

# ASIA-CHINA

## KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS:

### STATE OF THE FIELD

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## FRONT MATTER

### ABOUT THE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) is an independent, international, nonprofit organization founded in 1923. It fosters innovative research, nurtures new generations of social scientists, deepens how inquiry is practiced within and across disciplines, and mobilizes necessary knowledge on important public issues. For nearly 100 years the SSRC has coordinated the research, policy, and philanthropic communities in the pursuit of evidence-based policies to promote human well-being, emerging as both a pivotal force in the academy and a respected contributor to the public good. The SSRC is guided by the belief that justice, prosperity, and democracy all require better understanding of complex social, cultural, economic, and political processes. We work with practitioners, policymakers, and academic researchers in the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, and related professions. We build interdisciplinary and international networks, working with partners around the world to link research to practice and policy, strengthen individual and institutional capacities for learning, and enhance public access to information.

### ABOUT THE CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH PROJECT

The China and the Global South initiative aims to develop research capacity about China in the Global South and connect institutions and researchers producing knowledge on China in a global network. It builds capacity for knowledge generation and dissemination on China in the Global South by supporting research institutions, linking them to each other in an international network, and giving locally produced knowledge a greater voice in global academic and policy conversations.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## INTRODUCTION

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

China's economic and geopolitical rise over the last two decades has included a growing presence and influence across the globe, not least in the Global South, where it is an important investor across multiple sectors. The SSRC, through a decade of activities, constitutes a leading node for a growing, yet fragmented interest in China's engagement with the world. The China and the Global South (CGS) project aims to develop research capacity about China in the Global South and connect institutions and researchers producing knowledge on China in a global network. It is building capacity for knowledge generation and dissemination on China in the Global South by supporting research institutions, linking them to each other in an international network, and giving locally produced knowledge a greater voice in global academic and policy conversations. In particular, the project will work with "impact hubs" for China studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and convene research institutions to initiate cross-institutional and cross-regional networks.

As a first step in the larger initiative, we have conducted separate scoping studies of China's engagement with Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Each study consists of two mutually constitutive components: a literature review and a capacity assessment. This dual purpose distinguishes the CGS as more than a purely academic study, something that profiles both the intellectual and institutional landscape of a vibrant and diverse field of research. It aims to bring together siloes of research themes and chart the trajectories for future sustainable growth of relevant research, particularly in the Global South.

### GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Because of the large swaths of territory Asia covers, this study divides this supercontinent into four regions for the sake of coherence and feasibility. These regions, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, are defined as follows. East Asia is generally excluded because of the preponderance of developed economies. But this study covers high-income countries such as Singapore and Israel, as they play an essential role in China's engagement with the regions where they are situated. The different level of attention to different countries reflects the availability of research and sources.

**Southeast Asia:** coterminous with the membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with more coverage of high- and middle-income countries.

**South Asia:** mainly India, followed by Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to a lesser extent.

**Central Asia:** former Soviet Republics turned independent countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and, to a lesser extent, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

**West Asia:** Israel, Turkey, major members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), and, to a lesser extent, Iran. "Middle East" is another popular name for the region, which is often combined with North Africa. Fully aware of the imperfect nature of any

geographic label (see more in the critical reflections section under methodology), we settle on West Asia to present a more consistent regional structure in this report.

## METHODOLOGY

### Overview

We focus on the broadly defined social scientific research on contemporary China's engagement with the Global South produced in the past decade. First introduced in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved into China's signature outreach policy in infrastructure, trade, and more. It is understandably a common theme in contemporary discussion of China and the Global South. But this study is also informed by earlier SSRC work on China-Africa connections that predated the BRI (Carayannis and Olin 2012).<sup>1</sup> The sources of the literature reviewed here mainly comprise academic journal articles, supplemented by monographs and gray literature (reports from governments, think tanks, NGOs, and international organizations). The main working languages in this process are English and Chinese.

The qualitative systematic literature review uses two general methods: keyword (mostly in research databases) and snowball (based on existing keywords and feedback from expert consultations). Although we have tried to be consistent in our review across different regions, completely standardized keywords are all but impossible. This explains why, unlike the scoping studies for Africa or Latin America, this study lists the research themes geographically to account for regional differences. There is, however, a higher degree of consistency in Chinese-language literature because of national strategies such as the BRI.

The literature review specifically considers the following questions:

- Who is writing about China's engagement with the developing nations of Asia?
- Where is the knowledge being produced? By including researchers from different parts of Asia, China, and the rest of the world, this study develops a global scope.
- What are the key topics in the existing literature? What are their research questions? These findings inform the organization of the literature review into major themes.
- What are the gaps in the literature? Underdeveloped sub-topics and underused methods signal particular opportunities for further research.
- What is the policy context for the growth of relevant scholarship? Who is the intended audience? The BRI is an essential contextual factor, and the assessment of the current scholarship has to account for its implications in China and beyond.

Following the literature review, this study also includes an assessment of existing research capacity on China and the Global South in different regions, and an annex which maps the regional networks and institutions that we find to be the most relevant in terms of research on China-Asia connections. The general focus of our capacity assessment and inventory mapping is still research on the connections between contemporary China and various parts of Asia. Confucius Institutes, because of their general focus on language and culture courses, are not our main concern. By no means does our assessment intend to rank specific networks or institutions. It is rather a general accounting of regional variation.

It is worth noting that such assessments and mapping are unable to completely separate studies on China-Asia from China studies as such in the existing disciplinary establishment.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, the institutional history of the studies of different regions of Asia in China also informs

the contemporary research on China-Asia and is part of our purview. As will be seen later, places with varying pre-existing capacity in China/Asian studies approach China and the Global South differently. Meaningful capacity-building thus needs to consider these differences carefully.

To prepare these two sections, we conducted online searches as well as expert consultations. We examined a variety of entities through their online presence, such as events, conferences, and research outputs listed on websites. For institutions in China, we double-checked available online lists of nationally recognized area studies programs in universities registered with the Ministry of Education. We also undertook over thirty consultations with people possessing expert knowledge of the field, which helped to point us toward additional listings not necessarily covered by our own online research. In this process, we also consulted the pioneering work on China studies in the Global South done by the Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies at Universidad del Pacífico in Peru (Sanborn et al. 2021). Ultimately, we have tried to prepare the narrative and mapping based on adequate online presence and/or expert vetting.

## Reflections

An exhaustive coverage of a growing and dynamic field is impossible in terms of either the scholarship or institutions. Instead, our work aims to provide a solid overview of the major intellectual currents and institutional underpinnings. Nevertheless, we acknowledge several potential methodological biases in a study of this scope and hope that such reflections will help bring forth more vibrant research to inform our understanding of China's engagement with Asia.

First, the geographic division in our study, while necessary for the division of labor, largely follows a continental scheme with colonial and Orientalist legacies (Lewis and Wigen 1997). As an extremely diverse landmass, Asia—not to mention indeterminate regions such as the Middle East—defies easy definition. The adoption of the continent-subregions scheme in this study is more of an expedient choice. By no means does it claim a comprehensive coverage of Asia or intend to exclude alternative geographic framings.

Second, we acknowledge the porousness in the definition of “social sciences” and aim to bring in interdisciplinary insights whenever necessary. Our focus remains the scholarship on the complex social implications of contemporary China's global presence. Though not our main focus, the historical scholarship is immensely useful to our study as it informs our understanding of, among other things, contemporary national identity as the product of layered and entangled memories. Since the late nineteenth century, social science disciplines have been asserting their scientific status, which has shaped the popularity of different methods.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining a broad understanding of the social sciences, we do not merely record these different methods in the relevant literature but also interrogate the underlying dynamics that privilege some over others.

Third, to make the scope of our work manageable, we sometimes rely on existing citation indices such as SSCI and CSSCI to limit the origins of scholarship. Keenly aware of their biases, we nevertheless believe that they are useful in providing a heuristic understanding of the overall picture.

Last but not least, our extensive reference to institutional websites in mapping carries the risk of privileging those institutions which have the resources to maintain their online presence, and these institutions tend to be located in wealthier countries and regions. We have tried to overcome this potential bias with more in-depth consultations with experts on the ground, who can offer more nuanced understandings of the intellectual and institutional landscape.



## GENERAL FINDINGS

As mentioned above, as a gigantic landmass, Asia defies easy definition. Africa and Latin America are by no means homogenous, yet the overwhelming diversity across Asia makes China-Asia an even less coherent field as compared to China-Africa or China-Latin America. Such conceptual challenges notwithstanding, many of the Asian countries included in this study have witnessed the ebb and flow of longstanding overland and/or maritime connections with China. They have often been the first stops in China's international outreach, including the most recent iterations, such as the BRI. Examining China's engagement with different parts of Asia side-by-side thus yields particular insights into contemporary China's global positioning, which could spark further conversations with the deepening research on China-Africa, China-Latin America, and global China in general.

No summary of the findings will do full justice to this rich study, and we encourage readers to check out sections of interest for more nuanced analyses. There are, however, a few general points that can help situate readers as they begin to digest the overall study.

1. English-language scholarship remains the international standard on all aspects of China-Asia connections, which gives researchers based in the Global North a significant advantage over their counterparts elsewhere, China included. Yet particularly in the United States, the area studies paradigm, despite its waning influence, still tends to segment China and different parts of Asia into separate programs. It is often institutions outside the area studies norms that are the first to support scholarship on China and the Global South.
2. There are significant variations in the levels of research output and capacity across different parts of Asia. Thanks to decades-long regional integration, Southeast Asia tops the list, particularly higher-income countries such as Singapore and Thailand. In South Asia, India is witnessing conscientious discussions of strengthening the country's networks for China and East Asian studies, particularly among young private universities less subject to bureaucratic restrictions. But there is much less regional coordination here as compared to Southeast Asia. In Central and West Asia, China and the Global South as a topic has not yet attracted intensive attention, despite the existence of reputable Asian studies programs in select Israeli and Turkish universities.
3. China's positioning in global knowledge production has changed dramatically in the past decade. The boom in area studies in China after the BRI and the government's elevation of the field's disciplinary status in academic degree regulations have significantly increased Chinese scholarly output on China's engagement with different parts of the world, Asia included. Instead of being just a follower in international scholarly exchange, China has become an active organizer of various academic networks, including the Luban Workshops that aim to offer a network of vocational education programs in different parts of the world (Yang Yan and Wang 2021; Yau and van der Kley 2021). But such impressive growth is yet to translate into deepening conversations with researchers and institutions elsewhere. The vast majority of Chinese scholarship is not informing global research on China, and the actual impact of many Chinese-initiated networks remains murky.
4. While it is far from the norm, collaboration between Chinese and foreign researchers in collaborative research is taking place. It also appears to be more common in Chinese-language publications involving Chinese and Global South researchers. This reflects China's increasing attractiveness as a study-abroad destination, particularly among those from the Global South. But it also underscores the persistent hierarchy in global knowledge production. Such

a hierarchy has many causes, but the economic and political imbalances across regions form a major reason. Researchers from the Global South, China to a lesser extent, face challenges with bureaucracy, visas, and funding, especially when conducting fieldwork in another country.

## RESEARCH THEMES

### OVERVIEW

Based on an extensive survey of literature on different regions, this study lists the major themes by region. Such a geographically oriented presentation aims to respect regional specificities. However, notable thematic similarities and differences also emerge across regions.

1. Across all regions, macro studies of broadly defined political and economic issues are the dominant form of research, as evidenced in the themes of security and international relations, and economy and development. These studies often rely on policy documents and macroeconomic data to offer a more direct response to China's increasing global ambitions in the past decade. Also included are various policy suggestions depending on the authors' affiliations.
2. In contrast, more grounded fieldwork that aims to make sense of the intricacies and nuances of China's presence is rarer. It is usually found in the smaller theme of migration and culture. In fact, a recent article on the state of the field of Global China in *The China Quarterly*, a leading journal of contemporary China based in the United Kingdom, calls for more fieldwork employing this approach going forward, rather than just broad policy analysis (Lee 2022). This, however, raises the question of who has the means and freedom of travel to carry out such fieldwork, which requires longer stays and follow-up visits, and by extension more institutional research support from home institutions and on the ground.
3. The prevalence of the environment as a research topic is a prime example of the glaring regional differences. China shares extensive and, in some cases, contested international borders with Southeast, South, and Central Asia, where management of international rivers has far-reaching ecological, economic, and political impacts. It is in Southeast Asia where transnational environmental cooperation with China becomes a reality, despite underlying tensions, and where environment emerges as a robust topic in studying China's local presence. In South Asia, it encompasses mostly disputes and security concerns. Related topics are more muted in Central Asia and almost non-existent in West Asia.
4. The regional structure in this section does not mean to exclude the growing cross-regional research both in and outside Asia. In the Chinese-language literature, for example, the Afro-Asia framework is still present despite its origin in China's diplomatic overture of solidarity during the Cold War era (Ma Lirong 2015). The BRI provides another context for discussing cross-regional issues (Zhan 2018). In the English-language literature, both Global North and Global South scholars undertake cross-regional studies that examine diverse topics, from China's management of transboundary rivers to the BRI's nuanced impact (Biba 2014; Sevilla 2017; Jones and Hameiri 2020). Such research once again confirms that regional division is just a heuristic device for understanding China's engagement with the Global South.

## CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

### Literature Overview

Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity in China-Southeast Asia connections, English remains the lingua franca in relevant studies, and political and economic issues dominate the research agenda. Southeast Asian scholarship on China-Southeast Asia grew out of two related concerns during the Cold War: the ethnic Chinese community's evolving relationship with their settled society and the need for the newly independent nation-states to counter and contain the influence of Communist China (Galway and Oppen 2022). Starting in the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and China's rising economic and geopolitical importance prompted many Southeast Asian countries to develop their research capacity for studying contemporary China. While reputable research institutions have emerged over the years in select countries such as Singapore and Vietnam (Tong Chee-Kiong and Lee 2020), some observers still believe that there is "a parallel dearth of expertise on China" (Shambaugh 2020, 179). And the distribution of such capacity is also uneven. Dedicated research support for China studies in the Philippines is less common, and it is often activists and social workers who have disseminated understandings of China through community practice (Clemente and Shih 2018).

Southeast Asian studies in China began in the early twentieth century in select universities on the southeast coast with extensive diasporic connections to Southeast Asia, and these universities dominated the field through at least the 1980s (Seah 2017a; Zhang Xiaoxin 2017). Early scholars tended to have lived in Southeast Asia, and many returned to the People's Republic of China to avoid persecution in Indonesia in the 1960s. As China's economic reform in the 1990s deepened its connections to Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), relevant programs of study began to spread to inland provinces on the border and further afield. More recent policies such as the BRI fueled the development of area studies in China in general, including Southeast Asian studies. Among the quantitatively impressive output, the majority of Chinese research on China-Southeast Asia examines broad political and economic issues, such as great power politics and the BRI. A lot of focus falls on specific countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, followed by Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, and the Philippines (Luo Yifu 2018). But many of the studies are derivative, if not repetitive, "armchair scholarship" based on "secondhand research" without using Southeast Asian language materials or collaborating with international peers (Kankan Xie 2021).

Another salient feature of Chinese scholarship is the strong policy orientation. Research on the South China Sea is a telling example. The number of Chinese papers on this topic grew dramatically around 2010, peaking in 2012, and then dropped sharply after 2017.<sup>4</sup> This roughly corresponded with a series of highly publicized controversies, including China's intensification of sovereign claims in 2009, the 2013 Filipino case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the Scarborough Shoal standoff, the consultation of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, the militarization of islands through reclamation projects and the subsequent environmental impact, and the United States' increasing military presence through Freedom of Navigation Operation Programs (FONOPs). Such significant fluctuation underscores the blurred boundary between scholarship and policy in the Chinese context.

### Security and International Relations

#### *Great and Smaller Powers*

Southeast Asia is no stranger to outside powers jockeying for supremacy. Japan's expansion into the region during WWII under the banner of pan-Asianism dealt a final blow to the legitimacy of centuries

of Western colonial rule (Hotta 2007). The defeat of Japan thrust the United States into the region as the most influential outside power during the Cold War, and its influence remains in the early twenty-first century. While China never established a colonial government structure in Southeast Asia, longstanding diasporic connections made ethnic Chinese a formidable force, particularly in the regional economy (Macauley 2021). The recent rise of China has further solidified the competition between two great powers in the region. English-language scholarship has long documented the strategic hedging of Southeast Asian countries between the outside powers in order to maximize their interests, with Malaysia being a prime example (Kuik 2008; Kuik, Idris, and Nor 2012; Hong Liu and Lim 2019; Kuik 2021b). Scholars caution against any predetermined result of such competition and emphasize that internal debates and conflicts in Southeast Asian nations and their idiosyncratic execution of the BRI are going to play as important a role in the region's strategic outlook (Lampton, Ho, and Kuik 2020; Shambaugh 2020). But some believe that the US over-emphasis on defense and security allows China's successful economic outreach in the region, and that cooperation with middle powers such as ASEAN and Australia will be imperative for US interests (Stromseth 2021).<sup>5</sup>

Chinese-language scholarship in the 2000s was more open towards embracing middle powers as an important force to promote a multi-polar world away from American dominance (Qian Hao 2007, 52). But after Australia, Japan, and the United States sided with the Philippines following the 2016 ruling by a tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration against China's claims in the South China Sea, Chinese scholars have become more suspicious of what they consider outside middle and great powers in Southeast Asia (Feng Lei and Yu 2016). Some even suggest an upgrade of China-ASEAN relations in defense and military affairs as a deterrent (Du Lan 2020). With regard to Indonesia, a regional middle power, Chinese scholars show understanding of its balancing act between China and the United States (Sun Xihui 2019; Bi and Qu 2020).

### *China-ASEAN*

Despite ongoing challenges, ASEAN is arguably "Asia's first viable regional association" (Acharya 2017). Thanks to the strategy of "omni-enmeshment" and "complex balancing" (Goh 2007, 119, 139-40), it has played an indispensable role in engaging outside powers, including China, India, and the United States, as a regional multilateral force.

There is no consensus in the English-language literature on the increasingly close relationship between China and ASEAN. Some consider the rise of China "an existential threat" to ASEAN, citing the former's victories in preventing a coherent policy of dispute resolution (Beeson 2016). Some worry that the "rifts and distrust" within ASEAN will enable Beijing to "divide and conquer" (Hiebert 2020, 537). Despite being an "institutional mirage," ASEAN has proven to be an essential mechanism for member states to collectively recalibrate their foreign policy to advance national interests, according to more optimistic views (Emmerson 2020, 139-140). The organization is less "an institutional device ... for collective action" than a symbol of "regional resilience" that strengthens individual countries' bargaining power (Rüland 2014, 246).

Recent studies in Chinese on ASEAN often situate it within the larger competition between China and the United States and focuses on its hedging between outside powers (Chen Qi and Guan 2014, 24; Luo, Zhang, and Zhang 2022; Luo and Zhang 2022; Wang Chuanjian and Wei 2022). A recent essay by a respected senior scholar of China-Southeast Asia connections contends that China's determination to maintain a strong naval presence in the South China Sea despite strong US opposition needs to be understood in the long history of evolving Chinese understandings of the importance of maritime frontiers. China's growing naval power coincides with the emergence of ASEAN as a dynamic regional actor, which provides opportunities and challenges for both to build peaceful relations (Wang Gungwu 2022). In a sense, these studies are correcting a longstanding weakness in China's Southeast

Asian studies as seen by outside observers, namely “the tendency to downplay the autonomous agency” of weaker states (Shambaugh 2020, 182-183).

### *South China Sea Disputes*

The resource-rich and strategically important South China Sea between China and Southeast Asia has resulted in competing sovereign claims and Exclusive Economic Zones. The parties to such disputes are not just China and relevant Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. They also involve mainland China and Taiwan, to which the former ruling party retreated after losing mainland China in the Chinese civil war in the late 1940s (Zou 2021).

Scholars debate the legal meanings of the common Chinese cartographic exercise of marking the “nine-dash line” around the South China Sea. It is far from settled as to whether the markings constitute the national border, historic waters, or possession of islands (Pharand 1971; Wang Ying and Ma 2003). First appearing in the official maps of China in 1948, these dashed lines encircle about 80% of the South China Sea in the shape of the letter “U,” but their meanings have never been clarified by any Chinese government. Representing a mainstream position, Jia Yu (2012; 2015) argues that the dashed lines represent China’s historic rights in the South China Sea, which include “sovereignty” over all the shoals and islands and “nonexclusive rights,” including traditional fishing and historic rights of navigation. Li Jinming (2010), however, questions the legal basis of historic titles, given that no Chinese administration has consistently exercised exclusive power within the nine-dash lines. He points out that the government in Taiwan first articulated this position in 1989 and 1993, which ignited controversy both domestically and internationally. Li argues that the dashed lines represent a simple claim to all the islands, islets, reefs, and seamounts within the encircled space, which was a common cartographic practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although Chinese scholars tend to emphasize the non-threatening nature of these Chinese claims, others believe that relevant parties, such as ASEAN, need to show solidarity in order to strengthen their positions at the negotiation table (Majumdar 2015).

Other Chinese scholars pay attention to the larger international context beyond China and Southeast Asia. Some argue that China enjoys historical rights in addition to rights granted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Zhiguo Gao and Jia 2013; Gao Zhiguo and Jia 2014). Some attribute the South China Sea disputes to the United States’ geopolitical containment of China (He Zhigong and An 2010). But the deteriorating relationship with the United States after 2017 prompted China to moderate its position on the South China Sea, particularly with regard to Southeast Asian countries, in order to mold the regional order in its favor (Feng Liu 2020).

## Economy and Development

### *The Long Trajectory of Regional Integration*

While the BRI dominates the current discussions of China’s economic engagement in Southeast Asia, it is important to remember that there is a longer history of such engagement because of the two sides’ geographical proximity and the high level of endogenous efforts at regional integration in Southeast Asia. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which includes the Yunnan and Guangxi regions in southwest China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, attracted considerable interest. First proposed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992 through a developmental program, the grouping gained momentum in the 2000s among policymakers and international NGOs. Initially, the ADB and Japan took the lead in promoting infrastructure as the foundation for robust development. But as China emerged as the subregion’s economic engine, it started to lead a series of initiatives ranging from educational exchange to dam projects in the late 2000s, culminating in the articulation of the BRI and the institutionalization of the Lancang-Mekong



Cooperation (LMC) in 2016 (Grünwald 2020). The United States responded with the Lower Mekong Initiative as part of its “Pivot to Asia” during the Obama administration (Le 2016).

