russian experiences had become a target of criticism. The Chinese rejection of the Sixties is thus not an isolated historical incident, but an organic component of a continuing and totalizing de-revolutionary process. (Wang, 2006, p. 29)

Introduction

The study of the relationship between Global China and authoritarian power is often caught in a binary trap. For some, the domestic illiberal authoritarian regime of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) unavoidably taints the global engagements of actors from the People's Republic of China (PRC), culminating even in the deployment of a 'dictatorship diplomacy' (Cooley, 2015; Kleine-Ahlbrandt & Small, 2008). For others, the absence of macro-economic or macro-political conditionalities in the PRC's commercial agreements suggest a respect for local decision-making that can enable a more democratic international system, allowing developing country leaders to fulfil their electoral mandates in a relatively unobstructed way (Wang et al., 2014). These two perspectives rest on the assumption that authoritarian power emanates from central states and their leaders, and as such focus on the PRC's capacity to shape regimes and sway the minds of political elites across the world. From this premise, any enquiry on international authoritarian linkages

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needs to assess the diffusion of authoritarian features and ideas through processes of inter-elite socialization. In the case of China, this results in a focus on its 'rising influence and self-confident promotion of authoritarian ideals' targeted at influencing political elites, businesses and academia (Brenner et al., 2018, p. 2).

Recent literature has challenged this understanding of authoritarian power, shifting the focus from systems, regimes and personalities towards illiberal and authoritarian practices (Glasius, 2018). A practice-base perspective allows to explore sources of authoritarianism other the nation-state and its political representatives (Glasius, 2018, p. 519), and to emphasize the materiality of authoritarian relations. Scholars have for example called into question the assumption that the monopoly of violence necessarily rests on states, as illustrated by the increased involvement of private companies in all stages of migration control processes (Bloom, 2015). Indeed, critical political economists have demonstrated that in the contemporary global juncture, authoritarian practices are frequently associated to a neoliberal logic (Bruff & Tansel, 2019), developmentalism (Arsel et al., 2021), and more broadly to the creation and protection of hubs for transregional capital accumulation (Jenss & Schuetze, 2021). In agreement with these perspectives, this article contends that in order to understand the power relations at play in the PRC's global campaigns and avoid reproducing vacuous narratives of an 'authoritarian other' (Rogelja & Tsimonis, 2020), we need to place our focus on the grounded material entanglements of Chinese state and business actors overseas (see also Gurol & Schütze, 2022), as well as on the development rationales that justify and promote the deployment of such authoritarian practices.

To do so, this article traces the links between the PRC's domestic developmental rationality and its overseas economic interventions, unearthing the elitist and authoritarian logic of the latter. As such, the focus is not so much on the specific technologies enabling authoritarian control (see for example Gurol et al., 2022), but more broadly on the underlying development imaginaries that justify the authoritarian social relations promoted by a variety of state and corporate actors operating under the banner of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'. This is observed in projects that prioritize elite management (Selwyn, 2016), 'legible' national development goals (Scott, 1998), business-centrism and a vision of the poor not as interlocutors or direct beneficiaries of development but as useful labour inputs at best or inconvenient obstacles to China's global development thrust at worst. Importantly, while underpinned by a distinct rationality, the recourse to authoritarian practices of development is not unique to Global China. It remains instead a defining feature of capitalism, as attested by recent literature on the global logistics sector or the World Bank (Harrison, 2019; Jenss & Schuetze, 2021). Therefore, I do not aim to single out China or the BRI as developmental anomalies here, but rather to explore the unique paths followed by the Chinese state and corporate actors to join the forces shaping global capitalism and its authoritarian tendencies.

Methodologically, the article brings together empirical cases discussed in the literature through a variety of useful analytical perspectives (e.g. exploitation, dispossession, discipline, exclusion) and reconsiders them through the lenses of authoritarianism. The PRC's developmental rationality is explored through high-level official statements and documents, and inferred from the government's developmental priorities. In order to explore authoritarianism as a social relation, I draw upon Marxist understandings of class struggle, and anarchist critiques of coercive power as both a political and economic phenomenon – the latter epitomized by capitalism's preeminent institution, the profit-driven 'totalitarian' corporation (Chomsky, 1998, p. 19). As I will show, the transregional assemblages of business and policy actors that have served as vehicles to transpose an authoritarian logic of development from China and into the world operate at the blurred line between political and economic (or political economic) authoritarian power. The article hence

highlights how the ensuing illiberal and authoritarian practices of capital accumulation undermine accountability, participation, dissent, freedoms and rights.

