Impact of China's One Belt One Road Initiative at Different Geographical Scales

Yuxiang Hou
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Human Geography Commons, International Relations Commons, and the Political Economy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1280

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Impact of China’s One Belt One Road Initiative at Different Geographical Scales

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from The College of William and Mary

by

Yuxiang Hou

Accepted for ____________________________
(Honors)

[Brian Blouet]

Brian Blouet, Director

Tun-Jen Cheng

Calvin Hui

Williamsburg, VA
April 25, 2019
Abstract

China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR), proposed in 2013, is an ambitious initiative that aims at enhancing connectivity and integrating economies across countries. This thesis, by tracing its mechanism at three different geographical scales---global, national, and local, analyzes its multidimensional impact at each scale. It shows that at a global scale, OBOR is in the form of competing narratives over its global impact and nature; at a national scale, OBOR is represented as economic corridors, aiming at improving infrastructures, increasing multilateral trade, integrating financial systems, and strengthening cultural ties; and at a local scale, OBOR exerts an impact on multiple landscapes of land port, an important node of transition along economic corridors.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgement .........................................................................................................iv

Introduction ......................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: Global Scale ....................................................................................................5
  What is OBOR? ..............................................................................................................5
  Competing Narratives .................................................................................................7
  Behind the Narrative .................................................................................................12

Chapter 2: National Scale ...............................................................................................18
  Economic Corridor: Theory .......................................................................................18
  Economic Corridor: Reality .......................................................................................20

Chapter 3: Local Scale ....................................................................................................37
  Land Port: Theory ........................................................................................................37
  Land Port: Reality ........................................................................................................40
    *Alataw Pass* ...........................................................................................................41
    *Khorgos* ..................................................................................................................48
    *Manzhouli* ...............................................................................................................54
    *Erenhot* ....................................................................................................................57

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................63

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................65
Acknowledgement

First, I would like to give special thanks to the advisor of this honors project: Prof. Brian Blouet, for his careful suggestions and support. Second, I also thank Prof. Tun-Jen Cheng and Prof. Calvin Hui, two of my committee members, who have provided valuable guidance on this work. Third, there are two additional experts of geography that I would like to express thanks to: Prof. John Agnew at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), who provided comments on the case studies, and Prof. Andrew Barry at University College London (UCL), whose research on the materiality of Trans-Adriatic-Pipelines shed light on this research. Finally, I want to thank my parents and my family, who have always been supporting me throughout these years. Their supports are indispensable to the accomplishment of this project.
Introduction

China’s One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has received tremendous attention from all over the world since 2013 when it was first proposed by the Chinese government. Consisting of the “Belt”---Silk Road Economic Belt---and the “Road”---21st Century Maritime Silk Road, it is a highly ambitious initiative that aims to improve multilateral trade among economic partners, integrate regional economics, and enhance regional connectivity. In the past five years, it has achieved significant progress.

According to report from The People’s Daily (2018), more than 120 countries have signed collaboration agreement with China and 25 countries along OBOR have listed China as their largest economic partner until 2018 (see Yidaiyilu.gov 2019); in economic terms, the total trade between China and countries along OBOR has surpassed 5 trillion dollars and direct investment from China to those countries has surpassed 70 billion dollars, with an annual growth rate of 7.2%; in cultural terms, more than 300 thousand students studying in China came from countries along OBOR in the past five years, and tourist spending between China and those countries is estimated to be 100 billion dollars. Therefore, it can be seen that this huge project which includes countries with a total population of more than 4 billion people on the Eurasian landmass has created a substantial impact. In order to examine the initiative in a thorough way, this thesis aims to accomplish two things. First, it seeks to understand how OBOR works, through tracing a top-down mechanism which covers three geographical scales---global, national, and local. Second, it intends to uncover the impact that OBOR had at each scale.

For OBOR, there is already an extensive literature, primarily by Chinese scholars. Topics examined by the literature can be roughly summarized into three main categories: OBOR’s grand
strategic implications, OBOR’s general economic prospects, and OBOR’s philosophical and theoretical foundation. For example, in the first category, Liu (2015) examined the role that OBOR plays within the context of global economic integration and forecasted the geostrategic importance of OBOR to China’s foreign policy. Yuan (2014) placed OBOR under the background of the strategic confrontation between China and the U.S., and argued that launching OBOR is critical in enhancing China’s regional power. In the second category, Zou et al. (2015) analyzed the economic influence of initiating OBOR on international trade between China and other countries; Kong and Dong (2015) examined the potential gains and challenges within the economic cooperation between China and countries along OBOR; and Sun, Zhang and Liu (2017) explored how OBOR helped China transform its export-led growth in the new era. In the third category, Liu, Dunford and Gao (2017) interrogated how the concept of “inclusive globalization” may potentially serve as the theoretical foundation of OBOR.

However, few scholars have attempted to explore how the goals and aims of OBOR, at a global level, are linked to efforts from governments, companies, and individuals at national and local level. In other words, there is still no clear mechanism that links OBOR, as an international initiative, to national, and then local, actions. Thus, the first contribution of this thesis to today’s academic conversation about OBOR is to trace the mechanism of this huge initiative from a global-level narrative to specific projects at national and local level, and to examine the impact of OBOR at each scale. Specifically, at a global scale, I will critically analyze the aims and goals of OBOR in an international context; at a national scale, I will explore the functions of economic corridors---the skeletons of OBOR---in achieving the goals of this ambitious initiative; and at a local scale, I will focus on one specific type of places---land ports, which lie on national borders--and the role that they play in the context of OBOR.
Moreover, compared with previous literatures, this work contributes in two additional ways. First, previous articles that examined OBOR at a global scale, especially those written by Chinese experts, paid little attention to the opinions toward OBOR held by other major economies. Therefore, to better understand how OBOR is viewed differently by various parts of the world, I incorporate the U.S. and the EU’s opinions of this initiative into this thesis at the global scale, which can help avoid depending too much on either Chinese or western own rhetoric.

Second, in addition to the perception discrepancy between China and the West regarding the defining nature of OBOR, another void in the literature that needs to be filled is the study of land ports at a local scale. Researches and reports on OBOR thus far tended to be so much obsessed with the role of sea ports, that land ports studies are significantly limited. Land port, or border port, is a place situated on national border where people and goods can lawfully enter a country. Despite a rising attention given to the transformation of political and economic prospects of inland provinces including Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China’s borderlands, existing literature of Chinese land ports focuses narrowly on their spatial distribution (Wang, Cheng and Mo 2014), and their economic role in cross-national trade (Yang, Jiang and Wang 2017). Most literature ignores many landscapes other than economics at land ports and the multidimensional role that they play to support OBOR. Thus, in this thesis, I examine the pluralistic landscapes of land ports in the context of OBOR by focusing on two pairs of land ports in the form of case studies.

The rest of this thesis is structured into three chapters. The first chapter, at a global level, introduces OBOR by bringing in various opinions of this initiative from three different economies---China, the U.S. and the EU, and interrogates the logic behind their rhetorics. The
second chapter, delving into the transition between the macro image and the micro scenario, explores at a national level both the theory and reality of economic corridors, the skeletons of OBOR. The third chapter, at a local level, focuses on two pairs of land ports along economic corridors--Alataw Pass and Khorgos in Xinjiang province, and Erenhot and Manzhouli in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, under the context of OBOR, and within each individual case study included the analysis of the political, economic and cultural transformation of land port. Throughout the process of tracing the mechanism “global---national---local” to understand how OBOR works, I examine the impact of this initiative at these three different geographical scales, and argue that at each scale, OBOR has created a substantial impact accompanied by contentions and controversies.
Chapter 1: Global Scale

What is OBOR?

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan and lectured at Nazarbayev University. In his speech, the term “Silk Road Economic Belt” made its first appearance. A month later, in October, Xi visited Indonesia, during which he declared “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. Since then, the “Belt” and the “Road” joined together as OBOR.

Diagram 1: One Belt One Road Initiative
(Source: McKinsey Company 2016)

In 2015, Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce jointly published “Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century Maritime Silk Road”, a document that serves as both
an introduction and an overarching guide of OBOR in principle. I will use this document to briefly describe the attributes and functions of OBOR.

At the very beginning of this announcement, it directly refers to the history of the ancient Silk Road, in order to establish a connection and point out the similarity between the old and new versions of Silk Road, and, additionally, show the continuity of the mission of Silk Road throughout history—“peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2015, 1). This mission is also regarded by the Chinese government as the main theme of international relations in the 21st century. Following the reference to the historical context, this document puts OBOR under the global context in which there is a changing economic order—the continuation of the negative shocks of the 2008 financial crisis, the changes in investment and trade patterns, and so on.

In order to “uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation” (p2), OBOR is designed to link East Asia and Europe economically, encompassing many relatively less-developed countries with economic potentials in the hinterland of Eurasia. Routes that connect China and other regions are called “economic corridors”. According to Asian Development Bank, an economic corridor is a network of infrastructures encompassing a certain geographical region, aiming to stimulate economic growth (Brunner 2013).

For specific projects along economic corridors, they can be roughly divided into four main types, as listed in “Cooperation Priorities” section. They are: connectivity facilitation, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bond (p5-p10). In other words, OBOR aims to enhance connectivity by improving transportation infrastructures such as
pipelines, highways and railroads, increase bilateral and multilateral trade by expanding trade areas and removing trade barriers, build a stable currency, investment, and financing system in Asia by extending the scale of bilateral currency swap and settlement with countries along OBOR, and finally, advocate cultural exchanges and promote a harmonious civil environment by encouraging academic exchanges and tourism.

Thus, according to “Vision and Action”, the principle guide of OBOR, China seeks to, through infrastructure construction, international trade, financial integration and cultural ties, strengthen its relationships with countries along six different economic corridors which jointly form the initiative. In the next section I will list and compare competing narratives on OBOR from China, the U.S. and the EU, in order to better understand how China, as the founder and the leader of OBOR, the U.S., which is circumvented by OBOR, and the EU, which serves as the other pole of OBOR, view this ambitious initiative respectively.