Scholars have debated the effect of these competing programs on the region’s development and integration (Heng 2014; Panthamit and Chaiboonsri 2020). Some argue that the “weak institutional capacity” of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam constitutes the main hurdle to the timely completion of infrastructure targets, and highlight the risk of geopolitical competition in derailing development projects (Verbiest 2013). Others point out that the unevenness of development in the GMS, not just between China and relevant Southeast Asian countries but also among those countries themselves, is bound to engender new dynamics of integration and division (Xiangming Chen and Stone 2013; Cui 2018).

Starting in the mid-2000s, economic integration between China and Southeast Asia took the form of bilateral and multinational trade agreements (Rahul Sen 2006). The implementation of the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) was followed by the strengthening of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT, ASEAN and China, Japan, and South Korea) structure in 2007, and the inception of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, including the ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) in 2011. The RCEP came into effect in the beginning of 2022. Much research examines the benefits of such agreements on national economies (Jiang and Liu 2007; Rahman, Molla, and Murad 2008; Lang and Yin 2009; Lin Sun and Reed 2010; Kwan and Qiu 2010; Sun Lin and Xu 2011; Khan and Yu 2013). Even studies not just focusing on China and Southeast Asia (both individual countries and the ASEAN) give their free trade agreements particular attention because of the volume (Yanying Zhang, Zhang, and Fung 2007; Weeramantry 2017). Some focus on policy advice for particular industries covered in the agreements (Qiu et al. 2007; Irshad and Xin 2014; Hamid and Aslam 2017). But as early research notes, national interests remain paramount vis-à-vis the relative weakness of ASEAN as a coherent negotiation party (Lin Sun and Reed 2010).

The introduction of the BRI in the early 2010s deepened the China-Southeast Asia integration of previous decades. Take the internationalization of the Chinese currency renminbi (RMB) as an example. Before the BRI, there were already preliminary discussions of using Southeast Asia, whether Singapore or developing countries such as Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, as a launching ground for increasing the international profile of the RMB (Yang Changyong 2010; Ma Jun 2012; Fan Zuojun and Lu 2013). The enormous financing need in the BRI makes such discussions even more relevant (Cao Wei, Yan, and Bao 2016), extending to the possible use of digital Chinese currency (Chen Yanhe and Wang 2021).

China’s outbound investment and construction of huge infrastructural projects mark the country’s current stature as much more than a trade partner in Southeast Asia. A recent edited volume in English provides a comprehensive overview on the political economy of the BRI in Southeast Asia (Hong Liu, Tan, and Lim 2021). The annual blue books on development in Southeast Asia by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Xiamen University have become a popular reference in Chinese among policy and business circles about the region, including its connections to China in general.<sup>6</sup>

It is not difficult to find criticisms of the BRI as a rising outside superpower’s infrastructural project which may be actually detrimental to the local livelihood and environment in Southeast Asia and beyond (Rippa 2020). But scholars caution against viewing the BRI as a purely Chinese project. There is no uniform Southeast Asian approach to the BRI, as individual countries calculate their own interests (Kuik 2021a). The Chinese-invested industrial parks in Southeast Asia need to “embed” various local factors, from the geographical environment to the governance model, to succeed (Tao Song et al. 2018). The situation is similar when it comes to infrastructural projects. Civil society groups and local businesses have proven capable of influencing the planning and outcomes of Chinese initiatives, in addition to the host government leveraging such initiatives for “legitimacy narratives, internal

sociopolitical structures, and development needs” (Lampton, Ho, and Kuik 2020, 85). The construction of the Jakarta-Bandung high speed rail in Indonesia by a Chinese state-owned enterprise with joint Chinese-Indonesian financing also depends on Indonesia’s embrace of transnational state capitalism (Liu and Lim 2022). The publication of co-authored research by Indonesian and Chinese scholars in China on Indonesian reactions to the BRI, both positive (from the government) and negative (from scholars), also testifies to Chinese concerns with the local dimensions of the BRI (Murniasari and Shi 2016).

More in-depth Chinese-language scholarship on the BRI often draws upon macroeconomic data and pays increasing attention to assessing its effect in Southeast Asia. Some find that China’s bilateral trade with the region remains uneven, with Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand as legacy partners and Vietnam being a fast-growing one (Zong and Zheng 2017). In the global rollout of the BRI, Southeast Asia overall is still China’s closest trading partner compared to other regions (Song Zhouying, Che, and Zhang 2017). Chinese researchers generally agree that BRI projects across the world are still experiencing growth shock and that their efficiency needs improving. But they differ as to how such efficiency in Southeast Asia compares to other regions (Tian and Xu 2016; Ji Kaiwen and Zhou 2018).

### *Competing Visions of Regional Integration*

Because of the strategic location of Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that there have been different plans of fostering regional integration besides the Chinese ones. As mentioned above, the ADB under Japan started supporting the GMS in the 1990s. A few years before the introduction of the BRI, certain researchers were hopeful about China’s presence in the region being a catalyst for greater integration from Japan and South Korea to India (Kwan and Qiu 2010; Yunling Zhang and Shen 2012). Some pointed out that the coordination between China and Japan would be an important determining factor in facilitating Southeast Asia’s further integration with East Asia (Wang Yuzhu 2011).

The rollout of the BRI does not seem to have increased such desired coordination among outside powers in Southeast Asia (Dollar 2021). Japan never committed to the BRI framework and embraces the Indo-Pacific as a counter to the Chinese initiative (Insisa and Pugliese 2022). It also promotes its own Partnership for Quality Infrastructure as a competitor to the BRI in the region (Berger 2019). The negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the 2000s and 2010s, which involved major economies such as Japan, Singapore, Australia, Chile, Canada, and the United States, intentionally excluded China (Hamanaka 2014). After the United States withdrew from the TPP in early 2017, Japan led the negotiation for reviving the TPP through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement, which came into effect in late 2018.

Interestingly, both the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan have applied to join the new iteration of the TPP. This highlights another wrinkle in the competition for integration with Southeast Asia, as the two sides have sharply different views of Taiwan’s international status. Starting in the mid-1990s, the Taiwan government unveiled plans to move outbound direct investment further to Southeast Asia in order to reduce economic dependence on mainland China. The so-called Southbound Policy continued through the succession of ruling parties in the twenty-first century. It got a new lease on life in 2016 as the New Southbound Policy, which the pro-independence government linked to the Indo-Pacific, to include not just Southeast Asia but also South Asia and Oceania. Although the government insists that the New Southbound Policy does not intend to compete with the BRI, researchers are concerned that Taiwan is in no position to match mainland China’s financial resources in even just one country such as Thailand, let alone Southeast Asia as a region or further afield. They believe that a soft power approach in order to win hearts and minds is warranted and that an improved relationship with mainland China is still necessary for the New Southbound Policy to work (William Yang 2018; Chen Shangmao, Liu, and Lin 2019).

### *Categorizing Development Models*

As both China and Southeast Asia develop into dynamic non-Western economies, there is also concomitant scholarly interest in categorizing their respective models in order to augment Global South perspectives on theories of development (Witt and Redding 2013). But scholars consistently caution against simplistic labeling based on regime types because this obscures significant internal heterogeneity and debates (Reilly 2007; Ferchen 2013; Pepinsky 2021). This caution is also warranted when it comes to how law actually works in China and Indonesia, the world's most and fourth populous countries, and the largest authoritarian and newly democratic states respectively (Hurst 2018). To simply assert how they come up short in the Western-centric rule of law is not productive in understanding what interests law protects and how law legitimates economic and political interactions.

In particular, how China has adopted the so-called "Singapore model" has attracted specific attention. While there is a long history of China's learning of various foreign models, Singapore stood out in the early 1990s. The city-state with ethnic Chinese comprising three quarters of its population boasted economic prosperity and stable one-party rule when post-Tiananmen China desperately needed both (Kai Yang and Ortmann 2018). But there is no consensus as to what exactly China learned from Singapore. At the macro level, there are doubts about whether China has understood the Singapore model in its entirety, such as the colonial governance legacy, free market, and limited electoral politics, or is just invoking the city-state as a convenient cover for its own preferred model of strict authoritarian rule and government intervention in the market (Ortmann 2012; Benjamin Ho 2018; Thompson and Ortmann 2018). In fact, a Chinese scholar with long-term experience in Singapore already pointed out to Chinese readers in 2013 that China tended to overlook Singapore's democratic model, which allows a competitive process for picking qualified candidates in the ruling party (Zheng 2013). But when it comes to mid-level cadres going to Singapore for short training programs, researchers find that their learning overwhelmingly focused on pragmatic governance rather than ideological proximity (Hong Liu and Wang 2018).

Beyond labeling the Chinese or Singaporean models, a related question is how China has actually learned from Singapore. A recent case study delves into the actual policy transfer process in the successful China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park, founded in 1994 (Hong Liu and Wang 2021). Contrary to existing theory, rooted in North-South policy transfer, state corporations from both China and Singapore serve as an efficient interface between the national and local governments and market, and play a positive role in transferring, localizing, and institutionalizing policies. More case studies along these lines could lead to even more sophisticated understandings of economic development in the Global South.

### *Environmental Implications*

Given the outpouring of Chinese investments into the region, especially in the form of infrastructure and other large-scale development projects, more research is evaluating their impact on local ecology and the environment. Even before China became the dominant outside economic power in the region, an early report by Oxfam Australia already criticized the infrastructure-centered model in the Greater Mekong Subregion backed by the Asian Development Bank as exploitative of local communities and damaging to the environment (Cornford and Matthews 2008). A team of researchers based in Malaysia and the Netherlands finds that the Lao government faces challenges in enforcing environmental laws about bear farming because of the Chinese market (Livingstone, Gomez, and Bouhuys 2018). A team involving researchers in the Netherlands, China, and Myanmar examines how the changing Chinese economy (in this case, its corn production) and developmental projects (a hydropower dam on the Salween River) have reshaped the "axis of resource conflicts" in northern Myanmar (Borras, Franco, and Nam 2020). They emphasize how political decisions could have profound local impacts and the



need to incorporate climate justice into the decision-making process. Scholars also find that Laos, a land-locked country, has witnessed a certain level of green development, but that more attention to sustainable water management is needed in the long term (McCartney and Brunner 2021).

Chinese researchers are well aware of the economic, environmental, and ecological connections between China and Southeast Asia. Some argue that China's deepening commitment to green energy creates ample space in collaborating with big developing countries that are likely to remain significant greenhouse emitters, such as Indonesia (Wu Jing et al. 2019). With regard to the four major transboundary rivers (the Salween, the Mekong, the Irrawaddy, and the Red River), they call for more regional cooperation and public outreach to ease tensions and defuse the international perception of China's threat to downriver water resources in Southeast Asia (Hong Juhua and Luo 2015). According to empirical research in English (Selina Ho 2014, 2016), the power hierarchy between China and relevant Southeast Asian states and pre-existing regional cooperation mechanisms in Southeast Asia actually induces more cooperation in managing these international rivers.

Starting in the early 2000s, there was growing criticism in Southeast Asia of the “fundamental inadequacies” of developmental doctrines advocated by the United States and international organizations (Woo 2004). Following the call by some African intellectuals for a development strategy that is “neither Washington nor Beijing” (Sanusi 2011), Southeast Asian scholars are also trying to assert their unique development model. Some argue that a concerted “ecosystem-building” should be the foundation of an emergent “ASEAN consensus” that distinguishes itself from the Washington Consensus on free trade, led by the United States, and the Beijing consensus on top-down governance, led by China (Vu and Hartley, 2020; Vu 2021, 131).

## Migration and Culture

### *Diverse Chineseness*

Thanks to shared overland borders and intricate maritime connections, Southeast Asia has been a major destination for Han Chinese emigration for centuries. The life of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia has also long been a prominent topic in the larger field which used to be known as “overseas Chinese” studies in both Chinese- and English-language literature (Skinner 1957; Wang Gungwu 1988, 2005; Suryadinata 1997, 2007; Wang Ling-Chi and Wang 1998; Wickberg 2002; Zhuang Guotu 2002; Zhang Xiaoxin 2017; Seah 2017a, 2017b). However, this term assumes a uniform gravity of Chineseness tied to the Chinese state in the identities of those transnational actors, which is complicated by the fundamental sociopolitical changes in both China and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “Ethnic Chinese” is now the more neutral term. Beyond the ancestor rituals often associated with Chinese religious identity, Buddhism and Islam also play an important role in the religious connections between China and Southeast Asia, home to several Buddhist- and Muslim-majority countries. So far, however, religion as an important dimension of China-Southeast Asia engagement has not received due attention (Ngeow 2019).

More recent scholarship in both Chinese and English has taken note of a new wave of Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia starting in the late twentieth century and its implications for more established Chinese communities there (Dai Fan 2011; Zhuang Guotu and Zhang 2012; Zhuang Guotu 2020). In an edited volume, an international group of scholars offer grounded reflections on similar issues from a bottom-up perspective. There are chapters on not only specific situations in countries such as Cambodia and Singapore, but also rarely studied topics such as sex work as part of the Sino-Vietnamese international trade in the Chinese-language literature (Nyíri and Tan 2017). Although the Chinese government is ambitious in winning more hearts and minds among ethnic Chinese for its signature BRI project in Southeast Asia, the case of young, third-generation Chinese-Filipinos shows

that there is still a long way to go (Que 2019). Relatedly, the leaders of new Chinese immigrants to Laos are not simply the loyal promoters of the agenda of the Chinese state, but rather adept business actors who further their own interests by appropriating Beijing's rhetoric and performing patriotic duties (Wanjing Chen 2022).

Though still in short supply in general in the study of China-Southeast Asia, fieldwork is more likely to feature in research on migration and borderlands, broadly defined. Researchers have looked into how Buddhist ritual practices and story-telling inform transnational identities among China, Myanmar, and Thailand. Nuanced meaning-making by local communities challenges conventional understandings of the geographical divide and ethnic formation (Kojima and Badenoch 2013; O'Morchoe 2020). Another monograph on Chinese Muslims in Indonesia highlights the significant diversity within this community, which includes mostly recent Chinese converts to Islam, but also Chinese married to non-Chinese Muslims. How they juxtapose Chineseness and Islam in everyday life provides a unique perspective on a more inclusive post-reform Indonesia (Hew 2017).

### *Contested Chinese Language Instruction*

Historically, Chinese (Mandarin) language education in Southeast Asia was often a friction point between Chinese communities and their host governments due to perceived divided allegiances. The rise of contemporary China and its increasing economic draw generate new dynamics surrounding this issue. According to two Thai researchers who received their PhDs in China, Thailand is expanding Chinese language instruction in not just the formal educational system, but also in separate schools for ethnic Chinese. It remains to be seen how this instruction will be further institutionalized in order to strengthen the linguistic capability of Thai students (Duangmanee 2010; Worrachaiyut 2012). In Indonesia, the downfall of Suharto in 1998 unleashed a boom in Mandarin education among both Chinese and non-Chinese Indonesians, which accelerated throughout the early twenty-first century (Hoon and Kuntjara 2019). Chinese scholars also believe that more regional cooperation and publication of locally suited textbooks are necessary to sustain the interest in Chinese language learning in Southeast Asia (Wu Jian and Yang 2018).

Similar to economic integration, Chinese language teaching in Southeast Asia has not been free from the dynamic between mainland China and Taiwan. While Taiwan maintained an edge during much of the Cold War through diplomatic relations with countries with significant Chinese populations, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, the economic rise of mainland China in recent decades is changing the balance through initiatives such as Confucius Institutes. A critical study by two researchers in Taiwan cautions against equating the local reception of Chinese language instruction through the Confucius Institute to the host government's ties to China. They find that although both Cambodia and Myanmar are friendly with China, the latter is much less enthusiastic about the Chinese initiative and only acquiesces to limited teaching among the local Chinese community (Hsiao and Yang 2014). Another researcher from Taiwan conducted fieldwork among ethnic Chinese in Northern Thailand, where Taiwan spent considerable resources at the height of the Cold War in supporting Chinese language teaching and agricultural technology transfer, as well as covert sabotage against the Chinese government. He argues that those earlier efforts helped pave the way for contemporary China's outreach to the community and generate ongoing transnational entanglement in the daily life of the local Chinese (Hung 2022).

## CHINA AND SOUTH ASIA

### Literature Overview

Unlike the situation in Southeast Asia, where power, influence, and resources are distributed across several middle powers and smaller states, India is the undisputed regional leader in South Asia. It leads in knowledge production about China and looms large in China's engagement with other countries in the region. Similar to other regions, political and economic issues dominate the existing scholarship. China-India studies have seen impressive growth recently. Pairing India and China in a single framework helps “expose and unsettle disciplinary assumptions” beyond Asian studies (Mangalagiri and Sen 2022). But researchers need to guard against the tendency to essentialize “China” and “India” as “presupposed geographical or cultural areas” (Sen 2021). This longstanding topic of study spans large swaths of history, from premodern Buddhism to the present (Sen 2017). A growing number of recent books tackles particularly the sociopolitical and cultural interactions between the two countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and offers ample insights into the present (Andrew Liu 2020; Sen and Tsui 2021; Gvili 2022; Mangalagiri 2023). Although the focus of this review is not historical per se, how to bridge these methodologically reflective studies of the relatively recent past and the social scientific scholarship focusing on the contemporary period remains an important task.

On the Chinese side, the bulk of publications in leading journals also focuses on broad political and economic issues, with the BRI being a particularly popular topic. Among the various countries in South Asia, India and Pakistan receive the most attention. The former is the supreme regional power, and the latter is a longtime Chinese ally. Smaller countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka account for less research in general.

Just as in the case of Southeast Asia, Chinese scholars' limited use of primary sources in local languages and reliance on Chinese- and English-language sources constitute a major shortcoming. In one study of Indian influence on the delineation of the China-Nepal border, for example, the author cites only Chinese translations of Indian reports, which undermines the study's rigor and credibility (Mu A'ni 2015). Some consider such linguistic limitations as potentially compromising the Chinese position in border negotiations (Dai Chaowu 2014), and propose relevant language training as foundational to implementing the BRI (Yue 2022). Such framing underscores how Chinese-language scholarship is generally in lockstep with government policies, particularly with regard to topics considered politically sensitive.

### Security and International Relations

#### *Shifting Regional Dynamics*

Compared to Southeast Asia, regional cooperation in South Asia has been lackluster. One of the most important reasons is the protracted tension between India and Pakistan, two regional nuclear powers locked in territorial disputes dating back to their founding in the aftermath of the partition of British India in 1947. As the most powerful member state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India actually lacks a strategic interest in facilitating regional cooperation given its global ambitions and its preoccupation with China. This ironically undermines Indian leadership in the region because its neighbors find it useful to leverage their positions through collaboration with China (Ghosh 2013). Nevertheless, regional institutions provide a “relatively neutral playground” for India and China to pursue their shared interests and cultivate mutual trust (Singh 2011). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China and Russia, originally focusing on Central Asia, could

also offer an opportunity for India and Pakistan to maintain security dialogues to avoid unexpected military clashes (Ahmed, Ahmed, and Bhatnagar 2019). Some Chinese and Afghan researchers believe that the SCO can play a more active role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan under Taliban rule (Wang Li, Hameedullah, and Daim 2022).

Facing such a fraught region, some Chinese observers believe that China should focus on key countries on the western and eastern end of South Asia—Pakistan and Myanmar respectively—to maximize its regional interests (Du Debin and Ma 2012). However, cultivating relationships with particular South Asian countries requires Beijing to carry out a balancing act without overtly antagonizing other regional stakeholders (Jingdong Yuan 2011). International researchers also report that despite China's proactive promotion of itself as an alternative to India, it has so far maintained its distance from domestic politics in the region (Ahmed and Sheikh 2021).

In response to China's growing presence in South Asia and deepening ties with Pakistan, India generally takes the Chinese rhetoric of regional collaboration as a justification for realpolitik maneuvers for prestige and resources (Bhattacharya 2010). This has not stopped scholars from taking cues from the Chinese efforts to reformulate international relations theory according to Tianxia (天下 “all under heaven”) and championing an alternative Hindu framework for the same theory centered on the concept of Advaita (literally “non-dual”; Shahi and Gennaro Ascione 2016).

Such a religio-philosophical framing of international relations coincides with India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific as a new regional outlook. Although the concept dates back to the strategic vision of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century, it befits post-Cold War India as the country has tried to go beyond the confine of South Asia, reengage East and Southeast Asia, and counterbalance China in a new “great game” (Batabyal 2006; Acharya 2017; Bajpae 2017). The concrete activities of India's “Act East” strategies since the 1990s include the co-founding of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC, 1997) and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (2000), and participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit (Wu Zhaoli 2015).

“Indo-Pacific” gained more international currency after 2010 as strategic thinkers in United States also started using the term amid the new pivot to Asia. From the US perspective, this regional vision represents a new order that challenges China's rise and align India's global ambitions with other regional partners (Japan and Australia) based on shared democratic values and security interests. However, the idea is vague enough to allow India's own interpretation (Chacko 2014; Mohan and Mishra 2018). Some characterize India's Indo-Pacific strategy as “evasive balancing,” in that the Indian state is pursuing two contradictory goals—balancing China with the US while reassuring Beijing that it is not balancing China—and evading a public commitment to either (Rajagopalan 2020).

### *Bilateral Relations*

The bilateral focus in understanding China's engagement with individual countries in South Asia is also common, although researchers often situate that focus in the larger multilateral context as mentioned in the previous section. Because of the two countries' stature, the Sino-Indian relationship continues to receive a lot of attention. A study back in 2013 argued that that the two sides would continue to compete in resources and reputation while continuing cooperation in establishing a multipolar world order beyond the West (Panda 2013). Multinational contributors to a more recent edited volume continue to make sense of this competitive-cum-cooperative relationship in various fields, from military standoffs to global security (Bajpai, Ho, and Miller 2020).

The China-Pakistan relationship has also generated a sizable body of literature. While the two sides long maintained a de facto alliance, they further elevated this to a so-called “all-weather” partnership in recent years in order to counteract India. This thrusts China deeper into Pakistan's contentious domestic security and politics, and complicates the signature Chinese economic project

known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC; Small 2015). The political implications of CPEC are becoming increasingly clear in recent English-language literature. Researchers explore how the Pakistan Armed Forces provides protection and attracts the scrutiny of Chinese investment (Boon and Ong 2021), and how the CPEC gradually expanded to joint efforts in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan (Ali 2022). While still optimistic about the future of the CPEC, Chinese scholars are also increasingly concerned with the geopolitical headwind against this ostensibly economic project, involving factors such as terrorism, the dispute over Kashmir, and the US Indo-Pacific strategy (Lan and Jiang Ying 2019; Liu Changmin and Jiao Jian 2020; Wu Zhaoli 2021; Song Haiyang 2022).