The essay is organized as follows. The first section briefly reviews authoritarianism in the PRC and its current intertwining with capitalism. The subsequent sections study three pillars of the PRC's official development discourse, and explore how these shape China's global campaigns: nationalist development, business-centric development and elite-led development.

The contours of authoritarianism in China

Authoritarianism in in the PRC is shaped by two seemingly contradictory forces. On the one hand, the one-party state's authoritarian ideology and repressive apparatus are tied to a profoundly illiberal and hierarchical view of society, and to the inward-looking self-preservation instincts of the CCP and its cadres. On the other hand, authoritarian practices have grown intimately related to the development and success of capitalist social relations in the PRC, and to the country's global centrality as a production hub in the era of neoliberal globalization. This ostensible contradiction is easily resolved if we understand capitalism as a system that requires the coercive power of the state to thrive, and the CCP as an organization that has embraced capitalism to ensure its legitimacy since abandoning its egalitarian aspirations in the 1990s. From this perspective, authoritarian power in contemporary China is intertwined with the consolidation of capitalism, a system that thrives, as explained by Ellen Meiksins Wood, on the 'separation between the moment of coercion and the moment of appropriation, allocated between two distinct but complementary "spheres"' (Woods, 2017, p. 172).

Ever since the Tiananmen Massacre marked the epilogue to China's revolutionary century in 1989 (Wang, 2006), the CCP has taken the PRC on an unapologetic capitalist turn. This turn has been characterized by the marketization of everyday life and the entrepreneurial and market-enabling role increasingly adopted by a wide range of state institutions (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2011; Zhang & Ong, 2008). The centrality of capitalist relations in the PRC is exemplified by processes such as the commodification of labour power, enshrined in a 1995 Labour Law which 'consigned life-long employment to the dustbin of history' (Hui, 2017). This process proletarianized hundreds of millions of peasants and SOE and village enterprise (TVE) employees that would become irremediably dependent on the labour market (Walker & Buck, 2007). The capitalist nature of social relations in contemporary China is also apparent in the commodification of land, or in the emergence of a capitalist class in close connection to Party cadres, enshrined in the Party's Constitution in 2002 under Jiang Zemin's slogan of the 'Three Represents', which 'changed the Party's strategy of co-opting entrepreneurs from an informal practice to a formal goal' (Dickson, 2007, p. 833).

Justifying the parallel legitimacy of both the Party and the market amid unrepented capitalist transformation has required the rhetorical efforts of all PRC leaders since Deng Xiaoping. Through the relentless process of 'reform and opening', patriotism 'became increasingly prominent as the leadership went further than before in denuding socialism of notions of egalitarianism and class struggle' (Hughes, 2006, p. 54). In certain junctures, Chinese nationalism adopted a relatively 'open' and 'outward looking' authoritarian form. This was the case during the years of Hu Jintao's administration (see Howell & Pringle, 2019), as the PRC's leaders attempted to present China's 'peaceful rise' to the world through the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo. This is now seen as a phase of 'responsive authoritarianism' that selectively entertained citizen demands (Howell & Pringle, 2019; Qiaoan & Teets, 2020). Under Xi Jinping's

leadership, nationalism has become associated to a 'more closed, disciplinary type of authoritarianism' (Howell & Pringle, 2019). This change has coincided with the rise of social unrest following the economic impacts of the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis, the perils of the 'middle income trap', and overaccumulation in several strategic sectors (Rolf, 2021).