**Competing Narratives**

OBOR is a massive project, and people’s opinions and values towards OBOR heavily influence the shaping of it. To better understand how OBOR is socially and conceptually shaped by different actors, and the effect of the construction of OBOR beyond China, I bring in three different narratives on this project, from China, the U.S., and the EU, respectively.

------China’s narrative

I divide China’s official and elite narrative on OBOR roughly into three parts: 1) emphasizing its economic attribute; 2) claiming the difference between OBOR and traditional
geopolitical competition and 3) linking it to a higher-level objective---build “a community of shared future for mankind”.

First of all, Chinese government has, for multiple times, emphasized the fundamental attribute of OBOR---an economic initiative rather than a political strategy. For example, in “Vision and Action”, OBOR is placed under a changing economic order, and this announcement avoids mentioning both the political motivations and implications of OBOR. Moreover, emphasizing the importance of economics to OBOR from a historical perspective is exactly the strategy pursued by the documentary “Belt and Road” which is produced by China Central Television (CCTV). Similar to “Vision and Action”, in episode one of this documentary, the old Silk Road was referred to again in the beginning, implying that the purposes of both the old Silk Road and today’s OBOR are the same: benefit people through trade, which is in economic, instead of political, terms.

Diagram 2: The Ancient Silk Road
(Source: CCTV 2017)
Second, in May 2017, at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Chinese President Xi explicitly stated that OBOR will not repeat the old pattern of geopolitical competition (Zhang 2018). Furthermore, both Chinese government and academic scholars argued that, OBOR is actually a win-win project that will mutually benefit China and other partners who participated in it. For instance, in August 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during his visit to Mongol, said that OBOR is the international public product that China provided, and it has nothing to do with the so-called Chinese version of “Marshall Plan” (Liu 2018). More generally, OBOR is often called as an “initiative”, rather than a “strategy” within Chinese rhetoric, and scholars such as Huang Fengzhi and Ge Hanwen (2018) further claimed that the practice of OBOR is not the geostrategy of China.

Third, continuing the rhetoric that OBOR is not political-oriented, in August 2018, Chinese President Xi, at the 5th Anniversary Symposium on Promoting the Construction of OBOR, employed a new term to describe the ultimate goal of OBOR---“a community of shared future for mankind”, which corresponds to the “tian xia” value of Chinese people---harmony between all nations (Han 2018). It should be noted that this term was first proposed in 2012, but it was not until the launching of OBOR that this term had been widely employed in related literatures (Chang and Zhao 2012). In fact, the idea of “a community of shared future for mankind”, or sometimes referred to as “a community of shared interests and destinies”, points out a situation in which all countries’ interests and destinies, in the era of globalization, are tied together, and all human beings’ futures are related to each other (Qu 2013). OBOR, according to the official Chinese government rhetoric, will just lead to such kind of global harmony through different types of international collaborations in terms of both economics and culture.

Comprising every single individual and country on this planet, it is a highly grand rhetoric. The
reason why China’s narrative on OBOR focused heavily on these three points will be analyzed in the next section. Meanwhile, two other major economies, the U.S. and the EU, have different standpoints.

-----the U.S. narrative

Generally speaking, according to the analysis of major reports and researches on OBOR conducted by ASAN Forum, Atlantic Council, and Center for a New American Security, I find the core tone of the US response to OBOR to be “ambivalence with more negativity”, for the reason that OBOR is a significant challenge to the U.S. while it also presents itself as an opportunity to some extent.

On the one hand, the U.S. is not covered by OBOR geographically, which implies that the world’s largest economy is isolated from this grand economic initiative. Therefore, one of the primary rhetorics shared by related reports conducted by American scholars concerned with the possibility of a new economic order emerging on Eurasia, which is led by China, instead of the U.S. This potential new order may be created through both the infrastructure construction led by China and other Asian countries’ greater economic dependence on China (Meltzer 2017).

Moreover, it is interesting to point out that in contrast to the Chinese rhetoric in which OBOR is clearly differentiated from a geopolitical initiative, the U.S. narrative, including National Security Strategy of the United States of America, report from the Atlantic Council, research from Center for a New American Security, and review on “US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on OBOR” all explicitly regarded geopolitics as an important motivation for China launching this initiative:
“China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations...” (The White House 2017, 46)

“China is betting on an old geopolitical proposition...The United States should stay away from, and even oppose, initiatives that are geopolitical in nature, or are used as a smokescreen to mask China’s geopolitical ascendance” (Luft 2017, 1-4)

“Geopolitical motivations also underpin the Belt and Road – and they have become more pronounced since its inception...” (Kliman and Grace 2018, 5)

“Foreign observers have speculated about Beijing’s ulterior geopolitical motives. Commentators liken the BRI to the Marshall Plan...” (Wuthnow 2018, 2)

On the other hand, nevertheless, OBOR is also viewed positively to some extent. The best example is the presence of American delegation at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 (Blanchard and Wen 2017). Matthew Pottinger, the head of the American delegation, pointed out that “American companies have much to offer the OBOR” (Hsu 2017). For instance, both countries could enhance their level of cooperation in fields such as infrastructure development, a favorite theme within the Trump administration and an area that China is experienced at.

-----the EU’s narrative

I choose the term “conditional acceptance” to describe the overall tone from the EU towards OBOR. In general, the EU welcomes OBOR for its role in increasing the connectivity of both Europe and Asia, while still remains skeptical over whether it can follow strict industry
rules. For example, Jyrki Katainen, vice president of the European Commission, represented the EU and claimed at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation that the concept of improving connectivity lies at the center of China-EU collaboration, and more investment in cross-border links along OBOR could unleash huge growth potential with benefits both for China and the EU, but OBOR should “adhere to a number of principles”, including transparency, sustainability, and interoperability (Katainen 2017).

However, it is worth noting that across different countries in Europe, opinions towards OBOR vary significantly. Geographically speaking, Western European countries tend to be more conservative in applauding OBOR; by contrast, more than a dozen countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and Romania, have expressed much enthusiasm and signed memorandums with China (Corre 2018). For example, French President Macron, during his visits to Beijing, said that China should be aware of protecting intellectual property and public market access, and avoid dictating OBOR on its own (Fouquet and Shi 2018). Meanwhile, the 16+1 forum created in 2012 by 16 Central and Eastern European countries and China has become a solid platform for OBOR, and the Budapest–Belgrade railway, one of the leading projects of OBOR in Eastern Europe that is currently under construction, is warmly welcomed, as the Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto put: “We, in this region, have looked at China’s leading role in the new world order as an opportunity rather than a threat” (Peto 2017).

**Behind the Narrative**

Rhetorics can be ideological, biased, and sometimes misleading. Therefore, compared to the rhetoric itself, the logic that supports and the incentives that build the rhetoric are more important. Thus, this section looks at the reasoning behind three different narratives.
First, emphasizing the economic attribute of OBOR does reveal the fact that primary motivations of China implementing this project are economic. I divide the pressures that cause the emergence of economic incentives to build OBOR into two categories: pressure from without, which deals primarily with the Malacca Dilemma, and from within—overcapacity and overcapitalization.

Abroad, China increasingly concerned with the “Malacca dilemma”, the term used to describe the situation that around 80% of China’s Middle Eastern energy imports pass through the Strait of Malacca, while this passage is vulnerable to blockade (Winn 2014). Considering that U.S. security architecture rests heavily on island chains which control the Pacific Ocean, China has to explore other new supply passages, especially on-land routes which end up extending deep into Eurasia, in order to secure and diversify the supply of necessary resources and energies.

Domestically, in recent years China has faced the problem of overcapacity, which has appeared in lots of sectors, such as steel, coal, aluminum, cement, electric power machinery, and ferrous and non-ferrous metal mining (Hu et al. 2010; Yuan et al. 2016). For instance, China is the biggest steel producing country in the world, but annually almost a billion tons of Chinese steel cannot find an outlet for sale (World Steel Association 2017). Thus in order to increase the demand for Chinese capital and goods, Beijing intends to look for export markets, especially in less developed countries. Moreover, one of China’s long-term monetary policy goal—internationalization of RMB, the official currency of China, also gives impetus to the construction of B&R economic blueprint (Liu et al. 2017). When more and more RMB are settled in cross-border trade, it can decrease the trade risk and reduce dependence on US dollars.

Accordingly, the emphasis on the economic motivations in Chinese narrative reflects the need for China’s government to make changes to meet economic challenges.
Second, the reason why official Chinese narrative avoids binding OBOR with politics derives from the need to differentiate OBOR from traditional geopolitical competition and the determination to transcend classic geopolitics which was once used as a guide for empires to achieve hegemonic goals. To be specific, the rise of China has been a heated topic for a decade and there have been endless debates around whether the rise of China will threaten peace in East Asia. To avoid the situation in which the launching of OBOR under the background of the rise of China is exploited to strengthen the western argument that China will follow the old geopolitical pattern and threaten regional peace, Chinese government keeps emphasizing that OBOR is not a geostrategic initiative that may cause regional conflicts.

Third, to further strengthen the second statement, China’s government suggests building “a community of shared future for mankind” as a solution to move beyond the geopolitical dilemma. By linking together different countries’ interests and destinies, it evokes a sense of harmony and helps set up a friendly image of the Chinese government to the whole world. Besides, this can also be viewed as a sort of value export for Chinese culture.

Therefore, I argue that the Chinese narrative on OBOR derives from the need to 1) justify that the motivations of launching OBOR are primarily economic; 2) counter the argument that OBOR is a form of traditional geopolitical competition and 3) establish a positive and friendly image and export the value of “the community of shared interests and destinies” in the long term.

The American narrative is actually determined by the current U.S.-China relationship. Attributing the motivation of launching OBOR to geopolitics reflects two things.