Although China sided with Pakistan on the independence of Bangladesh in the early 1970s, Sino-Bangladeshi relations have seen stable growth especially in the twenty-first century, thanks to China's adherence to the non-interference principle. India's assistance in the independence struggle ironically did not translate into lasting goodwill between the two sides, due to India's perceived preference for particular politicians (Datta 2008). More recent studies confirm the strategic hedging of Bangladesh between China and India, as both powers will play an essential role in the country's economic prosperity and political stability (Alam 2019; Yasmin 2019; Hossain and Islam 2021).

Scholars find a similar dynamic in Sri Lanka. The Sino-Indian relationship will remain crucial in sustaining the "cooperative momentum" between China and the island nation (Fernando 2010). And it is in Sri Lanka's best interests to continue engaging both India and China (Attanayake and Atmakuri 2021). On the Chinese side, the "soft-power crusade" since the 2000s, especially its growing foreign aid and the expansion of the Confucius Institute network, has been helpful in enhancing China's public image in Sri Lanka (Rajapakshe 2016). And Sri Lanka still needs to improve its domestic governance and economic outreach in order to receive a fair share of benefits in balancing between China and India (Deyshappriya 2019; De Silva 2020).

### *Contestation over Transboundary Water Resources*

With the Yarlung Zangbo flowing through the Tibetan Plateau in China and into the Bengal delta in India and Bangladesh as Brahmaputra, transboundary rivers are also a relevant issue in China-South Asia. Compared to Southeast Asia, there is less cooperation than contestation. As a result, we include this topic under the Security and International Relations theme here.

There are different reasons for this lower level of cooperation between China and particularly India in managing international water resources. The power hierarchy between China and relevant Southeast Asian states (Selina Ho 2014) and pre-existing regional cooperation mechanisms in Southeast Asia (Selina Ho 2016) induce more cooperation. In contrast, the greater power parity between China and India (Selina Ho 2014) and lack of such cooperation mechanisms in South Asia (Selina Ho 2016) lead to both powers' more assertive positions on transboundary water resources here.

With the expansion of dam building in both China and South Asia, Chinese investments have stirred controversies, particularly in India.<sup>7</sup> Given India's lackluster record on facilitating any major hydroelectric projects beyond its border, it is particularly sensitive about Beijing's dam initiatives in its neighboring countries (Chaturvedy and Malone 2012). Brahma Chellaney, who popularized the notion of the "debt trap," is among the most vocal critics of China's hydroengineering on the Tibet plateau (Chellaney 2011). Realists, like Uttam Kumar Sinha (2012), argue that India ought to develop a "counter-hydro-hegemony strategy," given China's aggressive dam construction on international rivers such as the Brahmaputra. And given the significant political and ecological impacts of Chinese dams, Indian scholars are mostly critical of China's lack of transparency and its refusal to commit to any form of institutionalized policing mechanism. Some Indian thinkers argue that ecological concerns alone are sufficient to reject the Chinese developmental model, especially in fragile regions like Tibet (Gautam 2010).



Others argue that such an aggressive infrastructural drive must be understood through alternative frameworks such as securitization theory, which contextualize China's "hydro-behaviors" as a way of creating long-term stability through opportunistic and intermittent cooperation (Biba 2018). Despite some preliminary mechanisms of transnational cooperation, such as data sharing, stakeholders' vested interests further destabilize the region in the absence of substantive collaboration (Lei Xie, Zhang, and Panda 2018). A team of researchers based in Singapore finds that the Sino-Indian water dispute is in a curious place where both sides refrain from outright conflicts and high-profile cooperation because of the simultaneous realization of the harm of securitizing the water issue and the lack of political will and trust (Selina Ho, Qian, and Yan 2019). This challenges the conventional wisdom that cooperation provokes desecuritization.

It is worth pointing out that national attitudes to these controversies do differ. Given Nepal's reliance on international funding for hydroelectric development, its reactions to Chinese-funded dam building have been less critical (Dixit and Gyawali 2010).

## Economy and Development

### *Shared Interests in Development*

As home to some of the world's most populous developing countries, China and South Asia share interests in mutual development models. Back in the 1990s, Chinese scholars had already noticed the potential of micro-finance in Bangladesh for solving rural problems in China (Tang Min and Yao 1996). Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank, which won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, was a popular subject (Zhao Limei 2004; Guo Jianping 2007; Kong Lingjia and Zhang 2021). Such interest appears to have waned after the financial crisis of 2008, given China's reemphasis on lending to big infrastructural projects. Reflecting similar domestic concerns, the Indian model of financing medium-to-small businesses attracts Chinese economists concerned about the persistently high borrowing cost for most non-state-owned Chinese companies (Lü 2015).

South Asian scholars are interested in understanding the underlying mechanism behind China's economic success. Some argue that corporate ownership reforms have incentivized private companies to make riskier financial choices, which have resulted in higher leverage ratios (Vijavakumaran and Vijavakumaran 2019). There is also a growing literature that challenges the Chinese model's obsession with GDP growth. A team of researchers (Knight, Ma, and Gunatilaka 2022) analyze a series of factors and suggest that income inequality (especially between cities and the countryside) and a lack of social welfare (particularly for the elderly) have led to a decline in Chinese rural regions' happiness, despite growing household income.

Like their peers in other developing countries, Pakistani researchers are interested in understanding China's investment strategy, especially the impact of major policy initiatives like the BRI. Some have teamed up with Chinese scholars and reached cautiously optimistic conclusions, while acknowledging the heterogeneity among China's trading partners and investment host countries (Mao et al. 2019). Others have challenged the conventional wisdom about Chinese investment. Contrary to the understanding that China is hardly bothered by host countries' political institutions and stability, some researchers argue that China's outbound foreign direct investment in Asia and Africa is significantly determined by the institutional capacity of host countries, with the exception of the energy sector (Kamal et al. 2020).

Even in countries with relatively limited capacity, such as Afghanistan, a few researchers there have co-authored with collaborators based in China and elsewhere. Some investigate how inland regions of China, which tend to have a lower degree of internationalization, exhibit greater entrepreneurial intention than highly globalized hubs like Shenzhen (Elston and Weidinger 2019). Others reveal the

important role of local leaders in negotiating with the state, which can, without direct intervention, influence initiatives meant to promote self-governance (Ying Chang, Lau, and Calogero 2019). The influx of Chinese investment in copper mining in Afghanistan also results in forced relocation of local communities, and a significant loss of both cultural tradition and labor income (Dastgir, Kawata, and Yoshida 2018).

### *Competing Visions of Regional Integration*

There is no uniform reaction to the BRI among South Asian countries. Many in India perceive it as a direct competitor to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and the Indian government has been reluctant to participate in the BRI (Baruah 2017; Das 2017). But it is worth noting that India still joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the multilateral financing agency under China's leadership closely associated with the BRI, because of its perceived transparency in promoting connectivity (Kumar 2021).

For countries like Sri Lanka, the BRI seems to provide a platform for domestic development. As a flagship BRI project, the massive buildup of the Port of Colombo has stirred international controversy given its various problems, especially financial. Indian scholars like Brahma Chellaney (2017) have helped popularize the worry that many Chinese projects may become de facto "debt traps" for unsuspecting countries. A group of international researchers, however, argue that the Port of Colombo will continue to serve as a critical transshipping hub in the region as it is further integrated with other BRI projects such as land-based economic corridors, like the one in the Greater Mekong region (Ruan et al. 2019).

Chinese scholars also dismiss charges that BRI serves as a "debt trap" for developing countries eager for Chinese investment. They describe the "debt trap theory" as a tactic of "deception and alienation" meant to undermine China's overseas image, and analyze how the Indian government has leveraged concerns about the BRI's transparency and long-term impact on its diplomatic operations, especially in the Maldives (Yang Siling and Gao Huiping 2019). But their argument sometimes appears overly defensive of the Chinese government position and could be strengthened by specific engagement with criticisms raised by different researchers.

As a resource-rich longtime Chinese ally to counteract India, Pakistan emerges as a major pillar of the BRI and a main research topic. Even before the formal launch of the BRI, Chinese enterprise had already showed deep interest in the Pakistani market as part of its international strategy (Wu Ruyue 2013). A major concern in the Chinese-language scholarship is how to leverage the comparative advantages between the Chinese and Pakistani economies and thereby translate a longstanding political relationship into economic integration (e.g., Gao Zhigang and Zhang 2015). However, such studies tend to overlook the social and political diversity within Pakistan and fail to grasp the delicate balance of power at both central and local levels. When Chinese projects began to run into unexpected difficulties in the mid-2010s, Chinese scholars were forced to tone down optimistic projections. Liu Zongyi (2016) blames the limited progress of the hallmark China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the domestic politics of Pakistan. He argues that while the Pakistani elite is "ambivalent" about China's growing influence, the Pakistani public has been overpromised the actual benefit of CPEC and thus has "unrealistic" expectations. In other words, Liu recognizes that China has failed to persuade Pakistanis as a whole. Because China's developmental plan exacerbates inequality within Pakistan, Chinese policymakers must be cognizant of potential pushbacks. As Liu has warned, recent attacks on Chinese engineers and volunteer teachers highlight the imbalances of China's Pakistan strategy.

English-language studies on the CPEC are more attentive to what happens on the ground in Pakistan. Already a 2007 study mentioned the need for more structural reform in Pakistan in order to fully capture the economic benefits of engaging China (Kumar 2007). High-profile transnational projects often roll right past needy local residents near the sensitive borders of China, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, lead to further economic marginalization and even more limited social services, and

enrich powerful local brokers (Karrar 2019; 2021; 2022). Recently, China has also been reaching out to diverse local constituents in education, media, and energy sectors beyond the metropolitan political elite to deepen its engagement with Pakistan, as these actors are increasingly shaping the contours of what was assumed to be a Chinese project (Safdar 2021; Abb 2022). Some recent studies specifically focus on the impact of the CPEC on women and find that the project, while beneficial to their empowerment in general, needs to be more proactive in offering employment opportunities to educated women and improving the quality of life for rural women (Farooq, Gul, and Khan 2018; Saad et al. 2020; Kumar et al. 2022).

Although the impact of the BRI on economic stability in countries such as Sri Lanka often dominates the media coverage of China's economic presence in South Asia, it is important not to overlook other plans for regional economic integration. Long before the Port of Colombo project, China and Sri Lanka enjoyed a trading relationship dating back to the 1952 Rubber-Rice Pact, which lasted until 1982. As one of the first agreements signed by the PRC with a non-Communist country, the pact provided a much-coveted strategic resource and good publicity; Sri Lanka reaped the economic benefits of selling its rubber at a 40% premium and receiving rice for less than a third of the market price (Kelegama 2014).

International aid is another arena of Sino-Indian competition in South Asia, particularly with regard to Afghanistan (Denghua Zhang and Shivakumar 2017). In 1997, India under Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral updated its aid guideline for South Asian countries, shifting from an emphasis on reciprocity to altruistic help based on "good faith and trust" (Gujral 1997). Since then, India has expanded its international aid program. Afghanistan, in particular, emerged as a major recipient of Indian aid. Some Chinese researchers interpret the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan as India's hedge against China's BRI strategy, especially the proposed economic corridor through Pakistan (Zhao Chunzhen and Gong 2018).

The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation, earlier known as the "Kunming Initiative," started in 1999 to facilitate transnational trade and economic cooperation. However, the confluence of international and domestic challenges in both India and China have blunted this ambitious project. The 2013 announcement from India and China that they would revamp the original plan for the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) made little difference on the ground. Scholars attribute this lack of progress to India's cautious ambiguity, which is rooted in international and domestic concerns. Not only has India been reluctant to engage China in a multi-national mechanism, but it also is unsure about opening up its northeastern territory, which has been prone to unrest (Luo Shengrong and Nie 2018; Uberoi 2016). Although India formally endorsed the BCIM-EC program, it has objected to subsuming the project under China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The centralizing tendency of the BRI has also shifted the power dynamics on the Chinese side. The National Development and Reform Commission of the national government in Beijing took over the authority previously residing in Yunnan provincial governmental and academic institutions. The BRI actually represents the marginalization of the BCIM-EC in China's overall strategic plan (Uberoi 2016). Although Chinese scholarship disputes such characterization, it confirms that the inclusion of the BCIM-EC in the BRI led to fundamental changes in local stakeholders (Chen Lijun 2014).

### *China-India Comparative Studies*

As the world's two largest developing countries, China and India's comparative development has attracted considerable attention. Such comparison encompasses not just the economic and material dimensions, but also institutional and cultural ones. Urban areas are a key arena where researchers have carried out comparative work (Frazier 2022). While most of the reviewed literature is in English, it



is worth noting that Chinese-language scholarship has also been aware of the need to compare urban experiences in the two populous developing nations since at least the early 2010s. In critiquing the rigid household registration system (户口 hukou) that severely limited rural migrant workers' access to public goods in Chinese cities, Ouyang Lisheng (2013) mentions the positive example of India in promoting citizen participation as a part of the solution to transforming migrant workers into urban citizens. Such reference to a different mode of urban governance is still less empirically grounded than contemporary studies in English. A comparative study of Shanghai and Mumbai, for example, argues against the theory that major global cities are converging on similarly designed artificial landscapes characterized by mega-projects (Ren and Weinstein 2013). While highlighting the state's central role in the orchestration of such projects, which usually come at a great social and environmental cost to local communities, the authors highlight the contributions of intermediaries in influencing the projects' rollouts.

The limited space here allows only a few examples of ongoing new research in the field. As cosmopolitan economic centers, Shanghai and Mumbai (Bombay) both experienced the rise and fall of large-scale contentious politics over the course of the long twentieth century (Frazier 2019). A key explanation is their surprisingly similar political geography, such as the prominence of textile industry and labor militancy in the 1920s and 1930s, and controversy over urban redevelopment and individual compensation in the 1990s. Another recent monograph on urban governance further delineates two modes of such governance among Chinese and Indian cities (Ren 2020). In China, the focus is on state-dominated territorial institutions such as household registration. In contrast, there are more contingent alliances among state and non-state actors in India. Regarding the provision of water specifically and public goods in general in urban areas, the Chinese government fosters capacity and local government autonomy and delivers better material-cum-moral performance. In contrast, India's emphasis on socialism and populism allows much less administrative efficacy (Selina Ho 2019).

Related to such work focusing on urban governance, there is a growing scholarly consensus against the crude contrasting of regime types (autocratic China vs. democratic India) in comparing China and India. An edited volume specifically titled *Beyond Regimes* call for researchers to adopt convergent comparison between the two Asian giants, where transnational and subnational dynamics inform significant parallels in labor relations, legal reform and rights protests, public goods provision, and transnational migration and investment at critical moments (Duara and Perry 2018). Wenjuan Zhang (2018, 2019) also finds that both governments try to foster economic innovation and strengthen regulation of international NGOs in their respective institutional frameworks.

Despite the development of such promising scholarship, existing comparative studies still tend to use a few megacities to stand in for urban China or urban India (Frazier 2022). More attention to smaller cities is thus needed, but this raises the question of potentially greater challenges in conducting in-depth field work in those places, where the existing support structure might be lacking compared to bigger cities. Frazier (2022) also calls for a new conceptualization of China and India beyond their putative national borders to incorporate global China and global India, where their international investment could converge in the same African location. An earlier comparative study of the role of diasporas in effecting different kinds of foreign direct investment in China and India offers an example of how researchers can operationalize the concepts of global China and global India (Min Ye 2014).

## Migration and Culture

Compared to Southeast Asia, the relevant literature on Chinese migration in China-South Asia is more limited partly because of this migrant population's numeric insignificance compared to the local population (Pan 2014, 233-234). As a cosmopolitan city in West Bengal, Kolkata (Calcutta) hosts a historic Chinese community dating back to the nineteenth century. In his introduction to a special issue on Kolkata and China in *China Report*, the top China studies journal in India, Tansen Sen lamented

the lack of knowledge on this community (Tansen Sen 2007). In the issue, an oral history of Kolkata Chinese depicts in broad strokes the three waves of Chinese immigration to the city—skilled workers in the nineteenth century and refugees in the early and mid-twentieth century who fled social unrest and warfare in China—as well as their concentrated employment in carpentry, shoemaking, tannery, and hairdressing (Liang 2007). An ethnographic study of how the Hakka (literally “guest people”) Chinese assert their distinctive ethnic identity against not just Indian but also other Chinese groups in the city’s leather industry is based on fieldwork conducted in the 1980s and first published in 1996 (Oxfeld 2007). Beyond Kolkata, public memories of the bitter Sino-Indian War in the early 1960s continue to depict Chinese Indians as the treacherous and irrational Other in both government documents and popular culture, such as the 1996 film *Fire* (Banerjee 2007). Two other articles in this issue feature impressions of China by various visitors from India in the early twentieth century (Narayan Sen 2007; Basu 2007). Taken together, these studies testify to the dire need for updated research on the contemporary situations of Chinese Indians and Indian perceptions of China.

The development of such research after the special issue has been uneven at best. Kolkata Chinese continue to receive more attention among the limited studies. Zhang Xing (2009) finds that members of this community gradually develop a hybrid identity that incorporates both Chinese and Indian deities in their religious practice. And, in the only recent English language monograph on the topic, Zhang Xing (2015) offers a panorama of how different Chinese Indians negotiate their hybrid identities in present day Kolkata, China, and Toronto, Canada, and emphasizes the importance of not essentializing a singular Chinese Indian identity. A study based on interviews with Anglo-Indian and Chinese Calcuttans now living in London and Toronto argues that Kolkata carries significant emotional weight in both groups’ diaspora and that the city deserves more attention in the study of migration (Blunt and Bonnerjee 2013). Mei-Lin Pan (2014) cautions against applying marginalization as an exclusive framework in studying Indian Chinese. At least before the Sino-Indian War, some Chinese in Kolkata occupied relatively comfortable positions in skilled trades such as carpentry and shoemaking. Another study, by Aparna Chatterjee Sen (2009), documents the strategies by the small Chinese community in North Bengal to give their children an educational edge. As education becomes more important in confirming their social status, Chinese families are increasingly sending their children to English-speaking schools to prepare for overseas migration. Converting to Christianity is another tactic which provides an advantage in the competitive admission process for those schools.

## CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA

### Literature Overview

Scholars have long been aware of the intricate connections between today’s China and Central Asia dating back to antiquity (Li Shuicheng 2005; Roberts, Thornton, and Pigott 2005; Linduff 2015). But the independence of five Central Asian states from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s has spurred more research on contemporary engagement between the two sides, which was previously often obscured in Sino-Soviet studies. Especially in the Chinese-language literature, consistent policy impetuses have ensured the impressive quantitative growth of such research (Xiao 2018). In 2001, China led the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose member states included almost all of Central Asia and have since expanded to South and West Asia. It was in Kazakhstan in 2013 that President Xi Jinping first unveiled the Silk Road Economic Belt, which later became part of the ambitious BRI plan. Such policy influences in Chinese scholarship translate to more macro-level studies on the positive economic and political impact of China’s engagement with the region. In contrast, English-language literature, often produced by scholars in the Global North or internationally oriented

institutions in Central Asia, has different priorities. This literature pays more attention to the complexity of the Chinese influence, both positive and negative. The ethnographic approach, which focuses on how on-the-ground actors make sense of the international connections, is also more present.

## Security and International Relations

### *Multi-Power Presence*

China's deepening engagement with Central Asia takes place in the larger context of great power politics in the region. Russia and the United States both have vested interests in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union. Even before the BRI became an overarching policy, Chinese scholarship viewed China's engagement with Central Asia more favorably than similar strategic plans by the other two great powers. This is because of the well-received SCO framework and China's lack of military ambitions in the region at the time, both of which made China a more trusted partner (Gao Fei 2013). A more recent empirical study of this triangular dynamic in the BRI era draws upon available data on trade, diplomacy, defense spending, and cultural exchange and quantifies the different influences of the three powers in Central Asia. Compared to the comprehensive Russian, and to a lesser extent American, presence, China remains an economic power (Zhu Yongbiao and Wei 2019).

As China becomes the dominant economic power in Central Asia, its potential competition with Russia's longstanding geopolitical interests is also gaining attention. Given the recent close collaboration between the two powers in challenging US leadership in the post-Cold War international order, a longer perspective on this issue is important. The Chinese-language scholarship seldom goes into the details of such evolving collaboration and competition. The English-language scholarship generally agrees that China and Russia were largely cooperative in a multilateral framework on Central Asia through the 2000s, but the role of the SCO is going through a shift in recent years as China has been more interested in rewriting the rules of international engagement in its favor (Karrar 2009; Yau 2020). China's direct engagement with five Central Asian states through the China + Central Asia 5 (C+C5) framework, argues Srdjan Uljevic (2021), is another sign of China's confidence in reaching out to the region without worrying too much about Russia's possible objections.

Based in Japan, the Uzbek scholar Timur Dadabaev has written extensively on the importance of understanding the engagement between Central Asia and China in a comparative light. Besides Russia and China's strong influence in the region, Japan and South Korea are also noteworthy actors. In examining the discursive framing of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean policy on Central Asia, Dadabaev (2018a) finds that the "Silk Road" is a protean rhetorical device rather than a static policy doctrine. More specifically, the phrase reflects a particular country's self-identity and understanding of the international environment. In the case of Uzbekistan, the end of long-term rule by the former president Islam Karimov (in power 1991-2016) opened up possibilities for more cooperation with these middle powers (Dadabaev 2020).

### *Broadened Definitions of Security*

Security is one of the key underpinnings of China-Central Asia engagement, and recent scholarship has taken a more comprehensive look at this topic. The Chinese government's concerns over Xinjiang and border security predated the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Central Asian states and continue to shape security cooperation. But as China's economic presence in Central Asia grows significantly, security also takes on more dimensions, such as protecting Chinese investment and personnel and monitoring the domestic political environment in Central Asia (Yau 2022a).

In this process, China is deploying multiple tools to achieve its expanded security goals. Researchers based outside China have noticed the growing presence of Chinese private security

companies in Central Asia, but this still varies from country to country depending on the regulatory environment (Yau and van der Kley 2020). Kyrgyzstan has attracted many such Chinese companies because of the low legal threshold for market entry and the government's growing need for surveillance following the political unrest in 2020. In contrast, legal restrictions in Kazakhstan direct a smaller number of Chinese companies present to focus more on the logistics sector. On the other hand, China has offered multiple training programs on its soil for officials from across Central Asia, which circulate the Chinese model for technology-assisted domestic security management (Yau 2022b).