While the CCP has rolled out the new capitalist order, it would be incorrect to contend that it has presided over China's economic transformation. Rather, the transition to capitalism has shaken the very foundations of the state, market and society. In the new order, the party-state cannot be conceptualized as an entity that manages the tribulations of market and society from a distance, but should be seen as a social relation (Jessop, 2002) that both consolidates, reflects and interiorizes China's new capitalist social order. The resulting system combines the illiberal political organization of the one-party state with the inequalities and coercions of capitalist social relations, resulting in what Jonathan London has aptly described as 'market Leninism' (London, 2014). In the context of a state that has grown so deeply embedded in and permeated by markets, authoritarian power is diffused and enacted by a variety of actors operating in the blurred boundary between business and state, including transnational corporations. We can think for example of the collaboration between public Chinese vocational schools and the Taiwanese multinational Foxconn to force underage students into underpaid hard work at the company's Yantai factory (Reuteurs, 2013); or how the 'Big Four' accounting firms paid for adverts in the Hong Kong media calling for an end to the pro-democracy protests in 2014 (Wall Street Journal, 2014); or indeed how corporations such as Cisco Systems have wilfully contributed to developing the 'Great Firewall', which precludes Chinese citizens from freely accessing internet content globally (Lai Stirland, 2008).

A practice-based understanding of authoritarianism in China allows us to explore authoritarian patterns and their legitimizing discourses as performed by a variety of actors operating at different scales within China, rather than as a static regime feature. As we will see below, it also offers a useful perspective from which to interrogate the relationship between authoritarian power and the international rise of China as a major player in global capitalism. In the following sections I show how the PRC's development campaigns and official discourse have allowed elites in China and beyond to justify and mobilize authoritarian power in the name of a radically simplified notion of development that privileges the nation and the market over social justice and the aspirations and rights of working-class people. I pursue this analysis in three separate sections that trace three discursive pillars and their practical consequences at home and abroad.

Nationalist development: co-opting the public good

The Chinese government's official rhetoric has increasingly adopted a nationalist tone in recent years. Aimed mostly at a domestic[1] audience, this nationalist discourse builds upon a foreign/Chinese duality that allows the CCP to divert criticism and galvanize support at times of significant economic or social turbulence (Wong, 2020). This has been particularly noticeable in the contexts of the 'trade war' with the US and the Covid-19 pandemic (Zhang, 2020). Nationalist narratives have also become intertwined with the idea of development, consolidating the authoritarian trends that shape the making of 'modernization' in China. In contrast with decades of pro-poor and pro-market global development rationales (Carroll, 2012; Sumner & Melamed, 2010), a prominent feature of the development discourse in contemporary China is that it is 'pro-nation'. Rather than emphasizing human development or market growth, official rhetoric elevates the nation as the central beneficiary of modernization, as clearly articulated in President Xi Jinping's oratory:

> History shows that the future and destiny of each and every one of us are closely linked to those of our country and nation. One can do well only when one's country and nation do well. Achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is both a glorious and arduous mission that requires the dedicated efforts of the Chinese people one generation after another. (Xi, 2014, p. 38)

The coupling of personal wellbeing with 'national rejuvenation' reconstitutes the latter as both the means and measure of human development. In an analysis of public-speaking shows in China, Gil Hizi notes how, increasingly, 'state-promoted practices meticulously foster associations between the self-realization of individuals and their nationalistic sentiments' (Hizi, 2019, p. 37). This discursive resource is often used by Chinese authorities to conceptualize 'development' as a national good. For example, when in 2021 the PRC's government announced that the country had accomplished a 'complete victory' over extreme poverty, President Xi paid tribute to the 'glory and honour of the Chinese people' as 'model fighters' in 'a massive people's war against poverty' (Kuo, 2021) – mobilizing militaristic rhetoric to celebrate individual sacrifice for a common statistical goal.

The discourse of nationalist development is not just one of positive associations. Those who do not share the nationalistic goal of the CCP are conversely depicted as threats to the developmental trajectory of China, and become the subjects of ruthless disciplining campaigns. For example, rural protests against land seizures and forced demolitions for 'development' purposes have been increasingly criminalized and repressed during Xi Jinping's tenure (Chen, 2020a). An illiberal and authoritarian logic can also be observed in the framing of dissenting minorities in Xinjiang as 'bad Muslims' that need to be pre-emptively imprisoned and brought 'into line with "modern" social norms and expectations' (Brophy, 2022, pp. 51–2). Similarly, as hundreds of pro-democracy activists are jailed, exiled or pending trial in Hong Kong, China's National People's Congress has enforced a National Security Law and a National Security curriculum that foster allegiance to the 'China Dream' and the subordination of the Special Administrative Region to the overall development of the nation (Education Bureau, 2021). The ethos of 'development' is hence unapologetically national and effectively 'dehumanized' (Hanlon, 2022, p. 3). This facilitates the swift mobilization of the idea of development to justify authoritarian interventions over vulnerable populations.