First, describing China as a “revisionist country” in the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (The White House 2017, 25), the U.S. is worrying about a potential power balance shift between the U.S. and China in Asia due to the launch of OBOR. In other
words, the mainstream American rhetoric believes that China will, by OBOR, enhance its regional influence, become the future leader of Asia, and change the geopolitical order.

Second, the result of the potential “changing geopolitical order” is dangerous to the U.S., after careful geopolitical calculations. As Wuthnow points out—“OBOR is a modern manifestation of early 20th century British geographer Halford Mackinder’s thesis that dominating Eurasia is a prerequisite for global hegemony” (Wuthnow 2018, 2), classical geopolitical concepts are employed here to help calculate the geopolitical implications of OBOR. According to the Heartland theory, the domination of the Heartland of Eurasia---a large portion of landmass in the Eurasian hinterland---by a single land power forebodes the unification of the World Island---Asia, Europe and Africa together (Mackinder 1919), which is the situation that the U.S. has been constantly tried to avoid since the 20th century. OBOR, by its massive infrastructure developments, especially high-speed railways that are designed to cross through the entirety of Eurasia, can help China expand its on-land strategic depth and counterbalance the advantages that the U.S. possesses in the Pacific. Therefore, I argue that the competing rhetorics on whether OBOR is geopolitical-oriented reveals an emerging power’s meticulousness in positioning itself and justifying its action, and a present global power’s concern over power shifts.

However, arguments that view OBOR positively reflect the fact that today’s close economic interdependence between the U.S. and China hardly allows a complete deterioration of the bilateral relationship. For instance, infrastructure development is regarded as a platform for collaboration between the U.S. and China because it can serve a similar role as “climate change” did during the Obama administration (Luft 2017, 14). In April 2018, at the 9th China-U.S. Transportation Forum, Yang Chuantang, the Secretary of Party Committee at the Ministry of
Transport, claimed that “China is willing to work with the U.S. side, under the framework of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S. plan for rebuilding infrastructure and transportation development” (Wong 2018).

For the EU, its exclusive focus on “connectivity” derives primarily from the “Council Conclusions on EU Strategy on China” which argues that the EU-China relationship should be oriented primarily towards improving “infrastructure, trading, digital, and people-to-people connectivity” (Council of the European Union 2016, 5). Furthermore, facing the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis and the refugee crisis, enhancing the connectivity facilitates the inflow of foreign investment and more trade opportunities (Suetyi 2017). However, similar to the concerns that the U.S. has, whether OBOR can obey the high industry standards in Europe and whether it can be constructed in pure economic terms without geostrategic consideration is the factor that caused the EU’s hesitation to fully embrace this ambitious project.

As for the difference in attitudes across countries in the Europe, it can be best explained by the varied economic situations in different countries. On the one hand, many Central and Eastern European countries need Chinese infrastructure expertise and capital to develop local infrastructure systems that are not well-organized. On the other hand, Western European countries such as the United Kingdom and France, though also desiring foreign investment from outside Europe, are concerned with the potential negative shocks to domestic economies brought by OBOR, including increasing competition from Chinese construction firms, such as high-speed railway construction companies, and job market impacts.

In conclusion, China intends to, by pushing forward OBOR, improve its relationships with neighboring countries through better infrastructure connectivity, convenient cross-national trade, integrated financial system and closer cultural ties, which apparently forebode a global
impact. Meanwhile, contentions arise in the form of competing narratives. For example, the U.S. and the EU have expressed their different opinions on OBOR at a global scale. But putting aside the rhetoric which reveals concerns over the global impact that OBOR will impose, it is necessary to delve into the mechanism that links the grand rhetoric of OBOR to specific projects proposed in the blueprint, in order to understand how OBOR works at other scales. In the next chapter, I will zoom in the picture and examine how economic corridors, the main skeleton of OBOR, are designed to pursue the strategic goals of this initiative by analyzing their theoretical basis and construction reality at a national level.
Chapter 2: National Scale

Economic Corridor: Theory

OBOR, according to the analysis in the first chapter, aims at enhancing connectivity, increasing trade, integrating financial systems, and improving cultural communication. However, to achieve all four goals listed above, a connection must be made between China and countries that participate in OBOR. Specifically, enhancing connectivity requires infrastructure construction; increasing trade depends on transportation of goods; financial integration requires institutions; and cultural exchange requires movements of people and ideas. All four purposes require a spatial connection in physical world that links China and other countries. In this light, a passage, in a geographical sense, has to be constructed, and that is called an economic corridor.

As introduced briefly in the first chapter, an economic corridor is a geographically-targeted development passage. In fact, the idea of “corridor” can date back to at least 1949, when Thomas Taylor (1949, 278-300) mentioned “corridor” in a geographical context. In 1969, Charles Whebell (1969, 1-26) described “corridor” as a linear system which connects different geographical areas through transportation infrastructure. In 1996, ten “Pan-European transport corridors” were proposed at the second Pan-European Transport Conference (Reynaud 2003). As its name shows, these corridors are primarily transportation-oriented and include the construction of roads, rails and canals. Similarly, in the context of OBOR, the proposal of economic corridors is also based on the theory from economic geography, claiming that corridors, with international transportation as foundation, can adjust industry structure by the agglomeration of labor forces and improve regional economic integration by resource development (Zhang and Shi 2017). It is often viewed as an economic axis that can be extended to cities nearby and thus transformed into an economic zone with a larger geographical coverage.
Comparing the functions of an economic corridor described in theories, which are primarily in terms of economics, and the four main purposes of OBOR that economic corridors are designed to achieve, it is interesting to find that the responsibilities of an economic corridor in the context of OBOR are multi-dimensional, since it addresses not only economic development, but other aspects of international cooperation as well. In this light, I argue that an economic corridor within OBOR differs from a traditional transportation-based passage which aims only at economic growth; rather, it is a route that encompasses various kinds of landscapes of a certain region and aims at multi-dimensional collaboration between countries, including economic development, institutional improvement, and social and cultural communication, as evidenced in the next section by efforts to promote both economic growth and social harmony between China and countries along OBOR. In sum, from a theoretical perspective, an economic corridor in the context of OBOR is a transportation-infrastructure-based geographical passage that links together many countries, with the aim of promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation in terms of economic growth, institutional development, and cultural communication.

China intends to construct six economic corridors that connect China with six different geographical areas: 1) China-Mongolia-Russia corridor 2) New Eurasian Land Bridge 3) China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor 4) China-Pakistan corridor 5) Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor and 6) China-Indochina Peninsula corridor. Thus, through the construction of these six corridors, OBOR is transformed from a concept into six passages that can be identified on a map (see Diagram 3). The next section details the six corridors.
Economic Corridor: Reality

After briefly examining the theories that support the concept of economic corridor, it is necessary to understand whether in reality the theories are useful. The first half of this section looks at the six corridors separately by focusing upon specific projects, such as energy plants, dams, railroads, cultural communication institutes, etc., that have been or are being constructed along them, and argues that in the context of OBOR, different corridors target at different means of achieving economic growth. However, instead of simply presenting a list of projects, in the second half of this section I will explore the complex reality about how the projects that we see today were socially negotiated, contested, and shaped within the Chinese bureaucratic political...
system which involves a variety of players. In this regard, the second part of this section pays special attention to the role that Chinese domestic politics plays in the negotiation and shaping during the construction of economic corridors, and claims that the reality behind the construction of economic corridors is more complicated than the theory which describes the functions of them.

-----China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor

This corridor consists of two passages, one of which starts from Beijing, connecting cities including Hohhot, capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous region, Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia, Krasnoyarsk, the third largest city in Siberia, and ends at Moscow, and the other one follows the old Chinese Far East Railway, passes through Shenyang, Changchun, and Harbin, and arrives at Chita.

Diagram 4: China-Mongolia-Russia corridor
(Source: Caralb News 2017)
According to the official document “Outline of the Plan of Constructing China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor”, primary platforms for the trilateral cooperation are infrastructure development and trade (National Development and Reform Commission 2016, 2-5). First, in the “Analysis Report of China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor”, OBOR is designed to connect with both Russia’s “Greater Eurasian Partnership” and Mongolia’s “Steppe Road Initiative”, which are all based on economic cooperation aiming at enhancing the connectivity through infrastructure development (Center for Development in The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region 2017). Known projects on this corridor include Arxan-Choibalsan railway, Moscow-Kazan high speed railway, and China-Russian natural gas eastern pipeline (Railway Technology 2018). Second, bilateral trade has increased significantly. In 2018, China-Russia bilateral trade volume peaked over 100 billion dollars for the first time, based on a 27.1% increase year on year (Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2019); in January 2019, volume of trade between China and Russia reached 9.2 billion dollars.

However, disagreement over the future of this economic corridor arose when the China-Russia bilateral relationship was taken into consideration. According to some Chinese nationalists, though Russia is now ranked as a “comprehensive strategic partner” in Chinese diplomacy, as a strong land-power in the hinterland of Eurasia, Russia still desires to keep its sphere of influence, especially in Central Asia, which is also an important region that OBOR will cross (Tremin 2012). Therefore, a potential clash of interests in Central Asia between China and Russia will make the future of China-Mongolia-Russia corridor uncertain.
New Eurasian Land Bridge

Also known as the Second Eurasian Continental Bridge, it is the international railway line that starts from Lianyungang, a sea port on the Pacific coast, to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, with a total mileage of 10900 kilometers.

Diagram 5: New Eurasian Land Bridge
(Source: Meiya Pico 2016)

One of the rail services on this international railway---China-Europe Railway Express, is a landmark project of OBOR, and it is designed specifically at enhancing trade volume through the increase in “connectivity” as proposed by the Chinese government. In reality, the contribution of this land bridge to international trade is significant in recent years: between 2011 and 2018, total value of goods transported per year increased from 600 million dollars to 16 billion dollars, and the number of train operations per year increased from 17 in 2011 to 6300 in 2017 (Sohu 2018). More importantly, the number of train operations from Europe back to China also increased to a great extent. In 2018, there were 2090 train services from Europe to China, which more than doubled in 2017, and the categories of goods transported became diversified:
from electronics such as laptops and mobile phones, to including machines parts, agricultural products, clothing, etc. (CINIC 2019).