In the Chinese-language scholarship, religion is often intimately tied to the so-called “three evils” (三股势力 *sangu shili*): (violent) terrorism, (ethnic) separatism, and (religious) extremism. Due to the issue's perceived sensitivity, Chinese scholarship is generally reticent on this topic. Tellingly, a series of short articles on the BRI and religious risks in *The World Religious Cultures*, a journal edited by the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, includes three devoted to Islam in the Central Asia region. Chinese scholars are examining not only the religious situation in individual countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also “religious extremism” in the region in general (Yang Li 2017; Wang Cang and Meng 2020; Shi Xiehong 2016). Such framing of Islam has much to do with the Chinese government's concerns with the ethno-religious situation in Xinjiang. Shared religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities between inhabitants of Xinjiang and Central Asia have seemingly directed this focus on domestic security concerns in Chinese studies on Central Asia.

### *Ambivalence towards Chinese Influence*

Central Asian ambivalence towards Chinese influence usually receives only a passing mention in the Chinese-language scholarship, if at all. In the English-language literature, assessments differ regarding the specific reasons for concern about China's influence in the region. From the perspective of the promotion of democracy and rule of law, often favored by the West, China's role does not appear to be positive. But this line of scholarship concedes that the Chinese model offers an alternative to the neoliberal model of development and democracy (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017).

Yet the Central Asian states have a very different set of reasons for being cautious about China's growing influence. The ruling elites welcome Chinese direct investment and security cooperation, but they need to confront more critical public and expert opinions of the presence of a large number of Chinese workers and China's policy regarding its own Muslim populations (Peyrous 2016). A more recent case study of Kyrgyzstan (Kyzy 2021) finds that political leaders and ordinary people hold contrasting views of China. While the former are more likely to favor friendly relations with China, the latter often express negative views of China and Chinese migrants because of the perceived increase in economic competition.

Several survey studies focus on university students in different Central Asian states and demonstrate the uneven perceptions of China among future elites in these countries (Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017; Yu-Wen Chen and Günther 2020). Cross-country studies have found a consistently higher level of recognition and approval of China's international engagement in Kazakhstan, an authoritarian country with extensive borders with China and very close economic ties. In contrast, while students in Kyrgyzstan acknowledge China's growing influence in the region, the country's contentious economic relations with China and weak democratic institutions make them warier of such influence. Even students in apparently more isolated countries such as Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are well aware of China's active outreach in the region. In a recent study specifically focusing on Kazakh students and graduates of Chinese universities, the author also finds their simultaneous rejection of the popular China threat theory and lingering concerns about Kazakhstan's over-dependence on China (Arynov 2022).

In another recent single-institution survey based on students at the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, a team of researchers (Primiano, Rice, and Kudebayeva 2022) confirms mixed feelings about China that are statistically significant. One intriguing finding concerns gender difference: men tend to be more critical of China's economic presence than women, but more approving of China's domestic pandemic response. The authors speculate that the influx of male Chinese laborers and the competition they are perceived to pose in the marriage market upset traditional norms concerning women in society. There might also be a gendered difference with regard to attitudes towards democracy and by extension, government restrictions on daily life, a finding which needs follow-up research.

### *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

As an intergovernmental organization initiated by China in the early twenty-first century, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has received positive coverage in the Chinese literature. After its first expansion in 2017, SCO now includes India and Pakistan as full members and thus exerts interregional influence beyond Central Asia. The macro studies of SCO in Chinese-language literature hail it as a quintessential example of China's commitment to multilateral governance and a collaborative regional peace framework different from Cold War era great power rivalry (Sun Zhuangzhi 2021; Xu 2021).

The micro studies focus on the specific benefits the SCO presents to China as the country seeks a more prominent role in international affairs. China's burgeoning trade with different SCO member states and their inter-bank business increased the stature of Chinese renminbi as a settlement currency in international transactions (Guo Xiaoqiong 2015). After its enlargement, the SCO is no longer an organization centered on Central Asia. China is better positioned to link the organization to the BRI and its regionally specific components such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Silk Road Economic Belt (Xue Zhihua 2017). Using the UN General Assembly voting records as a proxy for bilateral diplomatic similarities, some researchers find a generally strong correlation between China's foreign investment in the SCO member states and their shared diplomatic positions. Specifically, investment by Chinese state-owned enterprises and in infrastructure has the most evident impact (Yang Gongyan and Tang 2021).

The relevant English-language literature shares a general consensus around China's predominant role (Rossotti 2018; Perskaya et al. 2022). Besides the domain of security, China is also actively pushing a top-down approach to environmental protection and energy transition through the SCO (Agostinis and Urdinez 2021). But scholars have different conclusions about the degree to which the organization facilitates regional cooperation. An early comparison between SCO and ASEAN argues that the latter is better institutionalized to carry out durable and norm-driven multilateral work (Aris 2009). The inherent power asymmetry within SCO, particularly between China and Central Asian states, leads other scholars to conclude that the organization faces enormous challenges in becoming an efficient actor in regional affairs or generating a solid regional identity (Song Weiqing 2014; Dadabaev 2014).

Although Russia has been a key leader of the SCO since the beginning, its willingness and capacity to fully commit to the organization are under question. Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia initiated the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 1992, which includes several Central Asian states. More tellingly, Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) together with Central Asian states in 2014, long after the founding of the SCO. While these alternative regional mechanisms sometimes complement the goals of the SCO, its unrivaled leadership therein gives Russia a strong incentive to maintain its distance from the China-initiated SCO (Gatev and Diesen 2016; de Haas 2017; Šćepanović 2021).



### *Agency of Central Asian States*

Despite the layered interests of great and middle powers in the region, Central Asian states have demonstrated their resourcefulness in shaping the presence of outside powers in their favor. In his evocatively titled monograph *Great Games, Local Rules*, Alexander Cooley demonstrated as early as 2012 how the local environment conditions the process of a new “great game” in the region among the United States, Russia, and China. Within this competition for influence between the great powers, Central Asian states are able to utilize this competition to achieve their own goals (Cooley 2012).

More recent research continues to confirm this dynamic. A team of Russian researchers has found that irrespective of the state of Sino-Russian relations, Central Asian states are motivated to carry out multivector relations with the West, Middle East, and South Asia. At present, the divergent interests of Russia and China and those of individual Central Asian states continue to pose challenges for regional integration (Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk 2021).

A team of researchers based in Germany and China (Ohle, Cook, and Han 2020) have found a similar dynamic in their case study of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy behavior. Facing Russia’s continuing influence in security and China’s growing impact on the economy, Kazakhstan develops hedging strategies in order to maximize its interests in this dual hierarchical order.

## Economy and Development

### *Grand Visions of Interconnectivity*

Central Asia’s important strategic location has inspired different plans for economic integration. Those emanating from China all hark back to the BRI and offer further elaborations, such as free trade (Liu Zhizhong and Cui 2018). Despite the projected mutual benefits over the long run, no negotiations appear to be underway between China and any of the Central Asian states as of 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Some more ambitious visions situate China and Central Asia in an even larger geographical framework. There is a proposal to link China, Central Asia, and West Asia in one economic corridor because of the economic complementarity among these economically diverse countries in terms of manufacturing, natural resources, and financing capabilities (He Wenbin 2017). Additionally, Central Asia’s strategic location in the middle of the Eurasian landmass could provide effective leverage, particularly in the energy sector, for China’s leadership in building the Silk Road Economic Belt linking both ends of the landmass (Yin Yiwen, Wang, and Fu 2019). Because of their enormous scale, these plans at present appear to be more aspirational policy talking points within China than coordinated actions across Eurasia.

### *Specific Sectors of Economic Connections*

Aside from such grand visions, Chinese scholarship is also considering specific sectors that could contribute to further economic connections between China and Central Asia. Central Asia is home to several important energy producers (oil in Kazakhstan, natural gas in Uzbekistan, and both in Turkmenistan). As a critical commodity for economic development and political stability, energy commands extensive attention. The energy sector has been essential to bilateral relations because of China’s enormous need, the ample supply in Central Asia, and their physical proximity to each other (Li Lei and Zhang 2018). Except for passing references to renewables, the focus is squarely on fossil fuels (Wang Meng 2018).

One recent analysis of China-Central Asia economic cooperation cautions against the homogeneity of China’s trade portfolio across Central Asia, which focuses on fossil fuels, minerals, and byproducts in import and household items in export (Wang Haiyan 2020b). A more diversified strategy is needed to sustain and deepen such cooperation.

Because of the low level and uneven distribution of precipitation, compounded by climate change, water is a particularly valuable and contested resource in Central Asia. The nexus of water, energy, and food, according to some researchers, poses particular economic and security challenges in the region. Chinese scholars believe that China is well positioned to share its water conservation techniques and experiences in international river management with Central Asia (Yu and Li 2021). On the other hand, China's need for fossil fuel from Kazakhstan also explains its more cooperative position on transboundary waters there than in South Asia (Selina Ho 2017).

The energy sector is also intimately tied to infrastructure, which exerts significant influence on the trade relations between China and Central Asia. Although Chinese scholars differ on the degree to which different kinds of infrastructure projects (energy, transportation, telecommunication) affect such relations, they agree on the necessity for better connectivity between the two sides in these areas (Guo Huijun 2017; Cao Chong 2021).

Agriculture is another promising sector that could deepen economic ties in the context of the BRI. While grain production in Central Asia is generally limited because of the climate, animal husbandry and the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton are more widespread; these also provide the vast majority of exports to China. Although there is no robust importation of China's agricultural products, Central Asia could benefit from financing and Chinese labor-saving technology in its sparsely populated fields (Shi Xianjin 2020).

Beyond the extractive sectors, information technology can upgrade China-Central Asia connections in the digital age and help build what Wang Haiyan (2020a) calls the "digital Silk Road." Central Asian governments have expressed strong interest in digitizing their economies. China can become a trusted partner in building relevant infrastructure, from the internet to cloud computing and mobile payment platforms. Flagship Chinese communications corporations such as Huawei have not only invested in the region but also provided funding to encourage local talent to join the industry. The investment and training combination has been proven an effective model for engaging the region.

While the English-language literature also acknowledges China's interest in pushing for more regional interconnectivity, it pays more attention to the benefits and costs of such interconnectivity for Central Asian states. Central Asian "energy hubs" and enhanced regional connectivity are crucial for China's continued economic growth. Additionally, the potential for Central Asia to serve as a connection hub between China and Europe means that economic and political stability in the region, as well as peripheral security, are critical factors in China's interest (Pradhan 2017). In a recent survey of Asian "opinion leaders" on the BRI (Rana, Chia, and Ji 2019), government officials, academics, business leaders, civil society employees, and the media generally approved the goals of infrastructural connectivity and unimpeded trade. Despite concerns over debt and Chinese labor, over 60% of Central Asian respondents saw the BRI as a net opportunity for their countries, significantly higher than the corresponding percentage (40%) among all respondents. Central Asian states have also demonstrated their agency in pushing for the upgrading of Chinese investment in their jurisdictions. Rather than the common assumption of massive Chinese infrastructure projects, Central Asian states have been able to advocate for a growing number of recent ventures that produce more value-added products and offer more technical training for local staff members (van der Kley and Yau 2021).

The English-language literature is also more attentive to the pros and cons of China's economic connections with individual Central Asian countries as opposed to with the region in general. In Kyrgyzstan, China's huge investment in energy and transportation makes it the top foreign investor. However, such investment yields no significant employment for the local population or tax revenues for the local government, and it accumulates massive external debts to China. The Kyrgyz government has therefore been advised to build its own infrastructure and investment capacities to avoid overdependence on Chinese investment in the long term (Mogilevskii 2017). In contrast, the Uzbek

government is more cognizant of such risks while leveraging its relationship with China to address its own needs and challenges (Burna-Asefi 2022).

### *Critical Nodes: Kazakhstan and Xinjiang*

Within the China-Central Asia corridor, important nodal points receive considerable attention in both the Chinese- and English-language literature. Among these, two particularly stand out: Kazakhstan is the largest Central Asian economy and has the largest territory, and Xinjiang is China's northwesternmost provincial-level administrative unit, sharing extensive borders with several Central Asian states.

The Chinese-language literature on China-Kazakhstan focuses on how to realize the broad potential for bilateral economic integration. In addition to being a critical node in the BRI, Kazakhstan is also a founding member of the EEU and promotes its own Bright Path (Nurly Jol, sometimes translated as Bright Road) economic initiative. Chinese scholars believe that because of the various internal conflicts within the EEU, Kazakhstan is strongly motivated to embrace the BRI to increase its international competitiveness in the region (Fang and Li 2018). China is also well positioned to use existing mechanisms such as the SCO to upgrade its economic presence in Kazakhstan beyond the extractive industries while also managing its cooperation with Russia in this critical Central Asian country.

Focusing on the grain trade, Guo Hui (2020) argues that while Chinese wheat imports from the West are unlikely to be replaced with imports from Kazakhstan, there is definitely room for improvement in bilateral agricultural cooperation. The negative factors that require market and policy intervention include, among others, Kazakhstan's unstable wheat yield, inadequate infrastructure, distance from major wheat import regions in coastal China, and impact on China's wheat-producing regions such as Xinjiang.

Both Kazakh and Chinese scholars are open about the multifaceted challenges for economic cooperation between the two sides. Such cooperation has an underlying environmental dimension because of scarce and unevenly distributed water resources and climate change. The regulatory framework of the major international rivers (the Irtysh and the Ili) needs to better and more effectively accommodate the economic development of the countries both upstream (China) and downstream (Kazakhstan) (Wu Fengping and Bai 2020). If not managed properly, such eco-economic differences could further fuel Kazakh resentment of Chinese businesses and immigrants and derail bilateral cooperation (Syroezhkin 2019).

In the English-language literature, Nargis Kassenova (2017) notes that Kazakhstan is actively linking its own Bright Path plan to the BRI, despite some local opposition. Other studies focusing on Kazakhstan see more need for domestic reform following China's increasing economic presence. The World Bank's (2020) case study of Kazakhstan's post-BRI economic prospects finds that the potential financial gains ultimately depend on Kazakhstan's ability to enact complementary domestic policies. Gaps in infrastructure and electricity supply mean that the expected economic growth would be distributed unevenly across the country, benefitting cities close to border crossings and larger urban centers such as Nur-Sultan and Almaty, while failing to reach more rural parts of the country. The Bank also identifies best practices for Kazakhstan in terms of increased cooperation in China: border-crossing reforms, increased regional connectivity, and forward-thinking financial reforms aimed at increasing private sector infrastructure investment are needed to ensure that BRI projects have the maximum possible impact on Kazakh GDP and welfare improvement.

In addition to regional balance, Chinese investment in Kazakhstan also prompts discussions of transparency. While major investors such as the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have long moved away from simply buying off members of the Kazakh ruling class to gain approval, they still make members of the Kazakh government stakeholders to maximize the chance of



success for their investments (O'Neill 2014). Such practices often reinforce high corruption, weak rule of law, and political risk in Central Asia.

Xinjiang's economic significance in China-Central Asia engagement also invites different interpretations. The vast majority of relevant studies in Chinese focus on deepening economic ties between Xinjiang and Central Asia, particularly in agriculture and the energy sector. Researchers find that despite the existing presence in Central Asia, Xinjiang businesses have a long way to go in order to produce more value-added and innovative products and services beyond fresh produce and mining (Gui, Wang, and Wang 2020; Shi Lan and Liu 2020; Wang Jin and Huang 2021). In the English-language literature, while researchers confirm Xinjiang's importance in the BRI, they are also concerned with the economic cost of the Chinese government's stringent security measures (O'Brian and Primiano 2020).

### *Geeconomics*

Analysis of China's economic presence in Central Asia is often tied to the region's larger geopolitics. Konstantin Tskhay's (2021) geoeconomic analysis of Chinese strategies in Central Asia takes note of regional states' efforts to utilize multivector foreign policy to avoid the risk of becoming economically "bound" to China. The BRI and corresponding Chinese initiatives give Central Asian countries a chance to escape their "landlockedness," grow their economies, connect with the rest of the region, and gain an important geoeconomic partner. Such balancing is of course not easy, as there are few alternatives to what China could offer. Uzbekistan in the past few years has been trying exactly this strategy. It embraces Russian, American, Chinese, and European investment projects as complementary and mutually compatible, refusing to prioritize one country over another. China's role in this new system is primarily as a financier and supplier of technology for the diversification of the Uzbek economy. The government is unwilling to accept any deals from Russia or China that could take agenda-setting power out of the country. Despite this position, Uzbekistan continues to sign far-reaching cooperation agreements with China, but it does not appear that China is using economic power to pressure Uzbekistan (Dadabaev 2018b).

When it comes to the impact of Chinese investment on domestic politics, there has been no apparent change in civil liberties, government accountability, or election contestation in Central Asia, according to Nurseit Niyazbekov. In other words, the region remains more or less equally as authoritarian as it was pre-BRI. There are, however, slight improvements in regime corruption levels, which might not necessarily be the direct result of Chinese investment. Negative changes include a deterioration of privacy protections, an increase in political and physical violence, increased government control of internet access, heightened state surveillance, and a subsequent rise in anti-Chinese sentiments across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Chinese aid has helped autocratic rulers within the region strengthen their rule, leading to authoritarian "deepening," which has increased difficulties for civil rights organizations and advocates (Niyazbekov 2021).

The United States indeed tried but failed to promote its New Silk Road Initiative in the region. Existing scholarship identifies several reasons for the failure of the US initiative compared to the BRI. Without the state backing that Chinese enterprises enjoy, American companies are nowhere near incentivized or financially capable enough to compete for Central Asian contracts. The US plan was structured heavily around the development of trade routes and logistical hubs within Afghanistan, in conjunction with the US military presence in the country, which ended in hasty withdrawal in 2021. Moreover, infrastructure alone does not create traffic and trade. Rather, more domestic reforms are necessary to reap its benefits, but such reforms were less forthcoming in the face of wavering US commitment to Afghanistan and the region (Peyrouse and Raballand 2015).

In the critical energy sector, which plays a disproportionate role in the China-Central Asia relationship, Chinese scholarship acknowledges challenges inside and outside the region. In addition to

inadequate infrastructure and rising nationalism, Chinese scholars are particularly concerned with the role of great powers such as Russia and the United States. They argue that as China needs to coexist with these powers in the Central Asian energy sector in the foreseeable future, a more pragmatic approach that involves multi-stakeholders and joint ventures is needed to mitigate the potential risks (Yang Yu, Liu, and Jin 2015; Han Qingna, Xiu, and Zhang 2018).

## Migration and Culture

### *Contested Identities*

Compared to well-studied destinations for ethnic Han Chinese emigration such as Southeast Asia, similar studies on Central Asia are limited in both Chinese and English. Also, because of shared ethnic and linguistic ties, migrants to Central Asia are more likely to be Muslims and/or speakers of various Turkic languages. This poses an acute conceptual challenge in applying Chinese migration as a term in studying these groups.

Scholarship on Uighur communities is particularly limited and dated despite their large size. A 2013 study estimates the number of Uighurs in Central Asia to be almost 350,000, accounting for three-quarters of all Uighurs outside China (Li Qi 2013). The paucity of scholarship on this topic is probably due to its sensitive nature, shaped by ethnic tensions in Xinjiang.

Chinese scholarship settles on “non-Han Chinese overseas” (非汉族华人 *fei hanzu huaren*) as the umbrella term to describe diverse ethnic minorities from China who settle abroad (Tan 2018). This term emphasizes the shared Chineseness of emigrants from different ethnic communities and reflects a tacitly state-centered approach to studying relevant issues. A recent study on the diasporic legacy of ethnic Uzbeks in Xinjiang reviews their transnational connections across Eurasia from Mongol times to the present and ultimately affirms the preeminence of Chinese national identity over ethnic identity (Tang Shuxian 2020).

Unlike quantitative studies of migration, which focus on official estimates or censuses, ethnographic fieldwork reveals how people make sense of their own movement across boundaries. Such an approach is much more common in English language publications. As Uighur traders from Xinjiang cross the border to do business in Kyrgyzstan, they understand themselves not just as profit-seeking economic actors, but also as moral ones who need to maintain a code of honor (Steenberg 2016). This explains why despite competition with one another they also act as a corporation: they need each other’s support in a foreign country and their family members back home also rely on a network of trading families.

Compared to the state-centered macro approach to ethnic and cultural connections between China and Central Asia, non-Chinese-language literature delves more deeply into the lived experiences of such connections and their contradictions. China’s successful bid to list the Kyrgyz epic of *Manas* as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 spurred flurries of “heritagization” of the same epic in Kyrgyzstan (Jacquesson 2020). Rather than simple promotion of ethnonationalism, this could also be understood as Kyrgyzstan’s effort to resist China’s perceived appropriation of its heritage.

Such transnational ethnic connections are further entangled with gender in the oral performance of *aytis* by female Kazakh *aqins* (poets) from Xinjiang and Kazakhstan (Salimjan 2017). Their spirited on-stage personas demonstrate, however fleetingly, the possibility of transnational ethnic self-fashioning beyond the dictates of either the Chinese or Kazakh state. On the other hand, they remain unable to fully escape the shared gender ideology across state borders that largely subjects women to domestic roles.

Studies of the Dungan people, Chinese Hui Muslim migrants from northwestern China who settled in Central Asia in the late nineteenth century, are a particularly illuminating example of the

different orientations of different bodies of literature. Despite Dungan settlement in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Chinese-language literature still emphasizes their Chinese ancestry and considers them effective conduits for carrying out BRI agendas in local society (Jin 2016; Ma Hailong 2019). The English-language literature shows more internal differences. Beyond their supposedly common Chinese origin and current nationality, the Dungan often resort to duality and flexibility in their self-identification: neither Chinese nor Central Asian, but both at the same time (Jiménez-Tovar 2016).

### *Borderlands on the Ground*

Unlike macro-level studies of the international impact of China-Central Asia interactions, ethnographic research on how borders actually function in everyday life yields fresh insights into their varied meanings to borderland residents. In all three Central Asian countries that share borders with China, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, scholars have found perceived peripheralization of towns near the border by local residents despite the deepening economic connections with China. These post-Soviet sovereign states in Central Asia all develop economic centers far away from the border without providing adequate social safety nets in border towns. Such regional inequality and the influx of traders from China exacerbate the perception of marginalization (Parham 2016; Alff 2016).

Although the ethnographic approach is still rare in Chinese-language scholarship, a unique study of the China-Kazakhstan Cross-Border Cooperation Center at the Horgos Port in Xinjiang presents fresh anthropological insights into the textured impact of border-crossing traffic on the ground (Zhao Xuan and Liu 2018). The authors argue that the increase in such traffic in both directions has not translated into intercultural understanding per se. Within the same Cooperation Center, Chinese and Kazakhs are spatially segregated from each other in most cases for border control. Commercial interests also reinforce each group's stereotypes of the other as untrustworthy business partners. Drawing upon broad scholarship on similar border-crossing points in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, these scholars raise a fundamental question about the lasting cultural impact of ambitious political and economic initiatives such as the BRI.