Exporting nationalist development

The rationale of national development also favours specific forms of development intervention overseas. In particular, the idea of modernization in the PRC has become closely associated to measurable or legible outcomes at a national scale. James Scott developed the idea of 'legibility' in the context of a state-directed 'high-modernist ideology' that promoted social simplification, rationalizing and standardizing in the name and image of scientific and technological progress (Scott, 1998). In the Chinese context, making development 'legible' requires rendering it scientifically measurable (e.g. statistics on poverty reduction, or triumphant zero-Covid figures), visibly imposing (landmark architecture and infrastructures), and punctuating it with milestones of national pride (e.g. international recognition in sport events or scientific achievements). This is a 'radical simplification' of development (Scott, 1998, p. 19), wherein development can only be measured and read through a national lens, and becomes dissociated from more participative and humanized approaches to wellbeing and social justice.

There is little doubt that economic imperatives drive the PRC's global infrastructural campaigns, designed to tackle 'chronic overaccumulation' in China's construction sector (Carmody et al., 2022; Jones & Zeng, 2019). However, these imperatives are shaped by an infrastructural ideology and a nationally legible aesthetics of development which mirror domestic trends and

often require the deployment of authoritarian practices. Large infrastructures bring together narratives of (national) development, state territoriality and economic opportunity – whether realized or not (see Oakes, 2020). Rapid delivery and profit serve the national goal of development and are favoured over prolonged processes involving meaningful consultations with a variety of social actors. In recent years, several scholars have expressed concerns over the top-down, technocratic and 'high-modernist' priorities of PRC elites and their counterparts in countries like Laos or Ethiopia. These priorities tend to contrast with the needs of poor, excluded and vulnerable populations in such settings (Fantini & Puddu, 2016; Sims, 2020). In a study of the China-Angola partnership, Power explains how joint redevelopment initiatives in Luanda are not only causing social-economic stratification but are in fact designed to 'separate the poor and the elites' (Power, 2012, p. 1007). In a similar vein, Elsje Fourie posits that the allure of the Chinese model of development has inspired Ethiopian ruling elites to prioritize 'large modernist infrastructure projects' such as industrial parks built by Chinese contractors, and to 'repackage' extreme poverty 'as the country's key comparative advantage' in the form of cheap labour (Fourie, 2017, p. 136).

The BRI is both an economic fix to the country's overaccumulation crisis and part and parcel of a developmental ethos that projects a depoliticized vision of China's present into the world's future (Power, 2012), while at the same time signalling obvious geopolitical aspirations (Narins & Agnew, 2020). This vision of development is at times an excellent match with the legacy aspirations of state leaders in some parts of the developing world, ready to embrace China's efficient and affordable high modernist infrastructures (see Ding & Xue, 2015) as visual markers of 'the improvement of human and national conditions', although often requiring 'a depoliticized narrative that banishes political dissent and upholds authoritarian political practices' (Fantini & Puddu, 2016, p. 98). To be sure, these new Chinese-funded and built icons of progress across the world may play a role in fomenting economic growth. The World Bank has projected that BRI transportation investments can potentially increase global real income by 0.7–2.9 percent, and global trade by 1.7–6.2 percent (World Bank Group, 2019). However, the radical simplification of development as a national rather than social and humanized endeavour precludes the PRC's official discourse of international development from directly addressing questions of social justice beyond those articulated with a language of inter-national inequality.

Business-Centric development: the corporate vanguard

The PRC's state-sponsored ideology has increasingly cherished capitalist markets as an unrivalled developmental tool, and presents state and business elites as the vanguard steering the country in its modernization path. The primacy of the capitalist market is justified in official pronouncements with the modernization rationale of twentieth century orthodox Marxism-Leninism. According to it, the development of capitalist productive forces is an inevitable steppingstone in the transition from feudalism to communism. 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' requires hence a full capitalist immersion in the 'primary stage' of socialism – a stage that according to Xi Jinping thought has no end in sight, for 'the basic fact that China is still in the primary stage of socialism and will long remain so has not changed' (Xi, 2014, p. 105). In other words, capitalist social relations are now at the core of the CCP's national rejuvenation project:

> Both theory and practice have proved that the allocation of resources by the market is the most effective means to this end. It is a general rule of the market economy that the market decides the allocation of

> resources, and a market economy in essence is one in which the market determines resource allocation. We have to follow this rule when we improve the socialist market economy. (Xi, 2014, p. 84)

Going a step further, in an awkward marriage between Leninist social engineering and behavioural economics, the CCP works now towards permeating all aspects of social life with market rationality. Rather than promoting a socialist order aided by markets, the goal is now a full-fledged *market society*. In its efforts to mould the cultural and psychological basis of the capitalist project, the CCP mirrors the World Bank's move to ditch the 'rational actor' of neoclassical economics and focus on 'programming the poor (…) with the gene of conformity in thought and behaviour to the logic of globally competitive capitalism' (Cammack, 2014, p. 1):

> Letting the market play a decisive role in allocating resources will mainly require economic reforms, but it will also inevitably affect politics, culture, society, ecological progress and Party building. Institutional reforms of all areas should be promoted in concert with establishing a sound socialist market economy, while ensuring that their related links better meet the demands of a growing socialist market economy. (Xi, 2014, pp. 106–7)

Examples of the marketization of social life in China are too plentiful to cover in any detail here. A majority of citizens in contemporary China are fundamentally market-dependent for their livelihoods and consumption. This is seen, for example, in the deepening of capitalist agrarian change around markets and consumption, in the proletarianization of rural migrant labour, or in the marketization of welfare provision and the promotion of a form of patriotism that encourages non-reliance on state support (Chang, 2020; Day & Schneider, 2018). The Party's narrative rationalizes, naturalizes and glorifies the unevenness of development that ensues as a form of 'scientific development' that represents a unique Chinese contribution to Marxist thought:

> The proposal to let the market play the decisive role in allocating resources is a breakthrough in our Party's understanding of the laws governing the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics as well as a new achievement in the Sinicization of Marxism. (Xi, 2014, p. 128)

In this way, the party-state is tightly linked to the socially-constructed nation, evoking totalitarian 'images of a 'wholeness' achieved through homogenization, standardization, and a repressive coordination of human beings' (Bookchin, 1982, p. 23):

> All political parties, organizations, ethnic groups, social groups and people from all walks of life in China should rally more closely around the CPC Central Committee, comprehensively implement the guiding principles of the Party's 18th National Congress, follow the guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development. (Xi, 2014, p. 46)

The actual political economy of societal change is of course more complex than what transpires from official rhetoric. An important distinction needs to be made here between market-centrism and business-centrism. While the PRC's leadership has had a complex relation with competitive markets – which are sometimes side-lined for geopolitical, developmentalist and social goals – a business-centric vision prevails despite fluctuating degrees of (domestic and international) market openness. The embrace of markets is hence profound but calculated, being more prominent for example at the level of individual risk, but less so at the corporate level in sectors that are deemed strategic. Business-centrism is however uncontested, as state-owned and private corporations, profit and growth are the undisputed agents and yardsticks of societal progress. When profit appears to take a backseat – for example to prioritize resource security or social 'harmony' – this can be due to efforts to strengthen Party resilience or to recreate the perfect conditions for accumulation across the Chinese economy.

Thereby, top-down narratives cohabitate with decentralized economic activity, as profit-driven enterprises take the lead in the productive apparatus, and contribute to enforcing social change, often through authoritarian practices at the workplace and beyond, suggesting once more that authoritarianism is not the remit of the state alone. Identifying sites of power other than the central state allows us to make sense of the fragmented nature of authoritarianism in China, the co-opting of state institutions by the capitalist class, the increasingly entrepreneurial orientation of a nominally 'communist' Party and state, and the perennial tensions between the micro-economic goals of city officials and individual businesses versus the macro-socioeconomic vision of the central state – observed for example in the field of environmental governance (Hong, Nannan, & Zhonggen, 2019; Zhou, 2010).