The significant workload of this railway reminds readers of Halford Mackinder’s famous article “The Geographical Pivot of History”, in which Mackinder claimed that “trans-continental railways are now transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such effect as in the closed heart-land of Euro-Asia…” (Mackinder 1904, 434) The reason why his emphasis on transportation in the hinterland of Eurasia proposed more than a hundred years ago can still illuminate OBOR in the 21st century is that Mackinder viewed the importance of mobility in the currents of history: “Is not the pivot region of the world’s politics that…is today about to be covered with a network of railways?” (p434) It is the “persistent geographical relationship” that he pointed out extends the temporality of improving connectivity in Eurasia as a geopolitical event. In other words, the construction and improvement of the New Eurasian Land Bridge will greatly promote the mobility of land powers and the connectivity between them, which potentially lays down the foundation of a new Eurasian order. Therefore, improving China-Europe Railway Express is not only an economic issue, but carries geopolitical implications as well.

However, an important question can be raised immediately: Is the New Eurasian Land bridge efficient enough to compete with maritime transportation in order to become the transportation basis of a new Eurasian economic order? It is usually a conventional wisdom that costs of maritime transportation are generally much lower than rail transportation, and this gap will grow larger when the amount of goods is greater (Rodrigue et al. 2017). But for OBOR which spans across the largest piece of land on earth---Eurasia, land transportation can also gain relative advantage over sea transportation. According to Lu et al. (2018), after taking into
account of both the transportation costs and time costs, the pattern of competition in transportation efficiency between rail and maritime transportations reaches a 1:1 dynamic equilibrium state on the Eurasian landmass. In other words, as shown in Diagram 6, a division line of costs between land and maritime transportation exists, stretching from Berlin, crossing the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, Iran, Afghanistan, Tibetan Plateau, and Inner Mongolia of China, to Chumikan in the Khabarovsk Krai of Russia. To the North of this line, rail transportation to Beijing and Berlin, the two main cities situated on the two poles of OBOR, costs less money than maritime transportation. In fact, a large portion of the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor just lies within the area north of this line, which shows that land transportation does have potentials to serve as the basis of the economic integration in the Eurasian hinterland.

Diagram 6: Balance lines of container transport in Europe-Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative
(source: Lu et al. 2018)
Yet it is apparent that this land bridge will encounter problems, and an obvious one is its complexity. Spanning over nearly half of the earth, this land bridge covers more than 30 countries, with at least 14 kinds of languages and 4 main types of religions. But in Central Asia, countries including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with complicated ethnic composition, poor education levels, stagnated economic development, have tended to become breeding ground for terrorism, which makes the land bridge construction vulnerable and fragile. This is also one of the primary weaknesses of the next corridor: China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor.

------China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor

Starting from Xinjiang province, this corridor stretches all the way up to Persian Gulf and Mediterranean, with passing countries include five Central Asian countries, Iran and Turkey.

Diagram 7: China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor
(source: OBOReurope)
Energy cooperation is a big part of the construction of this corridor. Known projects include Central Asia-China natural gas pipelines (Line A, B, C, and D) which link China with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Dushanbe No. 2 thermal power plant and Nurek hydropower station in Tajikistan, Angren thermal power plant and Karakol gas field in Uzbekistan, etc. (AFP 2016)

The primary mechanism to achieve the so-called “win-win” cooperation works in such a way that energy infrastructure construction in Central Asia raises local tax revenues and creates jobs, while importing gas from Central Asia alleviates the pressure from the increasing Chinese demand of natural gas. In reality, more than twenty thousands more jobs have been created in Uzbekistan due to the construction of infrastructure projects along this economic corridor (Jiang 2019). On the other hand, the Central Asia-China natural gas pipeline, a 1830 kilometers-long passage underneath the Central Asian soil, has enabled 47 billion scf of natural gas to flow into China every year, which provides about 15 percent of the total annual demand of natural gas in China (Qi 2017).

Cultural communication plays an important role in the construction of this corridor. In fact, understanding between China and Central and West Asian countries in terms of cultures is particularly important, because throughout Chinese history, Central Asia and the Middle East were always places known for mystery, and before modern times only through vast deserts or high mountains could they be reached geographically. Today in the era of OBOR, in order to increase the degree of Chinese cultural exposure to Central Asian countries, Confucius Institutes funded by the Chinese government have been established along the corridor at Tashkent, Samarkand and other cities (Jiang 2019); activities such as International Forum of Central Asia Cultural Exchange and Cooperation and Silk Road International Film Festival have also been organized along with infrastructure constructions in this region (Zeng 2019). Thus, cooperation
in terms of both economics and culture between China and its western neighbors intensified since the launch of OBOR, but the utility of these activities is still undecided.

-----China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Generally, China-Pakistan relationship is special. According to the classifications of “partners” in Chinese diplomacy, Pakistan is the only country listed as the “all-weather strategic partner”, which means no matter how international or domestic situations change, China-Pakistan friendship will persist (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2015). In 2015, Wang Yi, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a vivid analogy in his conversation with Pakistan Prime Minister Aziz during his visit to Islamabad: “if One Belt One Road is a symphony, then China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is its first chapter” (Associated Press of Pakistan 2017). There is no doubt that this economic corridor receives priority. Specifically, it starts from Kashgar in Xinjiang Province, extending through the entirety of Pakistan, and ends up at Gwadar Port.

Diagram 8: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
(source: OBOReurope)
Different from other corridors which emphasize on one or two aspects of bilateral cooperation such as trade or energy development, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is designed to achieve all four purposes of OBOR---better infrastructures, increased trade, improved financial systems, and more cultural exchange.

In terms of infrastructure construction, notable projects include upgrading Pakistan’s railroads, new highway construction, and metro development in Lahore, the second-most populous city in Pakistan (Malik 2017). Moreover, since 2013, a series of energy facilities including hydropower, solar power, wind power, and nuclear energy power generations have been built in Suki Kinari, Sahiwal, etc., as shown in Diagram 9. Besides the remarkable improvement on electricity supply, it also helps stabilize domestic textile industry from moving to India (Syed 2018).

Diagram 9: Major Projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
(source: Markey and West 2016)
The star project of this economic corridor is the Gwadar Port, which started functioning in 2016. To China, the investment in the construction of Gwadar Port accelerated the establishment of a deep-sea port that can be connected directly to China-Pakistan economic corridor, and this route can be used to import oil: from the Persian Gulf to Gwadar Port, and then through China-Pakistan railway to Xinjiang province. However, the success of this project didn’t prevent the rise of local opposition. The Baloch people in the province of Balochistan where Gwadar Port is situated opposed this project through strikes and conflicts during its construction period, because they perceive the territory of Balochistan as their own home, which should be prevented from foreign intervention, either physical or economic (Lim 2017). Perhaps the opposition can be best demonstrated by the attack on the Chinese consulate in November 2018, initiated by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a militant organization in Balochistan advocating Baloch separatism (Notezai 2018).

This concern relates to the issue of China’s cultural influence on Pakistan. Though by building Confucius Institutes and attracting Pakistani students to visit China, Beijing indeed strengthened its cultural image in Pakistani society, yet whether the local population of Pakistan will accept the presence of Chinese power within their own territory is important in determining the future of this corridor.

-----Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor

As its names shows, this corridor connects China and India together, with Bangladesh and Myanmar in between, geographically.
Diagram 10: Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (source: OBOR Europe)

This corridor places its main emphasis on trade, institutional cooperation, and policy coordination. For example, Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Goods Transportation through Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Accord on Joint-transportation between China and Myanmar over Ayeyarwady River, and Agreement on Jointly Constructing Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor have been reached by the four countries in the years following the announcement of OBOR (Yao and He 2018).

However, the biggest challenge to the construction of this corridor is India’s reluctance. As another big land power that is rising gradually, India has always been aiming at enhancing its own influence in the Indian Ocean (Pant 2018). However, OBOR extends into this region. In reality, right after China proposed OBOR, New Delhi initiated the “Monsoon Plan”, aiming to construct an India-centered order in Indian Ocean area which include East Africa, Arabian Peninsula, Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia (Pioneer 2017). Due to resemblance, the
Monsoon Plan is often referred to as the “Indian version of One Belt One Road” (Zhu 2017). There are two opposite interpretations of Monsoon Plan: 1) it will link China’s B&R to construct a mutually beneficial mechanism and achieve win-win situation or 2) it will counter China’s B&R to achieve India’s regional influence. If Modi’s government chooses the second option, both political and economic bilateral relationships between China and India will deteriorate, which inevitably increases the difficulty of the completion of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor.

-----China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor

It starts from Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, and ends at Singapore, passing through a series of Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand.
Similar to Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, this corridor looks for deeper economic integration through not so much infrastructure development as multilateral agreements and policy coordination between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a whole. As five out of the ten members of ASEAN, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia play an important role in South-East affairs, especially regional economic integration. This corridor provides an opportunity to bond these countries more firmly with China economically, increases China’s influence on ASEAN and thus advances its regional influence in South-East Asia.

To sum up, six economic corridors within OBOR are all transportation-infrastructure-based passages that aim to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation in terms of economic growth, institutional development, and cultural communication. Moreover, different corridors may have different emphasis with respect to specific types of cooperation. For example, the New Eurasian Land Bridge is designed almost exclusively for enhancing Eurasian trade, while corridors that extend into Central Asia and Middle East often relate to energy cooperation in a variety of ways. To be more specific, the construction of economic corridors in the context of OBOR indeed enhanced the volume of trade between China and its neighbors. Meanwhile, Beijing also paid close attention to the role that cultural communication plays in multi-dimensional cooperation between countries, but the effectiveness of strengthening cultural bonds is still undecided. This can be demonstrated by the contestations between the presence of Chinese power in foreign countries and the complicated local socioeconomic environments.