### *One-Way Educational Mobility*

Another prominent form of population movement between China and Central Asia in recent years is the mostly one-way study abroad phenomenon. As China becomes an increasingly attractive destination for international students, those from Central Asia account for almost one third of the total, according to a 2017 estimate (Wang Bingyi and Zhao 2019). Most relevant studies in Chinese treat students from Central Asia as a collective and focus on the challenges in their Chinese language acquisition or cultural adaptation in general. More of these studies employ surveys and semi-structured interviews at the authors' home institutions, with fewer utilizing established questionnaires for language learning (Liu Hongyu and Jia 2014; Zhang Lirui and Wan 2019). But the research findings are yet to offer methodological reflections on how participants were chosen in the first place.

Some preliminary studies provide a more in-depth look at country-specific situations. For example, in a 2015 survey of 130 first-year students (Fan Xiaoling 2015), those from Tajikistan reacted most strongly to sensitive intercultural issues such as politics and food, followed by those from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Such findings could facilitate more nuanced understandings of Central Asian students in China. When it comes to educational exchange between China and Kazakhstan, scholars from both sides agree that there need to be concerted efforts to increase the number of Chinese students in Kazakhstan in order to address the imbalance in such exchanges. Additionally, in light of the overwhelming emphasis on language learning, a more conscientious alignment between study abroad

and economic integration would better serve the need for expertise in diverse sectors (Qu Shaowei and Smanova 2019).

An English-language study of Central and West Asians who studied in China in the 2000s in comparison to those who studied in Russia in the 1980s indicates that the students in China also had business ventures there, which sometimes fed into their investment elsewhere (Ibañez Tirado 2019). Particularly for female students from Central Asia, China symbolized economic freedom and opportunity not readily available back home or in Russia. Such nuanced meaning-making once again indicates the value of ethnographic insights.

### *Two-Way Media Coverage*

In light of the growing stakes of China's international image in Central Asia, Chinese scholarship has started to examine both the proactive projection of Chinese narratives and preventative measures to contain negative publicity. Keenly aware of the cultural and institutional differences in Central Asia, some scholars advocate for increased use of concepts and frameworks that invoke mutual benefits and shared history in engaging local media, such as the idea of "community of shared destiny" and the Silk Road (Shao and Shen 2017). Some have paid attention to Xinjiang's unique role. As the home of Uighur-, Kazakh-, and Kyrgyz-language media, Xinjiang has launched TV and radio broadcasts and print media publications in Central Asia since 2000. More recently, Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat have also expanded to the region. But scholars worry that the rigid content and lack of funding put China at a disadvantage in winning hearts and minds in Central Asia as compared with powerful Western media such as VOA and BBC (Sun Jun and Liu 2017).

As the BRI thrusts China further onto the international stage, Central Asian media coverage of China has generated increasing scholarly interest. Focusing on the Pravda newspaper in Kazakhstan, a team of Chinese and international researchers finds generally positive recent coverage of China in Central Asia (She, Huang, and Sartov 2020). This finding is confirmed in a comparative study of the media coverage of China between Central Asia and Southeast Asia, which utilizes more sophisticated quantitative analysis (Wei et al. 2021). Based on analysis of GDELT (Global Database of Events, Languages and Tone, developed by Google Jigsaw), another team of Chinese researchers find that the overall media tone was cooperative in both regions. Central Asia's tone expressed less conflict but contained larger fluctuations between conflict and cooperation, and the conflict issues there were more related to religion and ethnicity. The authors call for more calibrated messaging in order to effectively manage different risk factors. Particularly in Central Asia, they believe China should be more prepared to engage in/with periodic incidents connected to religion. With a more eclectic source base of state-owned and private newspapers in both Kazakh and Russian, two scholars based outside China conclude that while the official rhetoric of China in Kazakhstan is indeed positive, there is pervasive suspicion and hostility towards the country and Chinese migration which the Kazakh ruling elite could not afford to ignore (Burkhanov and Chen 2016).

When it comes to the ultimate reason for China's negative publicity in the region, some Chinese research relies heavily on Russian sources and blames the US demonization of China. In response, it suggests that China should emphasize both government-to-government and people-to-people exchanges in order to mitigate stigmatization (Li Qi 2020).

Some Chinese scholars are concerned about Xinjiang's position in the two-way international communications between China and Central Asia. According to one 2015 survey of forty Uighur families near the border in western Xinjiang, Central Asian and Turkish-language news and entertainment enjoy considerable popularity among the local population. The authors fear that ethnic separatism and religious extremism could be hidden in such content and call for more government outreach to Uighurs

(Han Qiang and Liu 2015). Whether the local population still has access to similar content now is in doubt given the heightened security measures in the region in the past few years.

## CHINA AND WEST ASIA

### Literature Overview

In the past decade or so, China's growing need for fossil fuel and the introduction of the BRI have deepened the connections between China and West Asia. Moreover, wealthier countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are able to extend their engagement with China beyond the extractive industries to more diverse economic and cultural sectors. Compared to the more established scholarship on China-Southeast Asia, China-West Asia is still a smaller field. The general geopolitical frames of the Middle East or Arab world, which includes both West Asia and North Africa, often appear in the literature. The review here tries to specify the countries concerned when possible. More information on China-North Africa can be found in the CGS Africa-China scoping study.

The vast majority of the English-language literature analyzing China and West Asia comes out of the Global North and covers the broad themes of politics, economy, and culture, with the first two attracting more attention in general. While far from the norm, Chinese and West Asian researchers are starting to publish their findings in English.

Chinese-language scholarship on China-West Asia is also increasing steadily and follows a similar distribution among the general themes of politics, economy, and culture. Several special sections (although not entire issues) on various aspects of the relationship—often within the framework of the BRI—have appeared in top Chinese journals focused on the region.<sup>9</sup> Because of the policy imperative of the BRI, Chinese scholarship on China-West Asia focuses primarily on macro-level politics and economy, and tends to read like policy briefs. But scholars are also keenly aware of the need for other approaches which require more intensive field work (Fan Hongda 2013).

### Security and International Relations

#### *China's Overall and Niche Strategies*

Chinese scholars have written extensively on China's general diplomatic strategies with regard to West Asia within the larger framework of the Middle East or the Arab world. These studies point out the US's inability to solve some of the deep-seated regional security problems despite decades of involvement and present China's engagement not so much as an immediate solution, but as a responsible great power's new practice which will have a long-term positive effect in shoring up multinational cooperation (Niu 2022). They dwell on the latest political and policy slogans in China such as BRI, "community of common destiny/shared future" (mingyun gongtongti 命运共同体), and "great changes not seen in a century" (bainian weiyou zhi da bianju 百年未有之大变局); reinforce general Chinese positions such as noninterference and peace and development; and reiterate existing policy initiatives (Li Weijian 2017; Wang Li 2018).

Chinese researchers also touch upon specific strategies to expand China's diplomatic engagement with West Asia. There is a general consensus regarding the importance of people-to-people exchanges (renwen jiaoliu 人文交流). But existing studies still focus heavily on state-sponsored programs such as youth exchange, and do not have a clear definition of a category that can be overly broad. Besides the general proclamation of the necessity of more in-depth mutual understandings, these studies acknowledge real challenges, such as China's negative international publicity, but offer few concrete solutions (Ding and Chen 2018; Bao 2019).



Tourism, due to its personal appeal and combined cultural, economic, and political impact, is another toolkit with diplomatic significance. Both Chinese- and English-language studies note the rapid growth of China's outbound tourism, although as a destination, the Arab countries account for a tiny share. But they have dramatically different focuses. One Chinese study co-authored by a Chinese and a Saudi-based Egyptian researcher (Cao Xiaoxiao and Abdrabou 2021) highlights potential means of increasing the attraction of the Arab world to Chinese tourists, including supportive government rhetoric. Writing in English, a scholar based in Israel (Chaziza 2019b) warns against China's potential weaponization of international tourism in pressuring countries in the Middle East into accepting certain positions favored by the Chinese state.

The commemoration of the centennial of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021 has generated Chinese language scholarship on the Party's engagement with West Asia. In the Chinese system, the CCP proposes basic diplomatic principles before the government carries them out, which stamps official diplomacy with a distinctive party imprint. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the CCP's more proactive "comprehensive diplomacy" (quan fangwei waijiao 全方位外交) goes beyond pure "economic diplomacy" (jingji waijiao 经济外交). Resting on the three key points of peace, development, and governance, it helps China stake out a position in the conflict-prone region that differs from the position of the US (Li Weijian 2021). The CCP runs inter-party programs through its International Department (Zhong lian bu for short, 中联部). These programs enable the CCP to interact with a variety of political parties from Arab nations, organize mutual visits and seminars, and help popularize BRI with local constituents (Sun Degang and Wu 2021). The CCP's International Department has also reached out to the "ethnic minority overseas Chinese" in Saudi Arabia in order to burnish China's international position mostly to the domestic audience within China. But unlike the pushback such "united front" work generated in the West, it poses few meaningful threats to the Saudi government (Al-Sudairi 2018).

### *Regional and Outside Powers*

China's relations with influential countries in West Asia have also commanded a fair share of the scholarship. A recent monograph on the mutually beneficial Sino-GCC relations with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman contends that such relations are the result of a confluence of international and domestic considerations on both sides (Fulton 2019b). Among the advanced economies in the GCC, the UAE was one of the first in the region to welcome the BRI. Besides fossil fuels, the two sides enjoy collaboration in infrastructure, renewable energy, nuclear technology, and space technology. But as Tong Fei (2020) points out, China still needs to better understand UAE's federal system and increase its appeal to diverse constituents in order to deepen bilateral relations.

Besides the Arab countries in West Asia, China is also engaging important non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel to balance its strategic interests (Fulton 2021). Although China favors an even-handed approach in this volatile region, many intra-regional tensions are unpredictable. The Chinese are acting in a fragile space and have to exercise great caution in order to continue working with these non-Arab states while ensuring that their Arab neighbors do not become wary of China's intentions (Fulton 2019a, 7).

Because of its nuclear ambitions and huge energy reserves, Iran has also received particular attention in Chinese-language scholarship. It is worth noting that both Chinese and Iranian scholars publish on the bilateral relationship in Chinese journals. Writing in a Chinese journal, a professor from the University of Tehran emphasizes that while the BRI provides an opportunity for Iran to upgrade its own economy, Iran does not just want cheap Chinese manufacturing. Rather, Iran wants to leverage its energy sector to obtain technology transfers and to play a more prominent role in international finance through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Shahandeh 2016). A Chinese researcher proposes a shared social memory of national glory and decline as a new possibility

for broadening the bilateral relationship between China and Iran. Despite China's growing international stature, it still has a long way to go in order to win the personal admiration of ordinary Iranians (Fan Hongda 2020). For example, the University of Tehran, Iran's top national university, still lacked a graduate program in Chinese studies as of 2020.

Similar to other regions in Asia, China's diplomatic outreach in West Asia has to contend with various outside powers. From the perspective of Israel, although an independent relationship with a rising China makes sense, it is not always in a position to do so because of the actual and perceived pressure from the United States (Evron 2016). The Middle East has also become a spill-over battleground between China and Japan, as both seek to expand their own presence in the region (Evron 2019b).

### *Chinese Approaches to Conflict Management*

As a region with ongoing geopolitical conflicts, West Asia has witnessed successive mediation attempts by regional and international actors. China's growing involvement in West Asia also entails confronting the multitude of regional conflicts, from armed conflicts to humanitarian crises. Existing English-language scholarship notes that China's efforts in mediation differ from the strategy of other international actors in the region, such as the United States and Russia. The Chinese prioritize "social harmony, moderation, respect for authority, humility and benevolence" and favor tactics which are non-confrontational and nonviolent (Chaziza 2018). China continues to argue that the root cause of conflicts in the Middle East is the lack of development and that development is hence the only stable solution in the region (Fulton and Sim 2022, 15). However, it remains unclear whether this tactic can achieve sustainable outcomes.

Chinese researchers highlight China's positive and increasingly active role in managing the regional conflicts. But the long-term effect of Chinese intervention in the face of growing international expectations remains to be seen. While not a major recipient of refugees, China has been leveraging its good relations with most Middle Eastern countries and donating to relevant UN agencies to establish multilateral mechanisms to solve problems. China consistently advocates tackling the root causes of displacement, such as poverty and foreign invasion. Scholars believe that such a development-oriented approach is consistent with the goals of the BRI (Xing and Yu 2020).

Other Chinese studies confirm the same principle of increasing China's influence within a multilateral framework in peacekeeping and regional security in general. In 2006, China first dispatched peacekeeping troops to West Asia (Lebanon) and was the only country to send corps of engineers there. China continues to support the ongoing UN missions with funding and personnel, but also stakes out its own position by introducing new principles such as "developmental peacebuilding" (Zhang Degang and Zhang 2018). Moreover, China can increase the market appeal of some of its advanced technologies instrumental to promoting regional security in West Asia, such as artificial intelligence (Li Weijian 2019).

Managing regional conflicts also requires protocols for consular protection of Chinese citizens abroad. Various incidents in the Middle East and North Africa, from unexpected accidents to the rescue of hostages and massive evacuations, have prompted the Chinese government to draft regulations for various emergency situations. Chinese scholars call for more publicity about the protocols among Chinese abroad and more coordination between the government and private security firms in providing consular protection (Zhang Dandan and Sun 2019).

## *Economy and Development*

### *Diverse Economic Relations*

China's manufacturing prowess is supported by the global search for resources. Because of the abundance of critical resources such as oil in West Asia and particularly in the Gulf countries, the two sides have

maintained mutually beneficial economic ties based on the extraction and transport of these resources (Feng 2015, 1). In light of China's growing demand for oil, some authors believe that the country will further expand its oil acquisition network in the region beyond stable providers such as Saudi Arabia to more volatile producers, like Iraq (Ögütçü and Ma 2007).

Beyond the energy sector, the implementation of the BRI has made China an important player in building regional infrastructure in Israel, Iran, and several Arab countries in West Asia and North Africa. This further solidifies China's political interests in the Middle East in general (Chaziza 2019a, 33). But some question the viability of these infrastructural projects in the absence of a deeper engagement by China in regional politics (Evron 2019a).

Existing research in Chinese focuses on more advanced economies in West Asia, as they are better positioned to develop economic ties with China beyond the extractive industries. Bilateral financial cooperation particularly with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar arguably heralds further internationalization of the Chinese currency and deepening of the BRI. Chinese researchers commend the relevant inter-government agreements and call for more concrete actions by financial institutions (Wu Jiaming and Li 2019; Ye and Zhang 2020). They believe that a thorough understanding of local politics, Islamic finance, and related cultural conventions will be key to the long-term success of Chinese financial institutions in the region.

Given China's own manufacturing capacity and the Arab world's intention to diversify its economic base, Chinese researchers argue that building overseas industrial parks holds great promise in achieving a long-term win-win relationship (Liu Dong 2017). In countries such as Saudi Arabia, where the government has long been mindful of a broader economic base beyond oil, the two sides could collaborate in advanced technology, mutual investment, finance, and infrastructure in addition to the energy sector (Chen Mo 2017).

Various advanced technology has also received attention among Chinese scholars. According to Shen Xi (2022), the rising global stature of Chinese internet companies makes their investment in the GCC states an important topic to study. On the one hand, the GCC presents a promising market for Chinese companies under the BRI in challenging the dominance of American tech giants. But Shen also cautions Chinese companies to prepare for the rise of economic nationalism and step up their corporate social responsibility on the ground to mitigate uncertainties and risks.

Sun Degang and Wu Tongyu (2020) specifically frame China's science and technology diplomacy in Arab countries in the larger context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, marked by smart technology and accelerating connectivity. They contend that both sides enjoy complementary advantages in the midst of this Revolution, and suggest that teaming up gives them the opportunity to upend Western dominance. In their opinion, five areas are worth particular attention in this partnership: nuclear power, renewable energy, space technology, 5G, and drones.

Focusing on space technology, Lin Luzhou (2021) considers bilateral cooperation in this area part of the BRI and the "Space Silk Road." After an initial partnership with Algeria in 2007, over the past decade China has started working with more Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, on various aspects of satellite technology. How to sustain such partnerships with long-term funding and commercial applications remains to be seen.

### *Economic Security*

Because of the political implications of the petro-economy to both China and West Asia, economy and security are often combined in the literature. In the opinion of Yu Hongyuan (2019), this should incentivize China to be more proactive in managing its energy security. Yu suggests that China should join oil-producing and transiting countries in developing alternative energy sources such as natural gas.



Promoting the use of Chinese currency in energy transactions is another way to mitigate geostrategic risks.

Scholars differ in their assessment of how successfully China has combined its push for both economic and security interests in the region. Writing just a few years after the Arab Spring, a Chinese scholar and his coauthor based in France are more pessimistic about the prospect of China's business-first strategy, which they believe failed to appeal to the changing political sentiments in the region (Degang Sun and Zoubir 2015). However, a more recent article (Chaziza 2019a) argues that despite its avowed adherence to non-interference, China has been adept in fusing the two kinds of interests through projects such as infrastructure. This reflects a once-again changing political landscape in West Asia and the maturity of China's international engagement.

### *Development-Centered Health Governance*

Chinese scholars tend to frame health, an understudied topic in China-West Asia, primarily as an issue of development and link it to contemporary policy initiatives such as the BRI. Similar to relevant studies on China-Africa, such framing aims to demonstrate China's long-term commitment to nurturing relations with the region rather than relying on short-term diplomatic gestures. China's approach to health governance in the Middle East depends on the specific situations of different countries. In post-conflict countries, China dispatches medical teams, sends aid, and helps rebuild hospitals. In countries with ongoing military conflicts, Chinese aid comes from donations to multilateral organizations such as WHO and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In more stable countries, China promotes joint medical research and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM; Tang Bei 2019). TCM in particular is expected to offer a unique Chinese brand in local health governance and attract more consumers and tourists with disposable income to China (Song Xinyang and Li 2017).

A recent study in English confirms that China's COVID vaccine rollout in the Middle East and North Africa continues to promote positive perceptions of the country. Amid China's more tense relations with the West, this portends a more fractured world order from the perspective of global health (Zoubir and Tran 2022). It is worth noting that the UAE has become a particularly important country in terms of the international use of Chinese vaccines during the pandemic. It was the first to roll out the Sinopharm vaccine before even the Chinese government had approved its domestic use, and it was the first to allow the trial of a Chinese mRNA vaccine (Reuters 2020; 2022).

## Migration and Culture

### *Two-Way Population Movement*

As the relationship between China and West Asia intensifies, scholars have also identified an increase in migration patterns. This primarily affects laborers moving between the two regions, with the more popular route being from China into West Asia, as there are more Chinese businesses operating out of West Asia than West Asian businesses operating out of China. It is likely that as the regions further develop businesses partnerships and educational programs, there will be an increase in the number of people moving between the two regions.

In comparison to more popular routes from China to regions such as Southeast Asia and North America, Chinese migration to West Asia has attracted much less attention. But the deepening economic ties have prompted more Chinese to move to advanced GCC economies such as the UAE in the twenty-first century. Yuting Wang (2020a) has written the most detailed account on this subject in English so far. Trained as a sociologist of religion, Wang attends to not only how the estimated 300,000 Chinese sojourners in the UAE, mostly in Dubai, live through and make sense of economic globalization, but also how they help construct Dubai's identity as a global city and forge religious connections between

China and West Asia. Her extensive use of qualitative interviews, 100 in total, is still rare in the overall scholarship on Global China, which is dominated by the macro policy-oriented approach.

The limited Chinese-language scholarship on the topic pays close attention to the ethnic makeup of migrants from China to the region, the majority of whom are members of various Muslim communities, such as Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Hui from northwest China (Ji Kaiyun 2015). This study cites an estimate from the early 2000s which suggested there were 200,000 Uighurs in West Asia, 25,000 Kazakhs, and 20,000 Hui. Saudi Arabia alone hosts around 170,000 such ethnic migrants, and Turkey 75,000. This estimate likely does not account for the more recent labor migration to the UAE; many of these migrants are Han Chinese. Due to the Chinese government's longstanding attention to ethnic minorities and border security, these migrants' transnational movement is framed as a national security question. But in contrast to Wang's ethnographic fieldwork, personal anecdotes fill critical gaps in knowledge about the situations on the ground, which points to the need of more grounded research.

Conflict in West Asia has displaced significant numbers of people, who have fled their home countries in search of better, more stable lives for their families. While refugees from this region are often funneled through Turkey and to European countries via the Mediterranean, a small number are looking to China as their next home. A possible explanation for this, researchers note, is the tightening of European laws about accepting refugees (Chen Shanshan 2017). On the other hand, China's immigration policies grant no permanent legal status for refugees, which limits their access to public services (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2013).

Zeng Jingcheng and Fang Chu (2016) distributed questionnaires on cultural integration to 124 Arab businessmen (the majority from Yemen and Jordan) in Guangzhou and Yiwu, two trading hubs in South and East China with significant foreign populations. While their method is not strictly ethnographic, it is a rare attempt to understand the daily lives of West Asians in China, a topic that has received even less attention than the daily lives of Africans living in China (see the CGS Africa-China report). They find that these businessmen have integrated fairly well into local Chinese society, although children's education and healthcare still pose challenges. The size of the city also affects how migrants interact with Chinese residents: those in Yiwu, a much smaller city, use the Chinese language more intensively.

### *Deepening Educational Ties*

Employing a similar survey method, an Arab student enrolled in a university in Wuhan solicited the opinions of forty-five Arab students (slightly more than half from North Africa, the rest from West Asia) in the same city regarding studying in China (Zreik 2021). The vast majority of them enjoyed a positive experience in the country and were interested in forging professional ties beyond their formal education. The author believes that China's soft power approach to the Middle East with international education as an important hinge has worked better than that of the United States. Given the self-selected nature of these research participants, more studies are needed to fully evaluate China's appeal as a study-abroad destination for West Asians.

Wealthy GCC countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia are already strengthening their own Chinese language instruction, beginning in kindergarten. In 2019, the UAE's Ministry of Education introduced the teaching of Mandarin in government schools, and it has since increased the number of public schools teaching Mandarin to 142 (Sebugwaawo 2022). Saudi Arabia has also developed long-term strategic programs on Chinese language and culture in its education system, with the hopes of facilitating exchanges for both business and tourism (Abumaria 2020).