With the Chinese economy facing multiple bottlenecks (Rolf, 2019), the legitimacy of the capitalist arrangement needs to be reinforced by discipline, and justified through the historical role of the CCP in national liberation (e.g. the promotion of national education in Hong Kong and of course in the mainland), or in guiding the nation through national achievements of various types (e.g. Olympic medals, lunar exploration programs, Antarctic missions), some of which have little repercussion for the average Chinese citizen beyond the feeling of pride that the government and the official media carefully cultivate:

> We have to unify the thinking and will of the whole Party first in order to unify the thinking and will of the people of all China's ethnic groups so that everyone works together to advance our reform. (Xi, 2014, p. 101)

A business-centric vision of international development

Just as in China's own developmental trajectory, capital accumulation is today at the front and centre of China's engagement with the 'developing world'. The PRC's investment portfolio in developing countries is dominated by infrastructural and resource-based investments and finance (Gallagher & Ray, 2020). These two sectors have been found to be particularly pernicious for community rights and environmental protection in regions like Latin America, prompting frequent conflicts between states, businesses and vulnerable populations (Bebbington et al., 2018). To be sure, the PRC also promotes other types of cooperation – having for example surpassed all Western governments combined in the provision of scholarships to African students, around 12,000 per year (Jack, 2020). However, these pale in comparison with the business-centric thrust of China's global developmental footprint, with China's total global 'development finance' totalling USD462 billion between 2008 and 2019 (Ray et al., 2021).

The PRC's contemporary business-centric approach marks an abrupt change with the past. One only needs to compare the images of state and corporate leaders at the ceremonies of the various regional forums organized by the Chinese state (e.g. the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation) with the depictions of the Third World in Chinese propaganda posters from the 1950s to the 1980s. Whereas the latter focused on the comradery between the Third World's toiling masses (Suglo, 2021), the PRC's carefully choreographed events stand out today for their focus on elites, the ubiquity of business attires, and an anodyne bureaucratic tone. It takes only a scant look at recent work on the actors that head PRC delegations and more broadly China's overseas engagements to realize that these are predominantly business actors, including China's major policy banks (i.e. the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China), profit-oriented state and privately owned businesses, and 'quasi-governmental' organizations such as the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, which play an obvious market-enabling role (Yang, 2015).

China's 2016 'White Paper' on Latin America and the Caribbean offers an apt example. While stressing and reiterating the 'win-win' and 'mutually beneficial cooperation' principles that drive the new 'Cooperative Partnership', the paper soon emphasizes its 'pragmatic' nature. It does so by encouraging free trade agreements, 'agreements on investment protection', and by pledging to adhere to 'the principle of business-led and market-oriented cooperation for mutual economic and social benefits' (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). This quote offers us a glimpse into a system that, just like within China, prioritizes business leadership while strategically embracing competitive capitalist markets. Whereas many Chinese corporations are skilled international market competitors, others have secured their overseas projects through government-to-government negotiations which bypass open tenders that would have subjected them to competitive pressures. In these instances, Chinese corporations are shielded rather than exposed, and benefit from the competitive lending terms offered by Chinese policy banks. Whether protected from markets or exposed to them, profit-seeking corporations spearhead China's engagement with the developing world.

The prominence of business actors and rationales in China's overseas engagements has broader repercussions for the study of authoritarian power. While the PRC's official logic of development is a national one, authoritarian practices are 'co-produced' (on the 'tenuous co-production' of the BRI, see Oliveira & Myers, 2021). Chinese businesses participate, with the financial and institutional support of the state, in transregional assemblages of authoritarian power. In order to promote their profitability goals, Chinese enterprises have for example partnered with the Ecuadorian state to promote resource extraction through methods that infringe on the 'rights of some individuals or groups for the good of (…) the nation as a whole' (Van Teijlingen & Hogenboom, 2016, p. 397); established security points to protect projects such as the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, threatening the freedom of movement and livelihoods of local populations (Zhang, 2021); entered into agreements in countries like Jamaica to run project sites as 'spaces of exception' where local law – for example on minimum wages – is effectively suspended (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2019); funded and supplied pro-government militias in South Sudan to protect their business operations (The Sentry, 2019); and deployed Chinese security contractors that guard Chinese investments in Africa against terrorist threats but also against local dissent and protests (Nantulya, 2020).

In all these instances, the domestic logic of business-centrism is expanded into overseas projects. This is a logic where profit lies at the centre of development, which in turn legitimizes businesses to protect their capital accumulation objectives by consent or force, frequently at the expense of the rights of populations that are understood not necessarily as rightful beneficiaries of development, but a potentially a threat to it.