It should also be noted that the shaping of those projects behind their physical construction is not straightforward. Behind corridor construction are contention and controversy,
which deserve greater analysis. So in the next part of this section, I analyze the process of how domestic Chinese politics comes into play behind those projects by laying out three major points.

First, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that the process of the making of policies and initiatives such as OBOR is dictated by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee alone, there are in fact a variety of players competing within the Chinese political system to express their voices regarding OBOR and the construction of economic corridors. For example, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Transport, with varied interest-orientations, could have different opinions with regard to specific infrastructure projects (Yu 2018, 9). Facing the railroad construction in Central Asian countries, the Ministry of Commerce focused exclusively on returns and risks of this project as an investment, while the Ministry of Transport paid more attention to the efficiency and practicality of infrastructure construction (Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2018; Ministry of Transport of the PRC 2016). Besides competition at a ministerial level, provincial governments also compete with each other for projects that can benefit local economies to be approved by the Central Committee in the blueprint of economic corridors (Yu 2018, 8). Since Beijing has decided to devote a large sum of capital into OBOR, provincial governments has always been attempting to earn the attention of Beijing in order to attract more investment. For example, Yunnan province and Guangxi province competed with each other in order to serve as China’s gateway to Southeast Asia since the launch of OBOR, because for the province that is granted the name “gateway”, it will increase its popularity and attract both domestic and foreign investments (He 2018, 8).

Second, in addition to bureaucratic players within the Chinese government that participate in the competition for interests of OBOR, academia is also involved in the construction of economic corridors. Specifically, Beijing has offered significant research grants
for Chinese scholars in domestic universities to take over specific instructions from the Party to carry out studies on how to improve multilateral cooperation along economic corridors, including, for instance, how to enhance China’s soft power in neighboring countries (Lanzhou University News 2019). Putting aside the effectiveness of scholars’ research outcomes, it at least revealed the efforts of Beijing to actively bring academic scholars into the shaping of this huge initiative. For example, Tsinghua University, a major in China, established an OBOR research institute under the instruction of the Central government, which regularly published reports on OBOR, including “Constructing an Upgraded One Belt One Road: From Top Design to International Consensus” before the start of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 (Qu 2017); Beijing University, another top university in China, has been assigned at least two major OBOR tasks: 1) research on historical and cultural development in countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and 2) research on archeological discovery along Silk Road and heritage of Silk Road civilization (Zou 2019); and China University of Petroleum in Beijing, as a higher education institution which focuses on petroleum development, has received suggestions from the government to collaborate with state-owned oil corporations to perform joint research on the prospects of oil industry along economic corridors (Zhang 2018).

This process is broadly defined by Bruce Dickson as “co-optation”, which refers to organizing and recruiting elites including intellectuals into the practices of social policy-making, one of the main “survival strategies” of the Chinese Communist Party (Dickson 2016, 14). In this light, besides the potential outcome of OBOR---sustainable economic growth---that can serve as the opportunity for CCP to further consolidate its legitimacy of power, the process of attracting
more scholars to participate in the shaping of OBOR and construction of economic corridors also provides a venue for CCP to gain popularity and strengthen its seat in power.

Third, OBOR is a highly opaque initiative, despite that the Chinese government has published official documents such as “Vision and Action” and “Action Plan (2018---2020)” which have outlined the direction of OBOR vaguely. In fact, such opaqueness is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides enough room for Chinese domestic political players to act flexibly without many constraints from rules; on the other hand, it further enhances the level of distrust from other countries because such opaqueness hardly convinces partners, especially the EU, that their investment in infrastructure are guaranteed by an underwriter (Yu 2018).

Considering that opinions from outside China also influence the shaping of OBOR, as argued in the first chapter, whether clear guidelines on investment and financial activities within the boundary of OBOR can be drafted is important to the financing of this huge initiative.

In conclusion, it is obvious that six economic corridors, as the skeletons of OBOR, have exerted a substantial impact on both China and other participating countries in both economic and cultural terms. But there are contentions, as evidenced in some Chinese nationalists’ concerns over the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor in relation to the influence of Russia, and the local Baloch resistance to the construction of Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Furthermore, impact and contentions of OBOR are also implied within the Chinese domestic political system regarding the negotiation process of the construction of economic corridors. Competing voices across provincial governments and ministries are observed and non-political players, such as academics, also participate in this ambitious initiative. After an overview of both the theory and reality of economic corridors, the third chapter of this thesis focuses on a pivotal node along the corridor, the land port, in order to understand how OBOR is reflected in local development.
Chapter 3: Local Scale

Land Port: Theory

Economic corridors which link countries together are tended to be divided arbitrarily into two sections: domestic (Chinese) part and foreign part. This dichotomy ignores the pivot that connects these two parts together---port of entry (POE). Generally, a POE is a place where people and goods can lawfully enter a country, and there are three main categories of them: sea port, airport, and land port. Since all six economic corridors of OBOR are on-land passages, their domestic and foreign parts are linked by one certain type of ports---land ports. Land ports, by narrow definition, include road port and rail port that situate on national borders. Broadly speaking, nevertheless, land ports also include river port, since some national borders either cross river at a particular place, or are rivers themselves.

According to “Vision and Action” (p6-7), land ports along economic corridors are supposed to take four major responsibilities, and they are: “improve the customs clearance facilities”, “establish a single-window in border ports”, “set up coordination mechanisms”, and “strengthen relationships with sea ports”. I categorize the first two responsibilities into infrastructure support and the last two into institutional support.

In fact, theoretical motivations for constructing land ports along economic corridors in terms of economics are twofold: enhance the mobility of movements of economic factors including labor, capital, technology, information, etc. through infrastructure, and establish well-developed institutions, including policy coordination and communication of thoughts, to weaken the barrier function of border. To be more specific, two economic theories support the infrastructure and institutional development at land ports: growth pole theory and border advantage theory.
The growth pole theory, first proposed by the French economist Francois Perroux, argues that the economic core within a region is called a “growth pole”, which is usually a place with strong locational advantage (Parr 1999). By developing economic activities in the growth pole through absorbing and aggregating various production factors and economic agents, the growth pole also drives economic growth in nearby regions through a spillover effect. Land port, as a place which people and goods pass through, is believed to have the economic potentials to serve as a growth pole that can drive the economic growth in borderlands. Therefore, land ports are designed theoretically to become economic cores, spreading economic activities outward.

Besides the growth pole theory, border advantage theory is also an important theoretical tool that supports the development of land ports. It bases its argument on three aspects: 1) the duality of a border, 2) geographical gradients at a border, and 3) cross-border needs from inland countries (Hu 1993). First, the duality of border refers to the roles that both culture and economy play in border areas. During peacetime, culture exchange and economic development, instead of military conflicts, are the main feature in borderlands, which lay down a favorable environment for regional prosperity at land ports. Second, the geographical gradient at border refers to the difference between two countries that share the border in terms of socioeconomic characteristics (Zhang and Shi 2017). It is the difference that motivates both parties to participate in trade and exchange, which may benefit both. Third, finding an on-land passage that extends to the sea is necessary for landlocked countries to develop international trade. China, with both long borders shared with landlocked countries and a long coastline, is important in relation to the economies of neighboring countries, such as Mongolia and Kazakhstan. With the need to cross borders to expand trade from inland countries, land ports serve as connecting points to the sea.
In the next section, I will explore how the present development of land ports is influenced by OBOR and to what extent they follow the theoretical trajectories, by focusing on the reality at several specific land ports in the form of case studies.

**Land Port: Reality**

Out of more than 300 land ports spread along China’s 22800-kilometers-long borders, there are several major land ports due to their geographical locations with respect to OBOR---they situate precisely on the passage of economic corridors as shown in Diagram 12: Manzhouli and Erenhot are pivots of China-Mongolia-Russia corridor; Alataw Pass and Khorgos are pivots of both New Eurasian Land Bridge and China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor; Khunjerab Pass is the pivot of China-Pakistan corridor; Ruili is the pivot of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor; and Mohan, Hekou and Pingxiang are pivots of China-Indochina Peninsula corridor.

![Diagram 12: Major Land Ports under the Context of OBOR](source: map created by the author)
Rather than surveying all major OBOR land ports, the study focuses on two pairs of land ports---Alataw Pass and Khorgos in Xinjiang province, and Manzhouli and Erenhot in Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. The reason of choosing these two pairs of land ports as the subjects for case studies stems from two main facts. First, all four of them can be categorized as the largest land ports at a national level in China. Second, OBOR is generally a westward-oriented initiative that intends to link China with countries on its western side, and these four land ports are all westward-facing gateways of China, which play an important role in the context of OBOR.

The focus of the following case studies is to analyze the relationship between OBOR and specific land ports in both directions. In this part I will examine how the advent of OBOR impacts the multiple landscapes of land ports, and simultaneously, the effect of the development and transformation of those land ports on facilitating the progress of OBOR at a local scale. Since existing literatures of land ports development focus primarily on their economic prospects while ignoring other aspects, to establish a comprehensive framework used for analyzing the influence of OBOR on land ports, I borrow an important concept from Arjun Appadurai: the concept of five “-scapes”. Appadurai (1991) argued that the post-Cold War world witnessed the tensions between cultural homogenization and heterogenization, and thus the global order is featured by disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics. To articulate the disjunctures, he used five “-scapes” to describe them: ethnoscapes---human flow, mediascapes---cultural flow, technoscapes---technology flow, finanscapes---finance flow, and ideoscapes---ideology flow. In order for this paradigm to fit better into the context of OBOR, in this thesis I use technoscape to describe the development of infrastructure projects based on technology, ethnoscape to examine
the population influx, ideoscape and mediascape to analyze the cultural and ideological flow, and finanscape to explain the economic and financial influence.