A recent journal article that examines a shared sense of unease towards Western education demonstrates a different kind of educational tie between China and Saudi Arabia (Yan and Alsudairi 2021). Despite the two states' political differences, both are major sources of international students

in the West in the post-Cold War era. While Chinese and Saudi political elites saw such Western education as essential in economic modernization, they have grown increasingly concerned with the potential challenges of such education to their respective ruling ideologies. This explains their almost simultaneous invocation of the discourse of cultural security in the past decade, without any apparent collaboration, in order to stave off a perceived ideological threat.

### *Religious Connections*

As previously mentioned, religion is a contributing factor in Chinese migration to West Asia, particularly for Muslim ethnic minorities. But the religious experience of Chinese residents in the region is far more complicated. In religiously diverse Dubai, at least, there is a general sense of religious awakening in which Chinese residents seek out not just Islam but also Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Buddhism. Chinese Muslims, including recent converts, often play the role of intermediaries in facilitating China's outreach in the region (Shaheen 2009; Yuting Wang 2020b).

Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi (2017), who has published extensively on Sino-Arab connections in the mid-twentieth century, notes a contemporary Islamic missionary impulse towards China in Saudi Arabia. Saudi proponents of this impulse strive to convert non-Muslim Chinese in Saudi Arabia using both Arabic and Chinese-language materials. This functions as a response to the perceived inroads in this regard by Iran, Saudi Arabia's geopolitical and doctrinal rival. Their ultimate vision lies in converting non-Muslims in China, but such an effort could confirm the Chinese state's fear of foreign religious influence and jeopardize Chinese Muslims.

While Chinese scholars in general are reticent about the role of religion in China's engagement with West Asia, there is a tendency to view it as a latent risk factor to be managed (Ma Lirong and He 2016). In the larger context of promoting the BRI, Chinese scholars are concerned with Turkey's sympathy towards the Uighurs in Xinjiang and blame Turkish acquiescence to Uighur separatism as a sticking point in bilateral relations (Liu Yi 2017). Even in Jordan, a relatively peaceful country in the region, this line of inquiry advocates the monitoring of domestic sectarian conflicts and the presence of ISIS remnants as a potential threat to Chinese interests in the region (Li Xi 2020).

### *Media Coverage and Cooperation*

In top Chinese journals on West Asia, the number of articles focusing on media in the bilateral relationship is still limited. The few articles on the topic present a wealth of relevant media reports or policy initiatives, but they generally lack rigorous theorizing.

The Chinese government's comprehensive regulation of media means that research on the Chinese media is usually state-centered. Huang Hui and Lu Bichun (2022) find high-profile cooperation in news, radio, film, TV, and publications very useful in facilitating comprehensive mutual understanding between China and Arab countries and challenging Western discourses about the China "threat" and Islamophobia. But they concede that those official measures have not always reached ordinary people on both sides in their daily media consumption, which—particularly on the Arab side—does not necessarily include materials from official outlets. After sampling reports on Turkey in three official Chinese newspapers between 2009 and 2014, Tang Qingye (2015) finds that Chinese news coverage of this important country straddling Europe and Asia is still limited and usually tied to major political events. Because of the distance of such reporting from daily life, Tang believes that Chinese newspapers have more work to do in order to help readers understand Turkey at a personal level. Moreover, Chinese newspapers' almost total silence on the Turkish sympathy towards Uighurs in Xinjiang, a sensitive topic in China, does not contribute to mutual understanding, either.

Chinese-language scholarship has also examined diverse foreign media outlets in assessing how the BRI is perceived in West Asia. Huang Hui (2016) draws upon Factiva, a database developed

by Dow Jones, to study Arab media coverage of the BRI between 2011 and 2015. Such coverage is both extensive and generally positive, which, to Huang, further confirms the value of the BRI in the region. Methodologically speaking, Huang's approach is the most transparent, as she uses detailed quantitative data to gauge report index strength and positivity. Her characterization of increasing interest and general positivity is supported by other studies, which rely more on the authors' impressions of the foreign media and personal contacts, who tend to be scholars and officials (Xue Qingguo 2015; Lu 2015; Wang Yong, Umut, and Luo 2015). How ordinary citizens make sense of China-related media coverage, particularly negative coverage, remains unexplored.

## CAPACITY ASSESSMENT<sup>10</sup>

### OVERVIEW

Building upon the themes in existing research on China-Asia, this section further surveys the institutional capacity to generate knowledge via relevant research. To make this assessment easier to follow, we highlight the available capacity in different regions of Asia, China, and the Global North, respectively.

As will be seen, there are significant capacity differences within and across regions in terms of generating knowledge on China's engagement with the developing parts of Asia. Area studies in China date back to at least the 1960s, and recently the BRI has provided a significant impetus for Chinese scholarship on China and the Global South, Asia included, in general. But how such policy support translates into sustainable and impactful capacity building remains a challenge.

In other parts of Asia, Southeast Asia stands out not just in terms of individual institutions but also through its networks focusing on examining China's relations with the region. Despite its small size, Singapore hosts several world-renowned institutions that produce relevant research. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand also enjoy considerable capacity. The regional dynamic is quite different elsewhere. Although India dominates relevant activities in South Asia, widespread recognition of the importance of studying China is a more recent phenomenon and regional networking is lacking. Neither Central nor West Asia has one clear leading country, and the capacity to study connections with China is scattered among individual institutions, if at all.

The Global North, particularly the United States, has a long history of studying China and different parts of Asia in separate area studies programs such as those focusing on East, Southeast, and South Asia, as well as the Middle East. Before independence, Central Asia was usually covered in programs on Russia and Eastern Europe, although the region is gaining more dedicated programmatic attention on its own. Institutions that go beyond such area studies paradigms are still in the minority.

### SOUTHEAST ASIA

As a dynamic and diverse region, Southeast Asia has sustained active connections with China since antiquity. China-Southeast Asia, unsurprisingly, has commanded the lion's share of the existing research on China's recent engagement with the developing countries in Asia. With the exception of Singapore, a highly developed city-state, and Brunei, a small, oil-rich nation, the region still has a long way to go toward strengthening and sustaining its research capacity on this vibrant topic. At present, institutions in several Southeast Asian countries house researchers on China-Southeast Asia, yet the leveraging of individual expertise into more institutionalized capacity is uneven.

## Networks

There is a long history of research networking in Southeast Asia dating back to the early Cold War, when European colonialism was on its last leg in the region. Several university leaders (including the vice chancellor of the University of Hong Kong) founded the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) in 1956, which later expanded its membership throughout the region and to North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Tellingly, there are no mainland Chinese institutions in this network, despite the presence of Hong Kong and Taiwanese ones (Taylor 1992). The ASEAN, the most important intergovernmental regional organization, also founded its own ASEAN University Network of selective higher education institutions in 1995. In 1988, the ASEAN-ISIS (Institutes of Strategic and International Studies) network started with four such institutes in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The association of think tanks now includes national institutions from all ASEAN member states and shares analysis of issues related to the region's peace and security.

The networking particularly relevant to China-Southeast Asia started to emerge at the turn of the millennium. With its growing international stature, China also gradually changed from a participant to a leader in such networking. The SEASREP Foundation, based in the Philippines and founded in 1994, was the brainchild of four historians in Southeast Asia and aims to promote Southeast Asian studies in the region. The Foundation started paying attention to China-ASEAN connections in 1998. With support from the Japan Foundation over the past decade, it has also sponsored further research on Chinese migration into Southeast Asia and Japan. Initially supported by the Asian Development Bank, based in the Philippines, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, the Greater Mekong Subregion Academic and Research Network (GMSARN) was founded in 2001 to boost scholarly cooperation and socioeconomic development, made possible by a transnational river from southwest China to the South China Sea. With a secretariat at the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand, this network includes universities in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) and China (Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region). In 2015, the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia came into being, bringing together institutions with considerable strengths in the field from Southeast Asia, Japan, and Greater China (mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). It specifically aims to maximize regional coordination. In 2017, China took the lead in establishing the Network of ASEAN-China Academic Institutes (NACAI); its permanent secretariat is at Fudan University in Shanghai.

## Singapore: Global Node

As a highly developed city-state at the crossroads between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, Singapore enjoys a commanding advantage in the research infrastructure of China and various parts of Asia. Because of its strategic location, Singapore supports such research in various regional configurations, from Southeast and South Asia to West Asia.

Singapore's capacity for research on China and the Global South is first demonstrated in its world-class universities. The National University of Singapore (NUS) boasts almost a dozen research units that sponsor research on China's global engagement. The degree programs in the Department of Chinese Studies and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy have strengths in studying ethnic Chinese society in Southeast Asia and China and the BRI, respectively. The Department of History is the editorial home of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, a top journal in the field which welcomes scholarship in all humanities and social science disciplines and regularly covers China.<sup>11</sup> Separate research



institutes on East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Asia in general also support research on China's deepening engagement with these regions.<sup>12</sup> Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, which functions as both a graduate school and think tank, offers a signature program in strategic and security studies, among others. The implications of China's global footprint also feature prominently in its research profile.

Singapore is also home to vibrant research institutions, with both domestic and foreign branches, which probe regional and international topics of relevance to China. Founded in 1968, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute) has been a leading research center on issues pertaining to the region, from archaeology to contemporary international relations. The Institute also publishes three acclaimed, peer-reviewed journals, which feature scholarship in not only popular fields such as international relations and economics, but also more interpretative methods such as ethnography and history. This further solidifies Singapore's unrivaled position as the global node of Southeast Asian studies. A founding member of the aforementioned ASEAN-ISIS network, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs also actively monitors China's impact in the region. Valuing Singapore's advantage in location and human capital, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (headquartered in London) and Milken Institute (headquartered in Santa Monica, CA) use the country as their base in researching Asia Pacific, including China.

### Countries with Considerable Capacity

Home to the largest number of ethnic Chinese outside Greater China, Thailand maintains significant historical and contemporary ties to China. Thai research capacity on China-Southeast Asia is reflected in not only university research centers but also intra- and inter-university networking. There are several universities with research units on China in the Bangkok metropolitan region and the north. Quite a few younger Thai researchers were educated in top-tier Chinese universities.<sup>13</sup>

According to available data, the specific research topics Thai scholars explore range from the family dynamics of recent Chinese immigration in particular locales in Thailand to the regional impact of BRI. There appears to be less attention to high international politics and more focus on the socioeconomic implications of China's presence on the ground. Particularly impressive is Chiang Mai University's China-Southeast Asian Studies Center, which, under the leadership of Yos Santasombat, a senior sociologist, has produced several edited volumes in English through Palgrave Macmillan.<sup>14</sup>

The prestigious Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, also the oldest in the nation, established the well-respected Institute of Asian Studies in 1967, which includes a dedicated China study program. Its journal *Asia Review*, published in both Thai and English, frequently covers contemporary China in a global setting. Chulalongkorn has also cultivated strategic partnerships with leading Chinese universities. For example, it opened the Confucius Institute in collaboration with Peking University in 2007.<sup>15</sup> In addition to contemporary issues in domestic governance, international relations, and economic development, Chulalongkorn's faculty also studies traditional Chinese language and culture.

With particular strengths in social sciences, Thammasat University is another leader in China studies in Thailand. Under the patronage of a royal princess, Thammasat established the Institute for East Asian Studies in 1984, with early support from the Japanese government for Japanese studies. Since the 2000s, it has forged more connections with Chinese universities. With the founding of the Boromrajakumari Chinese Learning Center and its Sinology library, Thammasat maintains a tradition of studying the history of migration between China and Thailand, as well as the culture of ethnic Chinese in Thailand.

In 2019, the Asian Research Center for International Development at Mae Fah Luang University (Chiang Rai) led the establishment of the Thai University Network for Chinese Studies with four other universities. While there are few details beyond the memorandum of understanding, such local



initiatives in building an interuniversity platform for Chinese studies sets Thailand apart from other developing countries in Southeast Asia. Additionally, Thai universities actively seek collaboration with other universities in the region. Mahidol University Center for China and Globalizing Asia Studies, one of those institutions in the Thai network mentioned above, advertised a co-organized conference on contemporary China studies in Southeast Asia with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore in March 2020, which was probably disrupted by the pandemic.

The largest economy in Southeast Asia and the world's largest Muslim-majority country by population, Indonesia has become a key focus of the BRI. This is in fact where its composite program Maritime Silk Road was first announced in 2013. There are numerous scholars studying China-Indonesia/Southeast Asia, but the networking of this individual capacity is limited. As a result of fraught Cold War politics, Indonesia witnessed the mass killing of suspected Communists and longstanding hostility towards ethnic Chinese, which only started to dissipate after the end of the Suharto era in the late 1990s. Led by the Department of International Relations within the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, the country's leading higher education institution Universitas Indonesia in the Jakarta metropolitan region has more than a dozen researchers in different units working on the macro political economy of contemporary China-Indonesian connections.<sup>16</sup> But the existing units focusing on ASEAN and China studies do not appear to have much synergy in researching China and Southeast Asia. With thinner expertise at other universities and at think tanks, such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and Indonesian Institute of Sciences Center for Area Studies, the same problem exists for the country writ large.

According to one observer, the problems with Chinese studies in general in the country are structural and at least two-fold. De jure discrimination against ethnic Chinese has played a role historically, and Chinese language instruction today is still not where it should be, given the huge importance of China. Compounding the problem is the lack of university-trained Chinese language teachers and stable research infrastructure in universities for studying contemporary China beyond language instruction (Rakhmat 2021a; 2021b). The Center for Chinese-Indonesian Studies at Petra Christian University in Surabaya, despite its ambitious name, has a similarly narrow focus. Improving research capacity on China, and by extension China and Southeast Asia, in Indonesia is thus not just about supporting individual researchers, but also fostering a self-sustaining system.

Another Muslim-majority country with the second highest percentage of ethnic Chinese in the region after Singapore, Malaysia enjoys a solid institutional infrastructure in China studies in general. In a country with longstanding ethnic preferential policy favoring the Malays, those who study China tend to be ethnic Chinese, too. Due to the political sensitivity of Communist China at the height of the Cold War, subjects such as traditional China and Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia developed as safer alternatives. Even as China's rise leads more to study of its impact on Malaysia, a grounded understanding of contemporary China, in the opinion of some observers, is still inadequate (Ngeow, Ling, and Fan 2017).

Malaysia supports two national universities which are prominent in studying China-Southeast Asia. University of Malaya, dating back to the British colonial era in the early twentieth century, has an active Institute of China Studies. Founded in 2003 under the direction of Prime Minister Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, the Institute was the first research center in Malaysia with a specific focus on China. With almost ten full-time academic staff members, the Institute enjoys expertise ranging from premodern Chinese humanities to contemporary China's impact in Southeast Asia. This range of research interests represents a balance between the aforementioned tendencies of Indonesian and Thai scholarship. The educational background of the researchers, who possess terminal degrees from and postdoctoral affiliations in Malaysia, mainland China, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia, indicates a similar eclecticism in their research orientation. The National University

of Malaysia, founded in 1970, hosts a Centre for Asian Studies under an encompassing Institute of Malaysian and International Studies; it has, however, a smaller capacity than that of University of Malaya. The head of the Centre and two fellows work on China-Southeast Asia. Their research examines the political economy of China-Southeast Asian/Malaysian relations and the ethnography of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Another highly developed small country in the region, the oil-rich Brunei also has considerable research capacity on China-Southeast Asia. Universiti Brunei Darussalam, its flagship national university, established its Institute of Asian Studies in 2012. Despite its youth, the Institute has become home to a team of ten full-time international scholars and has built research connections to other schools on campus. Out of four research clusters, two—human security and regionalization and migration, mobility, and diaspora—specifically consider China. The Institute also has a steady research output in formats ranging from newsletters and working papers to book series that examine relevant topics.

### Countries with Moderate Capacity

Despite an early start in (Southeast) Asian studies, the Philippines has not kept up in its research capacity on China-Southeast Asia in terms of both individual scholars and institutions. China studies in the country are driven primarily by evolving contemporary concerns within Filipino society, with input from activists and social workers particularly regarding the ethnic Chinese in the country (Clemente and Shih 2018). Such inward-looking orientation is not dissimilar to that in Malaysia, has resulted in the marginalization of China studies, leading to “a scarcity in China studies scholars ... and even Chinese language education” (Kuo 2017). Only with the exacerbated sovereignty dispute with the PRC in the South China Sea in 2012 did China studies receive more funding. This type of policy focus is not unique to China studies, however. While Filipino universities were among the first to promote Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study, in practice, most programs were essentially synonymous with Philippine Studies, especially in their early years (Gin 2009).

As the most prestigious higher education institution in the country, the University of the Philippines Diliman created its Institute of Asian Studies as early as 1955 (reorganized as the Asian Center in 1968). But for the most part, its focus was on the Philippines and Japan. Today, of its twelve full-time faculty, only one specializes in China. Although the University is among the few Filipino institutions to offer a doctorate in China studies, it is categorized as a concentration under the graduate program in East Asia Studies. Recently, China-related research papers have featured prominently in the Center’s journal, *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, but this is more a reaction to the growing interest in China as a rising power and geopolitical threat than it is an indication of the field’s institutional status. Additionally, Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU) started collaborating with Chinese institutions as early as the 1980s (Wang Xinsheng 1991), and has since developed its own Chinese studies programming.

Vietnam has a decent institutional infrastructure for studying China-Southeast Asia rooted in its long history of studying traditional China (Shih, Chou, and Nguyen 2017). But its limited internet content in English or Chinese makes it difficult to ascertain the level of capacity. Vietnam National University, the country’s most prestigious, has a Center for Chinese Studies and Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies and International Issues on its Ho Chi Minh City campus, specializing in social sciences and humanities. Their limited websites in English indicate that the former focuses more on premodern topics, and that the latter has collaborated with Yunnan Nationalities University in China. The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences hosts an Institute of Chinese Studies, which studies contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations, but the information on its website is also limited.

## Countries with Limited Capacity

In the least developed countries in Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, research capacity is also limited. The Department of International Relations at the University of Yangon has a few scholars writing on China-Myanmar relations, but their publications in journals in Myanmar are challenging to access. In 2020, the Department cohosted the fourth NACAI (online) international symposium on ASEAN-China cooperation in containing the pandemic. It is, however, unclear whether or how the coup in early 2021 affected the Department. The national research institutions in Laos and Cambodia do not appear to maintain their own websites in English, making it difficult to ascertain their activities.

## SOUTH ASIA

Unlike the more diffuse research capacity in Southeast Asia, capacity in South Asia is concentrated in India, the leading regional power. Compared to Southeast Asia, South Asia as a region does not have the same level of coordination of individual institutional research capacity. This section thus focuses on assessing the situation in India and also includes other nations where such information is available.

### India: Coalescing Critical Mass

As a fast-growing economy with the world's second largest (soon to be largest) population, India has a long tradition of studying India-China connections dating back to at least the early twentieth century. Thanks to its geopolitical aspirations and extensive human capital networks (Indian scholars with overseas experience), India is expected to continue its lead in studying China-India/South Asia in the region.

Visva-Bharati University was founded by the renowned Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in 1921. Since 1937, it has been home to Cheena Bhavana (Institute of Chinese Language and Culture), which concentrates on teaching the Chinese language and studying pre-modern India-China cultural connections. Research capacity on contemporary India-China can be found in other prominent national universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for East Asian Studies and the Delhi-based Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), supported by the Ministry of External Affairs. The ICS publishes *China Report*, the premier academic journal on Chinese studies in India, and organizes the All India Conference on China Studies.

Such research infrastructure, while comparable to Southeast Asian nations with considerable capacity, has not yet yielded robust enough scholarship. Already in the early 2010s, Tansen Sen (2013) lamented the lack of interest in promoting China studies from both the Indian government and the private sector. While the China-India rivalry in the past few years has significantly increased such interest within India, he suggests that the quality of research has not kept pace. In a more recent article, he bluntly called out the "underwhelming analysis, questionable use of sources and data, and repetitions of earlier findings and conclusions" in China-India studies as a field, including those produced in India (Sen 2021). The problems are part methodological and part institutional. Sen argues that despite informative individual research projects, the field in general is yet to establish a reflexive framework to accommodate both the comparative and connective approaches to the two countries. Specifically, India still needs a critical mass of scholars with stable institutional support to engage in innovative studies on China-India.

But it is worth noting that several private universities founded in the past two decades are striving to boost China studies outside the traditional scholarly establishment. At the forefront of the

endeavor is Ashoka University's Centre for China Studies, chaired by Shivshankar Menon, the former Indian ambassador to China. The Centre provides language instruction (with instructors from Taiwan), a visiting scholars fellowship (open to both scholars and practitioners), and a postdoctoral fellowship (focusing on academic scholarship). The postdoctoral program is jointly run with the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI), an independent entity at Harvard University that has been a major sponsor of East Asian studies since its founding in 1928 (Fan Shuhua 2014). The first cohort of fellows in both fellowship programs mostly study socioeconomic issues relevant to both countries. Because of the tense bilateral relations between India and China, the Centre specifically disavows connections to any Chinese organizations on its website. At least before the pandemic, the HYI has provided a valuable space to host scholars from both India and China and allow them to exchange ideas when political tensions have made such exchanges increasingly difficult in China or India. But it still appears challenging to find qualified candidates from India for the positions and their facility with the Chinese language still needs improvement, which raises further questions about how to build sustainable capacity.

Jindal Global University (JGU), another young private university, has a Centre for India-China Studies dating back to 2014. A few things make JGU's efforts unique. First, India-China is situated in a suite of relevant area and transnational studies centers from Northeast and Southeast Asia to the Global South, which underlines JGU's ambitions in these fields.<sup>17</sup> Second, unlike other Indian institutions where the involvement of Chinese scholars is rare due to political concerns, the Centre not only has a Chinese founding director, but also maintains extensive partnerships with universities in Greater China, including the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, at least before the pandemic. Also, the Centre's research does not focus on high-level politics, but embraces a broader approach to civil society in both countries.<sup>18</sup>

Ahmedabad University's Centre for Inter-Asian Research has unique strengths in studying India-China cultural circulations; it spearheaded a unique music exchange program that involved musicians and scholars on both sides.<sup>19</sup> Under the leadership of Tejaswini Niranjana, a cultural theorist trained in the US and previously employed in Hong Kong, it is exploring general research topics that seek to situate India in the broader regional and maritime context.