Elite-Led development: subsuming labour

The discourse and practices outlined above leave little space for non-elite populations to actively participate in development, at least outside a limited market role. For a majority of the PRC's population, this role is a subservient one as labour inputs and consumers (see Selwyn, 2016). Cheng and Liu (2022) discuss for example how in China's development studies community, (industrial) modernization is understood to require a culture of labour discipline and the 'ability' of the toiling masses to endure hardship for industrial goals. To put it in Murray Bookchin's words, the working class in China is assigned a quiet position in a totalizing teleology that places 'human beings in the service of history', denying them 'a place in the service of their own humanity' (Bookchin, 1982, p. 24). A hierarchy between 'the nation' and 'the people' is carefully nurtured, where the latter are

expected to toil and sacrifice for the greater good, while national pride is conceptualized as the ultimate developmental ambition:

> Chinese workers should enhance their sense of historical mission and responsibility, do their jobs well, and keep the country's overall interests in mind. (Xi, 2014, p. 48)

Massive income and wealth inequalities prevail in contemporary China. As of 2020, 600 million Chinese people lived with a monthly income below USD154, not enough to rent a room in a city, according to China's Premier Li Keqiang (Goodman, 2021). At the same time, China is now home to the second largest number of billionaires, after the United States – 614 and 324 respectively (Ponciano, 2020). And yet, the official discourse puts the onus on the working class to 'learn from model workers' (Xi, 2014, p. 50), and place collective goals above personal ones:

> The working class of our country must play an exemplary and leading role in taking the Chinese path, fostering the Chinese spirit and building up China's strength, and make concerted efforts to realize the Chinese Dream. (Xi, 2014, p. 47)

This is more than grandiloquent rhetoric. The impetus to fulfil the Chinese Dream's historic mission also translates into practices of repression by both the state and capital, as detailed in many of the examples above. Authoritarian practices are pervasive. Among them, one of the most ironic trends in recent years has been the crackdown on Marxist student societies that supported worker disputes across the country (Yang, 2019). This example highlights both the relegation of the working class to a passive role and the active suppression of independent and critical thinking in higher education and beyond (Zhang, 2017). And this is just the tip of the iceberg. For decades, China's working class has been subordinated to the interests of urban capital, and attempts to challenge this hierarchy have been met with violence and discipline. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, repressive practices have been reinforced, and the space for labour NGOs an lawyers has narrowed significantly (Howell & Pringle, 2019).

Workers of the world, submit!

When assessing Global China's impacts on authoritarian trends and the subsumption of labour, we need to note that the PRC does not impose the type of macroeconomic conditionalities to its loans that are characteristic of other lenders such as the World Bank or the IMF. By not directly meddling with a country's macroeconomic governance, the PRC grants national elites leeway to carry out their electoral mandates, also in the realm of economic policy. Chinese state entities often impose project-based conditionalities that may infringe on the sovereignty of a country and undermine policies achieved through democratic deliberation (e.g. relaxation of labour laws, including salaries below the national minimum wage for Chinese workers; tax exemptions; sovereign repayment guarantees, see Gonzalez-Vicente, 2019) – yet the impact of these project-specific requirements is not as pervasive as those associated with, for example, structural adjustment. In principle, the PRC's approach could allow political representatives in a host country to encourage an engagement with Chinese banks and companies that is as open, accountable, and participatory as possible. While this is not necessarily a frequent outcome, it is fair to recognize that Western developmental campaigns and business engagements are also characterized by a hierarchical ethos and a deliberate avoidance of radical and truly equalitarian forms of democratic participation (Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

However, and despite this caveat, it remains the case that the Chinese approach to 'development cooperation' tends to dissuade actors other than policy and business elites from any meaningful form of active participation, and actively encourages opaque decision-making processes that hinder even a reactive civil society approach dovetailing on questions of accountability (Gelpern et al., 2021). The PRC's global developmental thrust undermines in this way demands and agendas for 'greater transparency, greater democracy, and greater accountability' (Wenar, 2006). Whereas the BRI's official rhetoric encourages 'people-to-people engagements', such engagements are socially-engineered and supervised by the state's managerial vanguard. For example, official reports on the BRI have focused on 'people-to-people ties' to emphasize the state-mediated organization of cultural festivals and launching of media programs, the Chinese Government Scholarship, assistance for disaster relief, and cooperation in the health sector with the World Health Organization and the Gates Foundation (Xinhua, 2019a). The official rhetoric reiterates the minimal and subservient role reserved for civil society, as illustrated by the remarks made by Chinese diplomats at an event hosted by the Chinese Embassy in Malaysia, where civil society is understood as a mere 'carrier' of state ideology:

> The commonality of the people is the top priority in the cooperation of the Belt and Road (…) [in the] global development plan to drive world economic growth through stronger trade and connectivity. (…) Public diplomacy is the best way to strengthen people's hearts and minds. To carry out public diplomacy between two countries requires a carrier, that is the vast civil society. (Xinhua, 2019b)

Here too, discourse is matched by actual practices of authoritarian development which place the working class in a subordinate role. As such, non-elite populations become targets of exclusion, exploitation and dispossession in the name of the greater good of industrial modernization. Exclusion can be appreciated in the conspicuous absence of civil society organizations or indigenous groups from China's regional forum diplomacy (Alden & Alves, 2017), the creation of urban infrastructure that excludes the poor (Power, 2012), or a preference for dialogue with local elites in conflict resolution negotiations (Tang-Lee, 2016). Exploitation targets not only local workers but also Chinese migrants. Wanjing Kelly Chen has for example explored how Chinese privately-owned subcontractors in a BRI-branded railway project in Laos replaced their local working force with Chinese migrants who were more easily exploitable than their local peers (Chen, 2020b). Crucially, Chen explains also how it was the owners of these firms, rather than central government schemes, who resourced to an amenable workforce – less likely to complain over delayed and reduced wages – in response to pressures to operate under tight budgets and late payments (ibid). Dispossession of lands and livelihoods, as discussed above in the case of Ecuador, is usually justified with high-modernist rationales of national progress by the plethora of actors working to ensure the successful completion of Chinese-financed projects. In this way, people are placed into a subservient role, toiling for the nation, and only tangentially (if ever) enjoying the fruits of a 'development' process in which their intellectual input is fundamentally discouraged.

Conclusions

This article has sought to foreground how the nationalist, business-centric and elite-led logics of development that underpin authoritarian practices in contemporary China are also reflected in contingent and locally-mediated ways in Belt and Road projects. Contrary to literature that suggests that the PRC's impact on global authoritarian trends occurs mostly as a contagion effect of

socialization among national policy elites, the article explains how practices of authoritarianism are more often linked to a developmental ethos focused on legible national modernization outcomes achieved through capitalist means. In other words, authoritarian practices are often the outcome of a narrowly defined idea of development upheld by transregional assemblages devoted to capital accumulation, rather than a regime feature that cascades down to specific BRI projects.

The BRI offers thus both a spatial fix (Harvey, 1981) to issues of overaccumulation within China and a blueprint for a high-modernist vision of development to be realized through capitalist social relations. There is now a burgeoning corpus of scholarly work that dissects how the contested implementation of BRI projects has required the disciplining, dispossession, exploitation and exclusion of non-elite local and Chinese populations. This article has proposed that the study Global China's authoritarian power needs to make explicit reference to these processes. If this has not often been the case, it is possibly because the profit-driven authoritarian practices of Chinese business actors overseas uncomfortably resemble those also mobilized by Western-based corporations and institutions – albeit justified and propelled by distinct developmental rationales.

Finally, the article has explained how the high-modernist business-centric vision of development that accompanies China's BRI is not always imposed from above, but embraced also by business actors wishing to position their profit-seeking activities within a positive narrative of modernization. In turn, these corporations form assemblages with other business, policy and security actors that justify authoritarian practices in the name of narrowly conceived ideas of national modernization. To be sure, the BRI may achieve positive outcomes in terms of growth and even measurable success in the fight against poverty. These, however, tend to be dehumanized statistical targets, and come often at the expense of openly collaborative and participatory forms of development where non-elite populations are empowered to make decisions over the goals, methods and difficult choices required to achieve human wellbeing and social justice in a finite planet.

Note

1. One might rather say a 'Chinese' audience in both the territorial and racial understandings of the term embraced by policy elites in China (see Gonzalez-Vicente, 2017).

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