---Alataw Pass and Khorgos

Alataw Pass

Alataw Pass (Chinese: 阿拉山口; pinyin: Alashankou), also known as Dzungarian Gate, is the second largest land port in Xinjiang province, equipped with railway, road, and pipeline passages. About 330 kilometers away from “the Eurasian Pole of Inaccessibility” (46° 17’ N, 86° 40’ E)---the most distant point from an ocean on the Earth, Alataw Pass is situated deep in the Eurasian hinterland, and it is noted for its severe geographical environment---intense sunlight, extremely little rainfall, and most importantly, fierce wind. As one of the four major “wind drought places” in China, Alataw Pass endures strong wind which blows at about 40 mph in more than 160 days every year (Xie 2016).

Diagram 13: Alataw Pass
(source: map created by the author)
However, despite its severe geographical environment, Alataw Pass has been utilized as a convenient gateway between China and the Eurasian steppe for a long time, at least since the 17th century when the Manchu people governed China (Fan and Tian 2006). In 1883, when the Qing Dynasty signed the unequal treaty with the Russian Empire, Alataw Pass became the official border. In the next century since then, unfortunately, the function of Alataw Pass as a node connecting China and Central Asia weakened significantly, due to the poor relationship between Qing and the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century, and later the Sino-Soviet Split in the 1960s (Jiang 1990). It was not until 1990 that the State Council of PRC approved the construction of Alataw Pass as a land port. In the 29-years history of the reopening of Alataw Pass, China’s Western Development Strategy initiated in 2000 once served as an important impetus for its growth, and now, OBOR is another.

First of all, the first label that OBOR brought to Alataw Pass was “transportation node”, for the most obvious transformation of Alataw Pass’s physical landscape since the launching of OBOR is lines of railway tracks and containers on them, crossing the border between China and Kazakhstan. As a crucial node of transportation on the New Eurasian Land Bridge, more than 70% of all China-Europe railway express services have to cross this land port (Sohu 2018). In this light, OBOR directly influenced the finanscape of Alataw Pass by reshaping its economy to a “corridor-based” type. In other words, drastically increasing flows of goods through rail transportation enhanced Alataw Pass’s role as a corridor, or a passage, that connects one place with another. However, as OBOR was shaping the finanscape of Alataw Pass, whether such kind of corridor-based economy is the ideal type for the future development at Alataw Pass is controversial. In fact, contentions arose when scholars argue that in order to substantially increase the economic welfare of local communities, a passage-based economy is not enough, for
the simple reason that the values of goods on trains moving across the border cannot stay at
Alataw Pass (Yao et al. 2012). To further improve the economic performance of Alataw Pass, it
is necessary for the passage-based economy to move to a growth-pole based economy. In 2014,
Alataw Pass government established a comprehensive bonded area which connects lines of
railway tracks in order to attract more investments, which is a crucial component of the new
finanscape of Alataw Pass.

A comprehensive bonded zone (CBZ), also called a comprehensive free trade zone, is a
“special commercial area with favorable taxation policies, managed by customs officials” (Shira
2019). In general, a CBZ combines the functions of a tax-protected area, an export processing
zone, and a bonded logistics zone, focusing on transportation, distribution, storage, handling, and
intermediate trade (Wang 2016). The Alataw Pass CBZ, as the first of its kind in Xinjiang
province, has experienced the trade volume equivalent to 8 billion dollars until 2018, and
attracted more than 460 companies, including Huamao Corporation from Anhui, Aikang from
Jiangsu, Zhende Medical Textile Corporation from Zhejiang, and Sarbulak Corporation from
Kazakhstan (Li 2017). Through favorable taxation policies, the CBZ aims to further attract
investments and drive the agglomeration of nonferrous metals, minerals, farm products, etc. in
order to accelerate the transformation from passage-based economy to a growth pole.
As more and more companies moved into Alataw Pass City, the change in finanscape incurred a transformation of local ethnoscape as well, for an increasing number of people moved here for businesses. It should be noted that the creation of CBZ attracted people into not only CBZ itself, but Alataw Pass City in general as well. According to an interview conducted by the Xinhuanet (Li and Li 2016), Luo Zhong, coming from the city of Bole, is the owner of the biggest supermarket in Alataw Pass City, and in two years, the size of his supermarket doubled to 400 m²; Zhao Liansheng, who came from Changji, found a job driving diesel locomotives at the rail station three years ago, and most drivers and workers at the railway station actually come from other places; Sister Ji, who came to Alataw Pass with a million yuan, invested in a game center, which is now the only one in the city…… It is after the gradual change in the finanscape of Alataw Pass that people with very different backgrounds came here looking for opportunities, and thus their ways of living changed significantly.

However, the influence on the ideoscape and mediascape at Alataw Pass from OBOR remained limited to the ideological inflow from Beijing, the center of OBOR. To be specific,
rather than Kazakhstan, the primary source of ideas inflow at Alataw Pass is the Chinese central
government, which influences the way that local government designs Alataw Pass, in order to
better serve the purpose of OBOR. One of the good examples is the diversity of municipal
activities organized by the government of Alataw Pass that aimed to advocate to the mass public
the “Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” delivered by the
Chinese president Xi at the 19th Communist Party of China National Congress in 2017 (Ifeng
News 2017). Through organizing events such as panel discussions and entertainment evening
parties, the ideoscape and mediascape at Alataw Pass gradually turned to look at the closer
relationship between Alataw Pass and Beijing, by trying to bring the “thoughts” from Beijing
into the locality. Moreover, the term “Spirit of Alataw Pass” was soon created after the 19th CCP
National Congress. Similar to the “thoughts” advocated by the central government, the “Spirit of
Alataw Pass” refers to “taking roots, dedication, and devotion to duty” (Zhang and Shi 2017). By
coining this term and collecting slogans with which can deliver this spirit among mass public,
Alataw Pass government transformed local ideoscape with an increasing presence of ideology
from Beijing.

On the other hand, however, cultural communication between Kazakhstan and China at
Alataw Pass remained limited, and one of the reasons may be the low degree of openness of the
land port on the Kazakhstan side which connects directly with Alataw Pass---Dostyk. As the land
port on the Kazakhstan border that is only 12 kilometers north of Alataw Pass, Dostyk is still not
fully open to the Chinese market, and thus cultural inflow from Kazakhstan into China is very
limited (Xinhuanet 2014).
Thus, launching OBOR affected multiple landscapes of Alataw Pass, especially its finanscape and ethnoscape. Meanwhile, the transformation of Alataw Pass in recent years also facilitated the progress of OBOR.

First, China-Europe railway express, as one of the most important projects of OBOR, crosses the border between China and Kazakhstan at Alataw Pass. Though Alataw Pass had served as a transportation node at the Chinese border since 1992, it was not until the establishment of Alataw Pass city in 2012 and the launch of OBOR that this land port accelerated the construction of rail-transportation-based infrastructures. Without extensive infrastructure investment at Alataw Pass in recent years, the China-Europe railway express would have stagnated in terms of both the frequency of train operations and volumes of goods transported. As a crucial transition node on the New Eurasian Land Bridge, Alataw Pass, until August 2018, has witnessed more than 6000 train operations of the China-Europe railway express (CINIC 2019). Without Alataw Pass, entire services of China-Europe railway express would have to depend only on Khorgos, another land port that connects China and Europe through railway, which would decrease the efficiency and raise costs.

Diagram 15: China-Europe Railway Express crossing the border at Alataw Pass
(source: Yidaiyilu.gov 2018)
Second, at Alataw Pass, infrastructure construction of pipelines contributed to the operation of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, which is the first energy import pipeline listed at a strategic level to China (Sun 2017). Though not visible to the public, this pipeline along the Silk Road is indispensable to the material landscape of OBOR. As the destination on the Chinese side, Alataw Pass plays an important role in handling the oil running through the pipeline: after the commercial trade handover at customs, Alataw Pass oil station pressurizes petroleum into pipelines which cross inland to China, passing through Urumqi, the provincial capital of Xinjiang province, and Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu province, and ending at Sichuan province (China Machinery Industry Federation 2017). Until 2017, the overall amount of oil transported from Kazakhstan to China through this pipeline had reached 100 million tons, which greatly alleviate the pressure from the increasing domestic demand of oil for industrial purposes in China (Qin 2017).

Third, as mentioned above, the CBZ represents the institutional experiment at China’s borderland in support of OBOR. In addition to stimulating local economy, it is also designed to improve the customs clearance facilities. For instance, by combining custom declaration form and inspection declaration form into one single form, CBZ increases declaration efficiency (Xinjiang News 2018). However, the institutional improvement of Alataw Pass custom is still incomplete. A notable example is the impeded construction of electronic custom/port. An electronic port is a database including all sorts of data related to a specific physical land port, directly connected to the national telecom public network based on internet technology for supervision and regulation (Zhu 2014). But due to lack of funding, especially from the central government, progress of constructing electronic land port at Alataw Pass is slow (Guo 2014).
Khorgos

200 kilometers away from Alataw Pass, Khorgos (Chinese: 霍尔果斯; pinyin: huoerguosi) is the oldest and the largest land port in Xinjiang province. Lying within the Ili river valley, Khorgos, with Karasu River and Khorgos River crossing through, enjoys a better geographical environment than Alataw Pass. The exclusive locational and environmental advantage of Khorgos in Central Asia thus undoubtedly turns it into an instrumental gateway between China and the West. The meaning of the word “Khorgos”, in the Mongolian language, is “the place which caravans pass by” (People’s Daily 2014).

Diagram 16: Khorgos
(source: map created by the author)

Having a much longer history as a land port than Alataw Pass, Khorgos had started its role of a transportation node along the ancient Silk Road in the Tang dynasty. Nevertheless, Khorgos shared with Alataw Pass a very similar development trajectory in modern history: it became the official border area during Qing dynasty, and due to the deteriorated relationship between the PRC and the Soviet Union, Khorgos was closed from 1962 until 1983. After the
reopening of Khorgos, trade between China and the Soviet Union (later Kazakhstan) increased gradually, and in 2010, Khorgos economic development zone was created (Zhang 2018).