In late 2021 and early 2022, the Asian Century Foundation (ACF) was also actively promoting several initiatives. Besides Ashoka University, ACF also supported other young private universities, such as Shiv Nadar University's East Asian studies (Asian Century Foundation 2022, 3). In fact, Shiv Nadar is developing a national center for Himalayan studies, a different geocultural framing of China's longstanding connections with India and South Asia (Asian Century Foundation 2022, 10). In March 2022, Shiv Nadar co-organized the first All India Conference of East Asian Studies with the ICS.<sup>20</sup> Beyond these individual institutions, ACF was also working to establish an Indian Association of East Asian Studies (Asian Century Foundation 2022, 11). Its long-term goal was to support around seven Indian institutions in such endeavors and promote even more research on India and the Global South. However, by October 2022 the ACF website was no longer accessible, which raises questions about the status of its ambitions and the impact on the development of Chinese studies in India.

Besides various research institutions, community members are also banding together to produce publicly available content on the fascinating story of Chinese immigrants in India. As mentioned above in the research themes section, Kolkata has the largest concentration of such Chinese immigration. The Desi Chinese Project is a collaboration between Chinese and non-Chinese Indians interested in documenting India's multiethnic social fabric from a particular angle.

### Uneven Capacity in Other Countries

The China-India rivalry dating back to the border skirmishes in the early 1960s has made Pakistan a key Chinese partner in the region. The introduction of the BRI, of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an important part, has further elevated the status of Pakistan in China's global

strategy. In the past decade, CPEC has spurred a series of higher education initiatives. Select Pakistani universities have established China-focused research units on campus to meet the increasing demand for knowledge about Chinese economy and society. Lahore University of Management Sciences houses two separate units: the Centre for Chinese Legal Studies and the China Pakistan Management Initiative. The capital city, Islamabad, is home to a few other institutions that study China-Pakistan and CPEC-related issues. Compared to China-India studies, the economic focus in CPEC leads to a narrower mission in the Pakistani institutions. While the rush to create CPEC-related units on campus reflects the importance of this bilateral relationship, their coordination is just starting to receive attention among individual institutions.<sup>21</sup>

In the past few years, the push for coordination in the China-Pakistan higher education sector comes from (semi)official national organizations on both sides. These kinds of bilateral efforts are different from the cross-regional ones in Southeast Asia, which are not always government-driven. Since 2014, Pakistan has been the largest recipient of Chinese government scholarships for international students to study in Chinese universities (Li Bing and Huang 2020, 76). In 2017, Fudan University became the Chinese secretariat of the CPEC Consortium of Universities under the auspices of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and the China Association of Higher Education. The Consortium has since grown from 18 to 83. In the fourth exchange mechanism conference in October 2021, the two sides also launched a new China-Pakistan Higher Education Research Institute.

As the most densely populated country in South Asia, Bangladesh has seen more serious scholarship on its relations with China and East Asia in general in the past decade. The University of Dhaka, the most prestigious national university, established an East Asia Study Center in 2013. Under the directorship of a Japanese-educated scholar of international relations, the Center is pursuing ambitious research programs on the complex political-economic connections among China, East Asia, ASEAN, and India, as well as their impact on Bangladesh. Its active publication programs include books, working papers, and newsletters, but these are not easily accessible to outside researchers.

In contrast to the more populous nations in the region, Sri Lanka does not have a dedicated research institution that focuses on China-South Asia. Sri Lankan scholars still appears to take South Asia (India) as their primary point of reference and China has not yet drawn consistent interest. The University of Colombo, the leading national university, has a Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies, but nothing comparable on China. The Confucius Institute on campus is yet to generate sustained student interest in the Chinese language or offer the language training required in order for Sri Lankan scholars to conduct rigorous research on relevant topics. Besides scattered attention from the university's Department of International Relations, most of the data-driven research on China-Sri Lanka topics in this small country comes from independent and government think tanks such as Verité Research, Institute of Policy Studies, and Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. These topics revolve around the increasingly close economic connections between Sri Lanka and China in the presence of India, a much closer aspiring world power. Such research offers a more nuanced picture of China's massive involvement in building the country's infrastructure, a topic that has fueled the sensationalist discourse of "debt trap diplomacy." How to disseminate Sri Lankan perspectives on these important and contentious topics via a more coordinated institutional platform remains a challenge.

## CENTRAL ASIA

A region where independent sovereign nations only date back to the 1990s, Central Asia still has a long road ahead to develop its capacity for researching China's international engagement. Despite the presence of multilateral frameworks with outside powers such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and



Eurasian Economic Union, Central Asia also needs more intensive endogenous regional cooperation to strengthen its research capacity on this topic.

At present, it is select private institutions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan using English as the language of instruction that have produced the most visible work on China-Central Asia. These institutions tend to be the best endowed in the region and to possess an active international outlook. KIMEP University, in Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, hosts the region's only research center on China and Central Asia. President Xi Jinping of China first introduced the idea of the BRI in 2013 in Astana, the country's capital; here, Nazarbayev University had joint programming with George Washington University on the topic. The OSCE Academy and University of Central Asia's Graduate School of Development, both located in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, have over the past few years organized conferences on the BRI and published online proceedings.

Outside these institutions, capacity appears to be more limited. There are individual researchers at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, but not yet relevant programming. The University of World Economy and Diplomacy, affiliated with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lists extensive collaboration with Chinese institutions at its Department of International Relations, but whether such collaboration has produced concrete research is unclear.

## WEST ASIA

Capacity in West Asia to conduct China-related research is slowly growing within universities and think tanks. The number of knowledge hubs focusing on China in most of the region is still minimal, but there is now interest in building physical locations to further collaboration as well as in opening up lines of communication. The wealthy GCC countries collectively host their fair share of the existing relevant institutions in West Asia, as these countries have the necessary resources to support such projects. Additionally, there are few active conflicts in these GCC countries; China generally refrains from deep research collaboration in conflict zones. In contrast, politically unstable countries in the region, such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, currently do not have much capacity. Although there are numerous universities, think tanks, and NGOs in the region in general, there is not yet a major focus on China studies or China and the Global South even in these more affluent countries. And the mutual pollination between Chinese language and social science training also needs improvement.

Countries within the Gulf, such as the UAE and Qatar, tend to have a greater capacity relative to the rest of the region. Partnerships have taken the form of introducing new, Chinese-focused learning opportunities, mainly highlighting the language, in the classroom as well as hosting Chinese delegations at universities, especially public ones. The UAE, given its deep pockets and growing global influence, aims for leadership in the region in creating a closer relationship with China. Back in 2013, Zayed University's Institute for Islamic World Studies hosted an international conference on Islamic Economics and China in Dubai.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) launched its Center for China Studies in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. University of Sharjah has hosted Chinese exchange students and maintains collaboration with Chinese institutions and the Chinese telecom giant Huawei.<sup>23</sup> But neither Zayed nor Sharjah has yet developed a dedicated unit on China within the university, and there appears to be no recent update on the UAEU Center. It is worth noting that the Emirates Foundation, set up by the government of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in 2005, funded research on Chinese migration to the region through the London School of Economics and American University of Sharjah.<sup>24</sup>

Another Gulf country expanding its capacity for research relating to China—despite its less liberal policies in comparison to the UAE—is Saudi Arabia. An excellent example of this is the Asian Studies Program at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, located in Riyadh. As one



of the regionally focused programs at the Center, the Asian Studies Program aims to promote greater understanding of Asia within the Gulf and the wider Arab world.

Because of Iran's close relationship with China, several Iranian institutions also collaborate with their Chinese counterparts. In the capital, Tehran, Allameh Tabataba'i University's Center for Chinese Research, established in 2019, was created with China Renmin University to promote further collaborations between the two institutions. But there appears to be no recent update on this center. There are also collaboration networks focusing on STEM subjects through Sharif University of Technology and Iran National Science Foundation.

Turkey and Israel both have several very established university departments and centers of Asian studies where China features prominently in faculty research and coursework from undergraduate to graduate levels. But except for a center on the BRI at İstinye University, a young private institution in Turkey, there appears to be no dedicated research on China's engagement with the region or the Global South in general.

## CHINA

China's capacity for research on its engagement with the developing nations of Asia has undergone tremendous growth in the new millennium. Developed over decades of shifting policy priorities, the national infrastructure for studying different regions of Asia is seeing a decisive shift towards China's engagement with these regions. Because of the voluminous amount of information available, this section further breaks down the capacity in China according to the institutional type, followed by an assessment.

### Universities

The institutional context of Chinese research on China-Asia has witnessed important changes since its initial development in universities on the maritime and overland frontiers in the early twentieth century. Chinese universities along the southeast coast with ties to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia (Nanyang), such as Jinan University and Xiamen University, showed research interest in the region dating back to the 1920s (Chan 2018, ch. 2). Early interest in the Arab world and Middle East also popped up at Yunnan University in China's far southwest in the 1940s. In 1964, China started its first national program fostering key institutes on international issues at top universities. A complete list of such institutions is not easy to find, but available evidence suggests a general division of labor between those in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and those in outlying provinces. Whereas the former focused on developed countries, the latter studied parts of the Global South with which China shared borders or had sociocultural connections (Qu Liaojian and Liu 2020, 78). Xiamen University remained the national leader for Southeast Asian studies.<sup>25</sup> Sichuan University and Yunnan University in the southwest received mandates to build up their South Asia and Southwest Asia programs. Northwest University focused on Islamic countries because of its location in northwest China, home to a large number of Muslims.

Although scuttled during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), this earlier effort became the foundation for the Ministry of Education's later designation of key area studies programs. The Ministry's 1999 list of significant university institutes of humanities and social sciences, for example, confirmed the stature of Xiamen University's Southeast Asian studies and Sichuan University's South Asian studies. Added to the list were a few more university institutes established in the 1980s, such as Shanghai International Studies University's Middle East studies and Jinan University's overseas Chinese studies (focusing on Southeast Asia).

Beginning in 2011, the Ministry has maintained a more expansive list of university area studies programs to support as think tanks for national development. While this listing continues to affirm the strengths of some legacy institutions such as Xiamen University, it also includes some noteworthy additions. Southeast Asian studies (focusing on the ASEAN) are expanding from the southeast coast to inland southwest China, where connections to Southeast Asia have been growing. Central Asia is listed as a separate category for the first time under Lanzhou University's Institute for Central Asian Studies (Qu Liaojian and Liu 2020, 79). While less clear-cut, the division of labor dating back to the 1960s still largely holds between universities in metropolitan centers and outlying provinces. This reflects the ongoing fusion of border security and local economic concerns with area studies scholarship in China (Li Chenyang 2019, 147).

In the twenty-first century, the growing trend of consolidating different regional studies entities (Asia included) has intersected with the policy imperative of the BRI. This resulted in a flurry of all-encompassing schools of international/global studies and the BRI or Silk Road schools at Chinese universities.<sup>26</sup> This has happened at not just top-tier national universities such as PKU and Fudan, but also at second-tier provincial universities such as Shanghai University and Yunnan University. The relatively new BRI schools (and the like) often draw upon existing researchers in fields such as foreign languages, international relations, and economics. Some at top universities recruit international students for graduate programs taught in English on contemporary China to increase the institution's international prestige. It is thus questionable whether graduates of these programs could conduct in-depth research on China in the Chinese language.<sup>27</sup>

But the rush is by no means restricted to these schools: more provincial institutions, fueled by "intense inter-provincial rivalry," have started to create campus units to capitalize on the trend (Kankan Xie 2021, 185-186). Yunnan and Guangxi, two neighboring provincial governments in southwest China, both try to leverage their extensive borders with Southeast Asia as they vie for the upper hand in building research centers. While Southeast Asia remains the shared focus, institutions in Yunnan strive to acquire an additional edge. Yunnan University, for example, is particularly strong in Myanmar studies, which further elevates the university's profile because of the close ties between China and Myanmar. Yunnan University of Finance and Economics established an Institute for Indian Ocean Economies in 2011 to reflect the province's ambitious pivot to not just Southeast but also South Asia. It has since become a nationally recognized institution.

While most of the aforementioned universities are (aspiring) comprehensive research universities, specialized institutions focusing on diplomacy and foreign language institutions have also been active in promoting studies on China-Asia. Affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China Foreign Affairs University hosts several internationally oriented research centers on different countries, regions, and themes, many of which concern the Global South, including Asia. Particularly, its Institute of Asian Studies is the Chinese secretariat of both the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT), dating back to collective visions in 2003, and the Network of ASEAN-China Think-Tanks (NACT), initiated by China in 2013. Beijing Foreign Studies University, an institution with traditional strengths in foreign language instruction, is leveraging such strengths in consolidating area studies centers. Similar institutions such as Beijing Language and Culture University are following suit, although it remains to be seen how such consolidation affects area studies and specifically research on China-Asia.

## Think Tanks

In addition to universities, China also has a host of think tanks which advise the government on international issues and China's relations with different world regions. Among these, the academy of social sciences has the most extensive presence, from the central-level Chinese Academy of Social

Sciences (CASS) in Beijing, dating back to the 1950s, to its provincial counterparts. CASS first established institutes on the Global South (Latin America, West Asia, and Africa), also the earliest in China, in the early 1960s. Its research infrastructure in South and Southeast Asia lagged that of major universities and did not emerge until the first decade of the Reform era. But CASS was early to consolidate its South and Southeast Asian studies into a cross-regional framework of Asia Pacific in the late 1980s, which was integrated into the National Institute of International Strategy in 2011. With the exception of the China Society for Southeast Asian Studies at Xiamen University, all the other major area studies academic associations in China are affiliated with respective CASS institutes.

Among the provincial-level (including municipalities and autonomous regions) academies of social sciences, some are particularly active in researching China's global impact. Taking advantage of the city's longstanding international connections, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) is one of the most internationally recognized among its peer institutions. SASS has a dedicated Institute of International Relations with research expertise on the Asia Pacific (including Southeast Asia), Indian Ocean (including South Asia and Middle East), and Central Asia. Additionally, its Institute of China Studies monitors international scholarship on China, including from the Global South.

At both the central and local levels, particular government agencies in China also maintain their own think tanks on international issues. Among them, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, is the highest-ranked among all Chinese think tanks in University of Pennsylvania's most recent Global Go To Think Tank Index Report (McGann 2021, 101). After beginning as a secretive advisory body for top party leaders shortly before the Cultural Revolution, CICIR has become public-facing since 1980. Its research focus spans all world regions along with important themes such as the BRI, anti-terrorism, climate change, and cybersecurity. CICIR hosts two Chinese-language academic journals and one in English. Affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China Institute of International Studies was founded in the mid-1950s and has a smaller but also comprehensive research program. Its research on Asia spreads across units on Asia-Pacific and developing countries, and often features in the two academic journals it publishes (one in Chinese, one in English). The Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, under the Ministry of Commerce, is another notable example which has expertise on different world regions, including Asia. Among local governments, Shanghai once again stands out: the research of its Shanghai Institutes for International Studies covers China's engagement with all the major world regions, including even the Arctic.

While government think tanks dominate the sector in China, some not-purely-official ones have emerged in the new millennium. The Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, founded in 2008, is a prominent example. As a young institution, it has already garnered a high ranking in the aforementioned University of Pennsylvania report, third highest among all Chinese think tanks (McGann 2021, 101). It does not have any direct government sponsorship, but Western media reports its founder's ties to the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020). Similar to other comprehensive official think tanks, it covers China's engagement with the rest of the world. Among various themes related to globalization, the Center researches standard ones such as international trade and the BRI but has particular strengths in international education.

## Networks

China's impressive economic growth and rising political influence in the past few decades correspond with the country's deepening involvement in international academic networks. Not only is China joining existing networks, it is also initiating new ones. In other words, Chinese institutions are becoming organizers and rule-makers, rather than just active participants.

Chinese networking closely reflects the country's overall geopolitical strategy and is thus uneven among different regions. Because of deep historical and contemporary ties, Southeast Asia is unsurprisingly a primary focus of such networking. The earlier example of GMSARN is one of the first regional networks joined by select universities Yunnan and Guangxi in southwest China. The more recent China-led networks of NACT, based at CFAU in Beijing, and NACAI, based at Fudan University in Shanghai, both target ASEAN and confirm the bloc's significance to China's international scholarly engagement. Besides networks in metropolitan centers, borderland provinces with particular connections to parts of Asia have also initiated their own. After earlier collaboration with the NUS East Asia Institute, Yunnan University has been hosting the annual Southwest Forum since 2010, showcasing scholarly dialogues on the province's strategic relations with Southeast Asia in general.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, the two northwest provinces of Gansu and Shaanxi created the University Alliance of Belt and Road and the University Alliance of the Silk Road, respectively, through their flagship universities. The former now boasts almost 180 member institutions, although the distribution is not clear. The latter has slightly fewer members, with Russia and Central Asia accounting for close to half of all the foreign institutions.

The overseas operation of Chinese universities and research institutions started in the early 2000s, another sign of China's proactive networking. Out of a dozen or so such institutions, five Chinese universities are currently operating separate programs or satellite campuses in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Thailand, Laos, and Malaysia), along with one in Sri Lanka (You and Wang 2019, 26). The Chinese Academy of Sciences also has joint research and education centers in Southeast, South, and Central Asia on topics from ecology and environment to drug development. So far, however, co-authored publications between Chinese and other Asian scholars through these centers remain uncommon.

## Strengths and Challenges

While there is a long history of Asian studies in China, Chinese research on relevant topics has accelerated considerably since the advent of the BRI. As of 2022, the State Council Academic Degrees Committee, China's official regulator of all university degrees, had added area studies as a level 1 interdisciplinary field.<sup>29</sup> This means that Chinese universities are now authorized to grant degrees specifically in area studies from the undergraduate to the doctoral level, and maintain faculty lines in the field. As is common in China, such a policy push from the central government often results in a rush of local initiatives in response. It is thus easy to see a dramatic scaling-up of research activities on a policy-driven topic within a short time. But this rapid growth, a hallmark of the Chinese development model in the past few decades, brings problems of redundancy and quality control (Saw 2007, 5-7; Wong and Wang 2019). It also calls into question whether the massive turn to policy-oriented China-Asia studies might marginalize much-needed research focusing on different parts of Asia. While the sheer number of research programs on China and the rest of Asia is impressive, the vast majority have only a virtual presence, meaning that they lack full-time staff or long-term research plans (Li Chenyang 2019, 150). Whether the new regulation is going to change that remains to be seen.

Despite their putatively international foci, area studies (including Asia) in China are "ironically inward-looking" (Kankan Xie 2021, 174). Perceived political sensitivity often dissuades Chinese scholars from organizing international events, which need to go through stringent bureaucratic review. Additionally, the domestic policy concerns behind area studies, something dating back to the 1960s, dictate short-term studies that are more meaningful to a domestic audience. The lack of qualified researchers with training in both foreign languages and rigorous disciplinary methods also contributes to the proliferation of many superficial macro-level studies without nuanced understandings of the situation on the ground.

Such methodological nationalism limits the broader outreach of Chinese academic networks. While quite a few top Chinese universities and think tanks host English-language publications (mostly journals), foreign contributors are not common and the publications are not well-known outside China. The SSCI, for example, includes only one journal from China (China Journal of International Politics) in the category of international relations, which has ninety-five source journals. There are, according to the Clarivate Journal Citation Reports, eighty journals in the category of area studies in the Social Science Citation Index, but only two are published in Hong Kong and none on the mainland.

## GLOBAL NORTH

Global North institutions have a long history of researching Asia, China included. But the existing disciplinary structure often favors discrete regional foci, such as East Asia (including China), Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Central Asia is often tied to Eurasia, and not yet a widespread regional designation on its own. In the United States, this structure dates back to Cold War-era area studies jointly financed by the federal government and the Ford Foundation. Professional organizations such as the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies were also instrumental in sustaining the structure by supporting scholarship on these different areas. Today, this structure is still kept largely in place through the Department of Education's National Resource Centers on regions from East Asia to Middle East, supported by Title VI funding.<sup>30</sup> Funded by both the federal government and private foundations, the Council of American Overseas Research Centers is a consortium of almost 30 member societies that promote scholarship on various world regions and actually has field offices in different parts of Asia (with the exception of East Asia).<sup>31</sup> While it is easy to characterize the current boom of area studies in China as following what the United States did at the height of the Cold War, critical differences remain between the two countries. Though not lacking policy considerations, area studies in the United States never acquire the policy intensive reputation as their contemporary Chinese counterparts, nor do they primarily focus on the connection between the United States and different world regions. In fact, many of the standalone area studies departments in U.S. universities today are the home of teaching and research on language and culture. Also, there is nothing even remotely similar to the CAROC in China, which enjoys on the ground presence to provide research support.

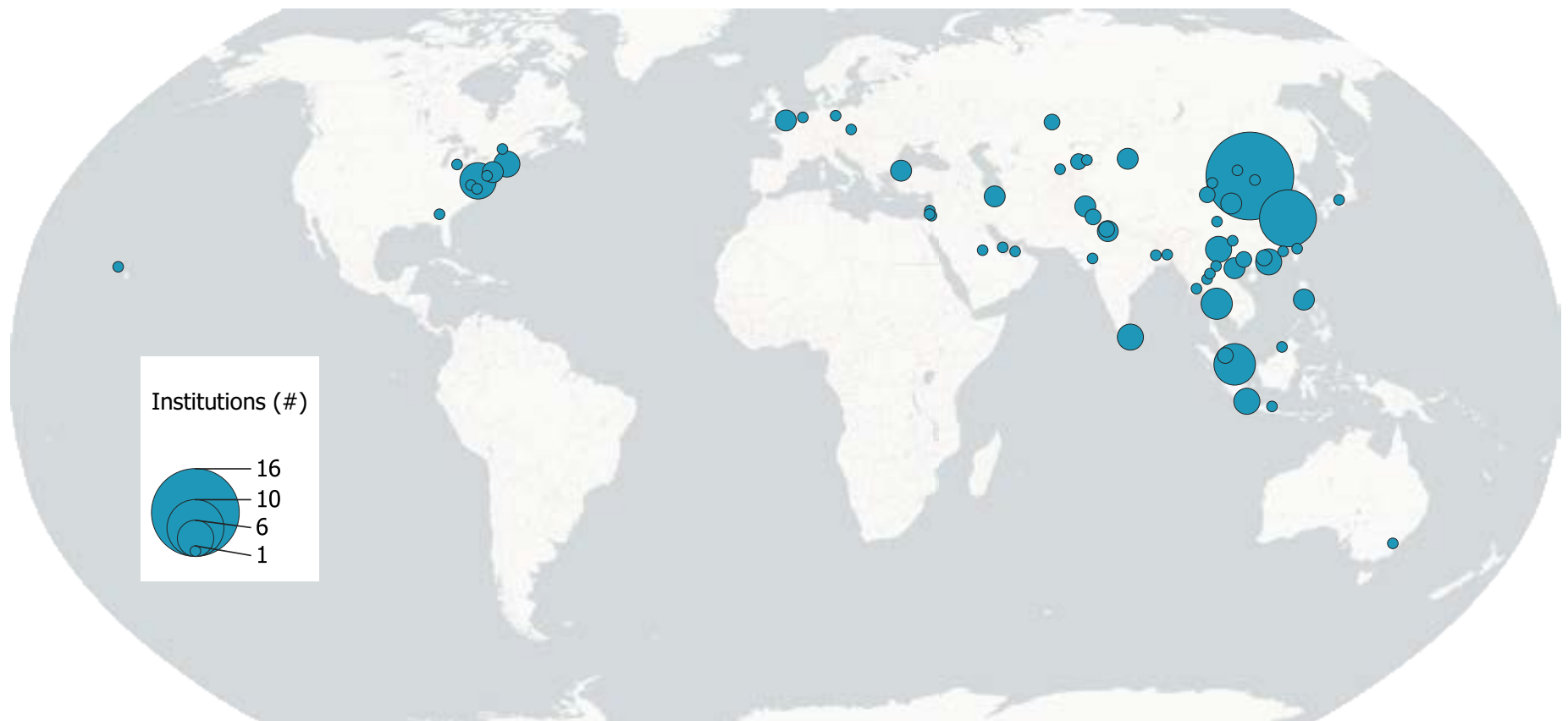
The study of China and the Global South aims to promote crossing these regional boundaries and calls into question the existing disciplinary structure. This is in line with the ongoing critical reflections on area studies (Szanton 2004). It is thus unsurprising to see that those institutions currently producing research on China and Asia tend to be outside the area studies paradigm. Take, for example, the India China Institute at the New School for Social Research, a New York-based institution that from its founding in 1919 aimed to break down conventional disciplinary boundaries.