Different from Alataw Pass, Khorgos’s финансe is shaped through OBOR by another experiment: China-Kazakhstan Khorgos International Frontier Cooperation Center (KIFCC). As the first cross-border economic and investment cooperation center in the world, KIFCC is a model center under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Wang 2012). The primary functions of KIFCC include transportation, storage, hosting trade talks, commodities presentation, financial services, etc. Specifically, goods entering KIFCC will not be levied custom taxes and import value-added taxes; citizens from both countries can enter the center making businesses without applying for a visa, and each person from the market is allowed to bring goods in the value equivalent to 8000 yuan without taxes into China per day. Until 2017, investment into infrastructure construction at KIFCC had reached 1.5 billion yuan, and more than 4000 merchants have settled in (Ma 2018).

Diagram 17: Sketch Map of KIFCC
(source: photo taken by the author)
With the expansion of KIFCC, the urbanization in Khorgos also reached a new stage. From an economic perspective, the percentage share of the service industry in Khorgos has reached 80% in 2016, and from a demographic perspective, urban population reached 80 thousand, with an urbanization rate over 70% (Li and Yimamu 2016). Though the expansion of the ethnoscape of Khorgos in recent years showed similarity with Alataw Pass---attracting businessmen by providing commercial opportunities and chances for profits, the growth of both the ideoscape and mediascape at Khorgos followed a different pattern. Most importantly, cultural communication between Kazakhstan and China at Khorgos is much more intense than at Alataw Pass, one of the reasons being the Ili river valley, as one of the few fertile places for people living in this region, provides an ideal environment for the Chinese culture, represented mainly by the Han people’s customs, to encounter the Kazakh and Uyghur cultures. Rather than natural resources, the multidimensional ideoscape and mediascape at the Ili river valley is the product of interaction between people and their different styles of life, featuring a sense of mystery and curiosity. Under the context of OBOR, the primary means through which the ideoscape and mediascape at Khorgos are shaped is tourism.

With the advent of OBOR, Khorgos, which was previously rather strange to most Chinese in the inland provinces, soon became a popular name that is famous for its role in transportation and trade along the New Eurasian Land Bridge. The growing fame of Khorgos can be best demonstrated by the increase in the number of visitors. From 2011 to 2018, the number of tourists to Khorgos increased by 397% and revenue from tourism increased by 580% (Xjhegs.gov 2018). Therefore, with a larger number of Chinese tourists on the supply side, the demand side---Kazakh, Uyghur, and Mongolian cultural elements---naturally entered the market at Khorgos. In 2013, the first “border tourism” project was initiated in KIFCC (Li 2018), and
Chinese visitors came here for purchasing local artifacts and souvenirs, or enjoying songs and dances played by ethnic minority performers. By exposing traditional forms of entertainment of ethnic minorities to Chinese visitors, the ideoscape and mediascape at Khorgos feature an increasing mix between various cultures. Meanwhile, the transformation of ideoscape at Khorgos echoes in a larger geographical area: the “border tourism” also stimulated the cultural cohesion in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, which Khorgos belongs to. For instance, local residents host visitors from inland provinces of China at their own houses, treating them to luxury feasts during the Nadam Fair, an important Mongolian festival (Zhang and Shi 2017).

In addition to the four “-scapes” mentioned above, the technoscape of Khorgos is also transformed by OBOR, primarily through the construction of the Central Asia-China natural gas pipelines. In fact, these natural gas pipelines are huge infrastructure projects based on knowledge, expertise, and technology, and one of the most exciting features related to the technoscape of this particular infrastructure is the materiality of the pipeline itself. I will show how the technoscape represented by the Chinese-led infrastructure construction based on mature Chinese technology is processed, by introducing two technological debates over the materiality of pipelines.

The first debate is around using either straight steel pipe, with an easier production engineering and a higher production efficiency, or spiral steel pipe, with a higher intensity and better durability, as the basic material. According to the rules followed by Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, they choose straight steel pipe as the main material for gas pipelines, while China, famous for its mature industry in the mass production of spiral steel pipe, prefer the latter (Xu and Wen 2015). This contentious debate lasted for months, eventually ending with the acceptance by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan of using spiral steel pipe
after being convinced by both Chinese and Russian experts (Wang et al. 2014). As the ultimate selection of choosing spiral steel pipe promoted the progress of the Chinese domestic steel industry and stimulated Chinese technology to extend to border area and even abroad, this decision also enabled the underground technoscape of Khorgos to connect smoothly with not only Chinese domestic pipelines, but Central Asian pipelines as well.

The second debate centered on the dimension of the pipeline. Originally planning to use a single pipeline with 1422 millimeters in diameter, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) found the supply of such pipelines too limited for this project that was facing a hard deadline (Li et al. 2015). Thus, the CNPC, the primary company in charge of the pipeline construction, proposed the usage of double pipes, each of which has a diameter of 1067 millimeters (Arranz and Hernandez 2016). After a series of negotiations over the new experiment between China, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, this proposal was accepted by all parties, and now it has become the safeguard for successful handover of natural gas at Khorgos. Therefore, Khorgos, as the destination of the Central Asia-China natural gas pipelines, witnessed the emergence of Chinese infrastructure technology in pipeline construction, which contributed greatly to the improvement of the technoscape in Chinese borderlands.

Similar to Alataw Pass, Khorgos has experienced a significant transformation due to OBOR, but development and experiment at Khorgos in recent years also created an impact on the execution of OBOR at the local scale.

First, in addition to the strategic importance of processing thousands of China-Europe railway expresses and importing oil from Central Asia through pipelines as indicated in the previous section, an important reason that contributes to the particularity of Khorgos in OBOR is its duality in role---it is both the destination and the transition node. On the one hand,
“destination”, referring to the destination of Central Asia-China pipeline, is represented by the national border marker that erected over ground on the border line, delivering a sense of national sovereignty. On the other hand, the “transition”, referring to the transitional role that Khorgos plays between this international pipeline and China’s domestic pipeline which extends all the way up to its eastern coast, is represented as the exchange of reports between Chinese and Kazakhstani experts at the natural gas metering station in Khorgos at the end of every month. The space of Khorgos is thus featured as the co-existence of both national sovereignty and global governance. In other words, Khorgos is of great importance to OBOR in two ways: first, it manifests the sacred sovereignty and the increasing Chinese power with respect to expertise and technology that is being instilled at borderlands, and second, it exemplifies the enhancing connectivity proposed by the Chinese government regarding OBOR.
Second, besides railway and pipeline infrastructure construction, Khorgos also devoted its resources to providing institutional support for OBOR by trying to improve customs efficiency. In 2017, the online monitoring platform of distribution and concentrated transportation was established in KIFC, in order to increase the efficiency of customs declaration and clearance by combining declaration, distribution, and transportation of goods into a single internet system (China News 2017).

---Manzhouli and Erenhot

Manzhouli

Manzhouli (Chinese: 滿洲里; pinyin: manzhouli), lying within the northwestern part of the Hulun Buir Grassland, is the largest land port in China. Due to its special geographical location---in the triangle of “China-Mongolia-Russia borders”, it is also called the “window of East Asia” (HKTDC Research 2019).
In contrast to Alataw Pass and Khorgos which have served as transportation nodes for hundreds of years, it only took Manzhouli a century to transform from an area with pure grasslands to the largest land port in contemporary China. It was in 1901 when the Russian Empire initiated the operation of the old Chinese Far East Railway that Manzhouli, as a stop along this railway, started its development (Du 2018). In the decade after the foundation of PRC, Manzhouli ranked at the No.1 land port in China in terms of freight traffic, partly due to the outbreak of the Korean War which pushed China to import large quantities of Soviet military materials, commodities, and industrial facilities (Wang 2003). Not surprisingly, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s hampered the development of Manzhouli as a land port, but after 1980s, as the relationship between Beijing and Moscow recovered gradually, Manzhouli again turned into the biggest land port in China.

The new finanscape at Manzhouli under the context of OBOR looks like the compound of the ones at both Alataw Pass and Khorgos: besides international railways that start from Suzhou in Jiangsu province, crossing Manzhouli, and end at Europe, the finanscape comprises at least three main economic experiments---a comprehensive bonded zone, a border economic cooperation zone, and an international logistics park. Similar to the international frontier cooperation center at Khorgos, the border economic cooperation zone is an economic area that aims at enhancing border trade and improving processing materials for export. The Manzhouli border economic cooperation zone specializes in two types of exports: wood processing and vegetable processing (Sun et al. 2017). Yearly volume of vegetables exported to Russia after processing at Manzhouli has reached 400 thousand tons (CNR News 2017). On the other hand, the international logistics park is a center of distribution of cargo and logistics information, focusing on international delivery (Jiang and Wang 2008). Located within the “pivot” of the
China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, all three economic zones have not only attracted huge investments, but fundamentally reshaped the finanscape of Manzhouli by making it an economic model for all other land ports in China.

As for ideoscape and mediascape at Manzhouli, they are highly pluralistic because there is a strong mix of nomadic culture, grassland culture and “red” culture (culture of Chinese resistance against foreign invaders in the past century). Though the presence of these three different types of cultures can date back to the 20th century, it was not until the launch of OBOR that the cultural mix came into public attention. This is because the Manzhouli government took the opportunity of OBOR to expand the influence of Manzhouli as a land port, by promoting attractive ideoscape and mediascape. In the 2018 official document “Report on the Work of Government”, Bu Xiaolin, the president of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, claimed that the driving force of culture is crucial to the development of Manzhouli (Bu 2018). It should be noted that the importance of culture was seldom mentioned in official government documents in previous years.

Tourism also plays a crucial role at Manzhouli because tourists stimulated the mingling of various cultures. Grassland culture is best portrayed here by ancient tombs of Xianbei nationality, the traditional nomadic people in Mongolia since the Han dynasty, sites of ancient Liao city, Genghis Khan’s ancient barracks, etc. (He 2018) On the other hand, the “red” culture is recollected by huge funds that local government invested in renewing historical sites such as Communism Memorial Plaza, Soviet Red Army Martyr Memorial Park, underground intelligence station used by Chinese militias during the War of Resistance against Japan, and so on (Pan 2017). As tourists move between sites, various sorts of cultural representations became linked together, forming a pluralistic ideoscape at Manzhouli.
As the largest land port in China, Manzhouli undoubtedly contributed to enhancing connectivity between China, Russia, and Mongolia. In terms of infrastructure construction, Manzhouli government initiated the upgrade and expansion project of international roads and railways in 2016 in order to further enhance the capacity of goods transportation (Guo 2017). By the end of this project, volume of goods transported through roads has reached 10 million tons (Jia 2017). Institutional improvement at Manzhouli custom is exemplary. Domestically, the Manzhouli custom has established the “single window” system, which greatly simplifies the process of custom clearance. For example, “single window” at Manzhouli custom decreases the number of using traditional physical pass cards which have to be stamped and signed by multiple departments of the custom (Li 2017). Under the “single window”, manual processings are replaced by internet system, which saves time for drivers crossing the border and thus increases the clearance efficiency. Internationally, in June 2018, Manzhouli custom joined the system of “International Road Transport” (TIR), which allows customs in countries other than departure country and destination country to skip the process of goods inspection (Xinhuanet 2018).

Erenhot

Erenhot, lying midway between Beijing and Ulan Bator, is China’s largest land port that opens directly into Mongolia. In history, Erenhot was first known in 1899 as a stop along the telegraph line set up between Zhangjiakou and Ulan Bator. In 1956, Erenhot City was established, as the Beijing-Ulan Bator-Moscow international railway went into operation (Qin 2018).
The China-Mongolia cross-border economic cooperation zone started from 2017 is the backbone of Erenhot’s new finanscape. As another cross-border economic zone following the international frontier cooperation center at Khorgos, it has a similar growth pattern with KIFCC: electronic businesses, logistics, storage and intermediate trade serve as the primary functions of this new experiment (Yang 2016). Instead of delving deep into this finanscape which shares many similarities with the ones in previous case studies, I turn the focus to the technoscape at Erenhot under the context of OBOR, featured by a dilemma over the selection of a rail gauge.

As the largest Chinese land port that opens directly to Mongolia, Erenhot processed more than 1000 train operations to Russia in 2018, with a year-on-year growth of 80% (Li 2019). As so many trains run through Erenhot, however, one practical issue emerged: Mongolia, as the country in between the departure country---China, and the destination country---Russia, had to choose a suitable rail gauge at the China-Mongolia border because China and Russia use different standards of rail gauges. Specifically, as shown in Diagram 21, China now adopts the standard gauge that is mostly widely used across the world, which is the 1435 mm gauge. Russia,
on the other hand, has always been using its own gauge that is known as the “Russian Gauge”---1520 mm. Since Mongolia followed Russia to use the Russian gauge domestically, the “difference in gauge” problem does not occur at the Russia-Mongolia border. But this problem did exist at Erenhot, the place where Chinese railways are connected to the Mongolian ones. As Mongolia attempted to reach a balance point between China and Russia, the debate over whether to adopt China’s standard gauge to increase the connectivity between China and Mongolia was heated, as evidenced by what the Mongolian president Khaltmaagiin Battulga, who was then the Minister of Transportation, claimed in the 2016 presidential election: “Tanks can easily penetrate into Mongolia in no time if we build a railway with a [narrower] gauge track, the same used in China” (Hillman 2019). Therefore, as this story reveals, I argue that a dilemma exists between enhancing cross-national connectivity and protecting national security, especially at land ports where disjunctures between countries and societies are easily observed.

Diagram 21: Major Gauges of the Global Rail Systems
(source: Rodrigue 2008)
In the end, Mongolia circumvented the dilemma by refusing to change to the standard gauge, and thus today’s trains passing through Erenhot to Mongolia have to wait until the railway gauge is transferred to the Russian gauge, a process that costs about an hour.

Accordingly, a technological debate over rail gauge thus actively contributed to the shaping of the technoscape at Erenhot under OBOR, featured by contentions and controversies. Though the rail gauge change also happens at some other land ports, at Erenhot it particularly reflects the dilemma of a country in between two major powers over the infrastructure standard and its potential security implications.

Impacts on the ethnoscape, mediascape, and ideoscape of Erenhot are collectively reflected in the efforts of building a model zone of “people-to-people bonds” in the locality. Within the zone, communities such as schools and hospitals from both Mongolia and China are paired with each other to establish a relationship. For instance, Erenhot International Institute
admitted 140 Mongolian students in 2016, and Erenhot Mongolian Middle School signed a treaty with The National University of Mongolia, which has promoted student exchanges of more than 1100 people (North News 2017). Through academic exchange and communication, the ethnoscape became increasingly dynamic. Moreover, in the Erenhot Municipal Hospital, instructions in another two languages besides Chinese have been added: Uyghur-type Mongolian, shown for local Chinese residents who speak Mongolian, and Cyrillic-type Mongolian, shown for Mongolian residents who come across the border to Erenhot (Zhang et al. 2018). Thus, the increasingly dynamic movement of people at Erenhot due to OBOR motivated a multicultural environment and diversified both the mediascape and ideoscape at Erenhot.

The local-scale effort to facilitate OBOR at Erenhot is best exemplified in the reforms of customs clearance. Specifically, by improving the coordination mechanism with the corresponding land port on the Mongolian side, Erenhot has avoided the dependence on documents processing in physical copies, and all cargo manifest documents between China and Mongolia are electronic (People.cn 2017).

In sum, from the four case studies I argue that OBOR imposed a significant impact on multiple landscapes of a land port at a local level, including economic influence reflected by various cooperation centers and zones, demographic influence featured by a greater population influx from inland provinces, technological influence based on infrastructure expertise, and cultural influence represented by a mix of various cultures. Additionally, since land port is a place that represents both global flows---goods and people are transported from one country to another, and national sovereignty---it lies on border, the representation of a nation state’s maximum geographical reach, we have observed economic and political disjunctures here with contentions and controversies, especially over technology. Meanwhile, improvements of land
ports in terms of both infrastructure construction and institutional coordination facilitated the progress of OBOR by enhancing the connectivity of people, goods, and capital, and increasing the efficiency of customs, although the extent of improvements varies with geography, and challenges still exist.
Conclusion

This thesis analyzed the impact of One Belt One Road Initiative at different geographical scales. At a global scale, in order to deepen the economic integration across the world, Beijing put forward OBOR as a tool to construct better infrastructures, improve multilateral trade, and strengthen cultural ties, all of which are potential impacts that have earned attention from other major economies. Debated over the nature and the real purposes of OBOR, competing narratives from China, the U.S., and the EU have created enough contentions.

Putting aside the rhetoric debate, to better understand the working mechanism of OBOR and its influence at other scales I delve into the main skeletons of this ambitious initiative---economic corridors, by analyzing both their theories and realities. Six corridors that cover many countries and extend into different geographical regions are infrastructure-based passages that aim at promoting economic growth, institutional coordination, and cultural communication. Surveying a number of specific projects and activities along the corridors, I found the impact of OBOR at a national level to be both significant and contentious. Infrastructure projects, for example, indeed enhanced the physical connectivity between countries and contributed to solving energy issues. However, the “connectivity” in terms of cultures between China and other countries faces more challenges, as evidenced in either the distrust within international relations, or opposition to foreign influence. Moreover, I also tried to picture the scenario behind the construction of economic corridors by analyzing the role of the Chinese domestic politics, pointing out several important realities including the rise of competing voices within the Chinese government and a more active participation in OBOR from academics.
Further, I investigated the impact of OBOR from a local perspective at land ports. Land ports, situated on national borders, are important nodes along economic corridors. Specifically, I select Alataw Pass, Khorgos, Manzhouli, and Erenhot, which are all westward-oriented land ports, as case studies. Through examining the finanscape, ethnoscape, technoscape, mediascape, and ideoscape at these four land ports, I found that OBOR contributed greatly and differently to the expansion of multiple landscapes of land ports through the establishment of border economic zones, more population flow, technology instilment in infrastructures, and increasingly mixed cultural environment. On the other hand, investment in infrastructure development and improvement in efficient custom policies are two major ways that local governments adopt to support OBOR.

As an ambitious initiative that covers more and more countries, OBOR is still in progress today, and additional considerations besides economics and culture have been involved. Therefore, continuous researches on its nature and adaptability are necessary.
Bibliography


Huang, Fengzhi, and Hanwen Ge. In Theory And Strategy: Thinking On The Construction Of Silk Road Economic Belt. 2018


Li, Li, and Buzuolaguli Yimamu. "Discussion Of Urbanization Driven By Tourism---Case Of Khorgos In Xinjiang Province". *Business* 26 (2016).


Liu, Xiaopeng. "王毅：‘一带一路’不是‘马歇尔计划’，而是共建人类命运共同体的生动实践" [Wang Yi: One Belt One Road is not Marshall Plan, but an Active Experiment of


Ministry of Commerce of the PRC. "2017年中国对“一带一路”沿线国家投资合作情况" [Chinese Investment Into Participating Countries Along One Belt One Road In 2017].


"The New Silk Road Corridors". *OBOReurope*.  


https://www.caralb.com/2017/05/19/what-is-one-belt-one-road-2/.


Yao, Yao, and Xianqing He. "Current Situation And Prospect Of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor". *OBOR Hundred People Forum*, (2018).


Zhang, Hong. "An Important Stop On The Old Silk Road---Khorgos". Rural Economy And Science-Technology, no. 6 (2018).