This does not mean that cross-regional research is unencumbered by other politics of knowledge. The China Institute at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies is uniquely positioned as the largest Chinese studies center in Europe. Its unparalleled cross-fertilization with the School's broad strengths in Asian and African studies dates back to a bygone imperial vision that nevertheless still shapes the production of knowledge. Besides academic institutions, some think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Middle East Institute have also shown consistent interest in China's engagement with different parts of Asia. While they do not speak for the US government directly, their positioning as part of the policy community in Washington reflects new ways of thinking about China.

## MAPPING

This map is based on the list of networks and institutions in the Annex, and does not include entities without a fixed physical location.

### ASIA-CHINA KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS





## ANNEX: INVENTORY

This section divides entities relevant to research on China-Asia into networks (platform of several institutions) and individual institutions (some with multiple units), and lists them geographically. For the general criteria used to choose these entities, see the methodology section. Many of them are mentioned in the capacity section, and the order in which they appear here generally corresponds to that section as well.

### NETWORKS

#### Asia (mostly Southeast Asia)

##### *ASEAN-ISIS (Institutes of Strategic and International Studies)*

Established in 1988

- Founded by five national institutes of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, now including those from all other ASEAN states.<sup>32</sup>
- Shared interests in China's political and economic presence in the region.

##### *SEASREP Foundation*

Manila, Philippines

Established in 1994

- Brainchild of a few Southeast Asian historians aiming to promote Southeast Asian studies in the region.
- Increasing attention to China-ASEAN research with the recent support of the Japan Foundation.<sup>33</sup>

##### *Greater Mekong Subregion Academic and Research Network (GMSARN)*

Bangkok, Thailand

Established in 2001

- Aims to boost scholarly and socioeconomic development in a transnational region defined by one of the prominent international rivers flowing from southwest China to Southeast Asia.
- The network includes member institutions from universities in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) and China (Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces).<sup>34</sup> This is one of the first regional academic networks Chinese institutions joined.
- It supports the GMSARN International Journal, which publishes both physical and social science research.

##### *Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA)*

Established in 2015

- Aims to promote multilateral cooperation among scholars of Southeast Asian studies based in East and Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup>
- Rotating secretariat among member institutions, which include Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, three institutions in Taiwan, three in Singapore, and one each in the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, mainland China, and Hong Kong.

*Thai University Network for Chinese Studies (TUNCS)*

Established in 2019

- The only national network in Asia specifically focusing on Chinese studies. Five member institutions (see the Institutions section) represent the highest level of Thai scholarship on China-Southeast Asia.<sup>36</sup>

*Indian Association of East Asian Studies*

Planning in progress in 2022

- Asian Century Foundation is planning the establishment of the Association in order to bring together Indian scholars working on East Asia.
- China studies are expected to be a significant part of the new organization as the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, is a key partner and will host the inaugural conference in late March 2022.<sup>37</sup>

## China

*Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks (NACT)* 中国-东盟思想库网络

Beijing Municipality

Established in 2013

- Promoted by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang as Track-II diplomacy strengthening the “community of common destiny.”
- Secretariat based at the Institute of Asian studies at China Foreign Affairs University, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Recent online meetings covered issues such as public health, the environment, and the supply chain.

*Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS): Research Center for Ecology and Environment of Central Asia*

中国科学院中亚生态与环境研究中心

Headquartered in Urumqi, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

Established in 2013

- A network of research institutions spanning China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- In addition to the headquarters, there are three branches (Almaty, Bishkek, and Dushanbe), three joint labs, three information centers, fifteen field observation and research stations, and four experimental and demonstrative sites.<sup>38</sup>

*CAS: Southeast Asia Biodiversity Research Institute* 中国科学院东南亚生物多样性研究中心

Headquartered in Mengla, Yunnan Province

Established in 2016

- One of the active CAS operations that focuses on a network of Sino-Burmese scientific collaboration.
- The network also plans to include research institutions and international organizations in other Southeast Asian countries.<sup>39</sup>

*BRI Database* 一带一路数据库

Established in 2015

- Comprehensive Chinese-language database on China’s signature international policy initiative, developed by Social Sciences Literature Press and affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

- It aims at three kinds of institutional users (government agencies, research institutions, and business) and provides relevant information on academic research and policy practice. The entries include the latest developments in specific countries (including many in Asia) and specific Chinese provinces, as well as particular themes.<sup>40</sup>

#### *University Alliance of Belt and Road* 一带一路高校联盟

Lanzhou, Gansu Province

Established in 2015

- Network initiated by Lanzhou University, the flagship higher education institution in Gansu Province in northwest China; a similar network to UASR.
- Almost 180 member institutions from different parts of the world, but distribution unclear. Website is still under construction.<sup>41</sup>

#### *University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR)* 丝绸之路大学联盟

Xi'an, Shaanxi Province

Established in 2015

- Network initiated by Xi'an Jiaotong University, the flagship higher education institution in Shaanxi Province in northwest China, in reference to the ancient trade route linking China and the world, touted as a predecessor of BRI.<sup>42</sup>
- Almost half of the 150 or so member institutions are in Russia and Central Asia.

#### *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Consortium of Universities* 中巴经济走廊大学联盟

Established in 2017

- The higher education corollary of the signature bilateral cooperation program, under the auspices of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and China Association of Higher Education, Chinese secretariat at Fudan University in Shanghai. Member institutions now number over eighty.
- In the fourth exchange mechanism conference in 2021, the two sides also launched a new China-Pakistan Higher Education Research Institute 中巴高等教育研究院.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Network of ASEAN-China Academic Institutes (NACAI)* 中国-东盟学术共同体

Shanghai Municipality

Established in 2017

- Secretariat based at Fudan University's Center for China's Relations with Neighboring Countries, with member institutions from all ASEAN states.
- Despite the policy mandate for strengthening ASEAN-China relations, this network has the most transparent academic component as compared to similar ones. It hosts annual meetings that feature research on China-Southeast Asia. The Fudan Center has more than a dozen affiliated researchers and supports its own journal and book series.

#### *Think Tank Forum of China + Central Asia (C + C5)* 中国+中亚五国智库论坛

Established in 2021

- A network very recently initiated by the CASS Institute of Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies and joined by official think tanks in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>44</sup>
- The first meeting focused on the situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US troops in the context of Central Asian security and development. China's vice minister of foreign affairs also joined.<sup>45</sup>

*Luban Workshops* 鲁班工坊

Tianjin Municipality, China

Established in 2016

- Originally an initiative by Tianjin Municipality to encourage vocational schools within its jurisdiction to open joint programs overseas; now evolving into a national plan to promote China's vocational education abroad.
- Existing workshops in Southeast and South Asia, as well as West Europe and Africa; curriculum including railway technology, advanced manufacturing, logistics, etc.<sup>46</sup>

## Global North

*Association for Asian Studies (AAS)*

Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Established in 1941

- Largest professional organization of Asian studies in North America with considerable membership in China studies.
- Recent collaboration with similar organizations in Asia, Europe, and Latin America in promoting global networks for Asian studies serves as a template for facilitating research on China and the Global South.<sup>47</sup>
- Recipient of a recent \$2.68 million grant from Sweden to support under-represented scholars of Asia in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>48</sup>

*Central Eurasian Studies Society*

Cambridge, MA, USA

Established in 2000

- Sole professional association dedicated to the study of Central Asia in the United States; organizes an annual conference which includes panels on Chinese influence in the region.
- Close collaboration with Central Asian Survey, a top journal in the field with regular coverage of China.<sup>49</sup>

*Association of Global South Studies*

Americus, GA, USA

Established in 1983

- Founded as the Association for Third World Studies, changed to its current name in 2016.
- Its flagship journal also changed its title from Journal of Third World Studies to Journal of Global South Studies in 2016. There was more interest in China's own development and to a lesser extent its engagement with other developing countries in the old journal; this probably reflects a changing perception of China's international standing.<sup>50</sup>

*International Institute for Asian Studies*

Leiden, Netherlands

Established in 1993

- In the same city as Leiden University, which has a long history of Sinological research.
- Sponsors biennial International Convention of Asia Scholars from 1998, the largest international conference of Asian studies (including China), with host cities in China, East and Southeast Asia, Australia, and Western Europe.<sup>51</sup>
- Thematic interests in Global Asia, which spurred an Asia-Africa knowledge network, and recent programming on BRI.<sup>52</sup>

## INSTITUTIONS

### Southeast Asia

#### *National University of Singapore (NUS): various units*

##### Singapore

- As the city-state's top comprehensive university, NUS enjoys an unparalleled concentration of research capacity that examines China's connection with different parts of Asia. This reflects Singapore's strategic location between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- East Asian Institute (founded in 1997) studies China, East Asia, and ASEAN.<sup>53</sup>
- Asia Research Institute (founded in 2001) conducts thematic and cross-national research that examines China in the Asian context.<sup>54</sup>
- Institute of South Asian Studies (founded in 2004) covers China's presence in South Asia.<sup>55</sup>
- Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (founded in 2004) has a dedicated line of research on BRI.<sup>56</sup>
- Middle East Institute (founded in 2007) features research on Arabia-Asia, including China.<sup>57</sup>
- The Department of History is the editorial home of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, a top journal in the field, which welcomes scholarship in all humanities and social sciences and regularly covers China.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Nanyang Technological University: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

##### Singapore

##### Established in 1996

- As part of another top research university in Singapore, the School is known for its security studies covering China-Southeast Asia. It also functions as a think tank.

#### *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute*

##### Singapore

##### Established in 1968

- Leading research center on Southeast Asia outside Singapore's university system, paying extensive attention to China.
- Hosts three acclaimed peer-reviewed journals in the fields of international relations, economics, and ethnography and history.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Chulalongkorn University: Institute of Asian Studies*

##### Bangkok, Thailand

##### Established in 1985

- Institute at Thailand's most prestigious national university with a small Chinese Studies Center, part of NACAI and TUNCS.
- Collective projects on Chinese migration and tourism in the region.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Thammasat University: Institute of East Asian Studies*

##### Khlong Luang, Thailand

##### Established in 1981

- An early university institute, part of TUNCS; focuses on East Asia and has patronage from Princess Sirindhorn.<sup>61</sup>

- Earlier research focus on Japan, moving more to China in recent years; opened a Chinese learning center and Chinese studies library.

*Chiang Mai University: China-Southeast Asian Studies Center*

Chiang Mai, Thailand

Established in 2019

- A young center led by a senior sociologist, part of TUNCS.
- It is active in producing publications, including several books. The sociological focus on situations on the ground is unique in a field dominated by macro political economy.<sup>62</sup>

*Mae Fah Luang University: Asian Research Center for International Development*

Chiang Rai, Thailand

Established in 2016

- Focuses on China-Southeast Asian relations; part of TUNCS. Has limited research output.

*Mahidol University: Center for China and Globalizing Asia Studies*

Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

Established in 2017

- Young center with specialists on China-Southeast Asian cultural connections; part of TUNCS.
- Cohosted an international conference with Singapore's Nanyang Technological University on China studies in Southeast Asia in March 2020.<sup>63</sup>

*Asian Institute of Technology: Belt & Road Research Center*

Khlong Luang, Thailand

Established in 2019

- Housed in an international English-speaking postgraduate institution focusing on engineering, environment, and management studies.
- Aspiring as an international hub for collaborative and innovative research towards robust economic growth and sustainable development in the BRI region, directed by a Chinese scholar with advanced training in environmental engineering, but no recent update of activities.<sup>64</sup>

*Universitas Indonesia: various units*

Depok, Indonesia

- ASEAN Study Center under Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Department of International Relations as part of NACAL. Limited information on the English-language website.<sup>65</sup>
- Chinese Studies Program under the Faculty of Humanities also has limited information in English.<sup>66</sup>

*Petra Christian University: Center for Chinese-Indonesian Studies*

Surabaya, Indonesia

Established in 2011

- Focuses on language learning; limited information on the English-language website.<sup>67</sup>



*Center for Indonesia-China Studies*

Jakarta, Indonesia

Established in 2021

- Student-run think tank on China and Indonesia-China relations.
- Promotes public events and brief online posts on social media sites such as Instagram and LinkedIn.<sup>68</sup>

*Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia: China Forum*

Jakarta, Indonesia

Established in 2020

- Foreign policy think tank involving government officials, scholars, businesses, and civil society; has an informal Chinese Policy Group coordinating China-related programming.
- Inaugural China Forum invited over twenty participants from government, academia, and civil society, including the Chinese ambassador.<sup>69</sup>

*University of Malaya: Institute of China Studies*

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Established in 2003

- The first research center in the country to focus on China.
- With almost ten full-time academic staff members, the Institute produces research on a wide range of topics ranging from premodern Chinese humanities to contemporary China-Southeast Asia connections.<sup>70</sup>

*National University of Malaysia: Centre for Asian Studies*

Selangor, Malaysia

Established in 1995

- Housed under the encompassing Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, this Centre has three researchers working on the political economy and cultural dimensions of China-Southeast Asian relations.<sup>71</sup>

*Universiti Brunei Darussalam: Institute of Asian Studies*

Gadong, Brunei

Established in 2012

- A young institute supported by a small, oil-rich nation, with considerable research on China and the BRI specifically in two researcher clusters: human security and regionalization, and migration, mobility, and diaspora.<sup>72</sup>

*University of the Philippines: Asian Center*

Quezon City, Philippines

Established in 1955

- Affiliated with the most prestigious Filipino university; part of NACAL.
- One of the earliest Asian studies programs in the region, but has only one faculty member working on China-Southeast Asia, among research on other parts of Asia.<sup>73</sup>
- Hosted a webinar on global networks of Asian studies with scholarly associations in the region, North America, Europe, and Latin America.<sup>74</sup>

*Ateneo de Manila University: various units*

Quezon City, Philippines

- Chinese Studies Program offers Chinese studies major and minor in humanities, social sciences and business tracks, as well as professional courses on traditional Chinese medicine.<sup>75</sup>
- Ricardo Leong Center for Chinese Studies (founded in 2005) received an endowment from the Leong family to promote Chinese studies, including Chinese diaspora, in the Philippines. Has held conferences and sponsored scholarship and fellowship programs.<sup>76</sup>

*University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University: various units*

Hanoi, Vietnam

Vietnam's most prestigious university.

- Center for Chinese Studies (founded in 2003) focuses on the premodern period.<sup>77</sup>
- Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies and International Issues (founded in 2012) covers the contemporary period and had a past collaboration with Yunnan Nationalities University. Limited information on the English-language website.<sup>78</sup>

*Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences: Institute of Chinese Studies*

Hanoi, Vietnam

Established in 1993

- Part of an official Vietnamese think tank.
- Research coverage from premodern literature to contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations. Limited information on the English-language website.<sup>79</sup>

*University of Yangon: Department of International Relations*

Yangon, Myanmar

Established in 1958

- Part of NACAI at Myanmar's most prestigious university. Cohosted the fourth international symposium on ASEAN-China collaboration in fighting the COVID pandemic in late 2020.
- A few scholars study China-Myanmar relations, but their writings in Burmese are difficult to access.<sup>80</sup>
- The impact of the military coup in early 2021 on the institution is unclear.

## South Asia

*Visva-Bharati University: Cheena Bhavana (Department of Chinese Language and Culture)*

Santiniketan, India

Established in 1937

- Oldest academic institution of Chinese studies in India, focusing on language and culture.<sup>81</sup>

*Jawaharlal Nehru University: Centre for East Asian Studies*

New Delhi, India

Year of establishment unknown

- One of the most prestigious public universities in India with an established East Asian studies program.
- A few scholars working on China-India relations, but lacking the dynamic initiatives seen at young private universities.<sup>82</sup>

*Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi*

New Delhi, India

Established in 1969

- An official think tank supported by the Ministry of External Affairs, focusing on bilateral strategic and security issues.
- Cohosts the All India Conference of China Studies and India Forum on China; also publishes China Report, the premier Indian journal of China studies.<sup>83</sup>

*Ashoka University: Centre for China Studies*

Sonapat, India

Established in 2020

- A young, rising private university supported by the International Foundation for Research and Education and the Asian Century Foundation to develop its Chinese studies program.
- The Centre collaborates with the Harvard-Yenching Institute and National Taiwan Normal University on postdoctoral fellowships and language teaching.<sup>84</sup>

*Jindal Global University: Centre for India-China Studies*

Sonapat, India

Established in 2014

- A young private university with a wide array of area and transnational studies programs.
- The Centre is unique in its explicit focus on broadly defined civil society in India-China. The founding and current director is a Chinese female scholar, which is rare in India given the geopolitical tensions between the two countries.<sup>85</sup>

*Ahmedabad University: Centre for Inter-Asian Research*

Established in 2021

Based in Ahmedabad, India

- A young private university with a unique Centre focusing on inter-Asian cultural studies, including China-India, led by an Indian scholar who taught in Hong Kong.<sup>86</sup>

*Desi Chinese Project*

Year of establishment unknown

- A living online archive of the Chinese community in India, this interactive website provides both textual and audiovisual sources that cover different aspects of Chinese Indian community life, such as religion and food.<sup>87</sup>

*Lahore University of Management Sciences: various units*

Lahore, Pakistan

- One of the top private universities in the country; began as a business school, now a comprehensive research university.
- Centre for Chinese Legal Studies (founded in 2019) is unique in its focus on Chinese law in bilateral relations. Active programming and research agenda.<sup>88</sup>
- China Pakistan Management Initiative focuses on “developing a center for collaborative research, exploring business avenues and exchange of ideas between China and Pakistan.”<sup>89</sup> Website not as active as that of the Centre for Chinese Legal Studies.

*COMSATS University Islamabad: China Study Centre*

Islamabad, Pakistan

Established in 2013

- Led by a Chinese-educated faculty member in business; involves networking for faculty members with Chinese education and students planning to study in China. No active research yet.<sup>90</sup>

*National University of Sciences and Technology: China Study Center*

Islamabad, Pakistan

Established in 2016

- Led by a Chinese woman with business and consulting experience in both countries; not much research yet published.<sup>91</sup>

*Asian Institute of Eco-Civilization Research and Development*

Islamabad, Pakistan

Year of establishment unknown

- Think tank with considerable focus on China and CPEC.<sup>92</sup>

*University of Dhaka: East Asia Study Center*

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Established in 2013

- Top university in Bangladesh with active programming and research on China and Southeast and South Asia.

*Verité Research*

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Established in 2010

- Leading independent think tank focusing on economics, law, politics, and media, touching upon Chinese trade and investment.<sup>94</sup>

*Institute of Policy Research of Sri Lanka*

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Established in 1988

- Leading independent think tank focusing on economic research; China-Sri Lankan economic relations appear in recent research output.<sup>95</sup>

*Pathfinder Foundation*

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Established in 2008

- Leading independent think tank founded by a former government official.
- Considerable attention to China's presence in the region and extensive collaboration with Chinese institutions.<sup>96</sup>

*Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies*

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Established in 1988

- Government think tank affiliated with Ministry of Foreign Affairs; some attention to China.<sup>97</sup>

## Central Asia

### *KIMEP University: China and Central Asia Studies Center*

Almaty, Kazakhstan

Established in 2017

- New private university, founded with English as its primary language and probably the only such dedicated center on Central Asia and China in the region.
- Soon to enter a formal collaboration agreement for researchers with Tsinghua University's Institute for International and Area Studies.
- Current director, trained as a political scientist of China, has expertise on UN and Southeast Asia; now also working on Central Asia.<sup>98</sup>

### *Nazarbayev University*

Astana, Kazakhstan

Established in 2010

- New university with English as the primary language, named after the first president of independent Kazakhstan, where President Xi Jinping first unveiled BRI in 2013.
- Joint program on BRI with George Washington University in 2017-8.<sup>99</sup>
- The only English-language PhD program in Eurasian studies in the region.<sup>100</sup>

### *Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*

Astana, Kazakhstan

Established in 1993

- Official think tank in charge of advising the president on, among other things, international relations. Periodic research briefings on China.
- Partnership with China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and Shanghai Institutes of International Studies.<sup>101</sup>

### *OSCE Academy*

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Established in 2002

- Supported by the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, with a research focus on security.
- Sponsored two international conferences on BRI in 2019 and 2021.<sup>102</sup>

### *University of Central Asia: Graduate School of Development*

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Established in 2000

- International university founded by several Central Asian states and the Aga Khan.
- Sponsors publications and conferences on the impact of BRI in the region.<sup>103</sup>

### *University of World Economy and Diplomacy: Department of International Relations*

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Established in 1992

- University affiliated with the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs; department collaborating with several Chinese institutions.<sup>104</sup>

## West Asia

### *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies: Asian Studies Program*

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Established in 2015

- Aims to promote greater understanding of Asia within the Gulf and wider Arab world.
- The Program's research agenda is bifurcated between a focus on contemporary Asian international relations, politics, economics, and security topics on the one hand, and a concentration on historical, anthropological, and cultural-social issues on the other.<sup>105</sup>

### *United Arab Emirates University: Center for China Studies*

Abu Dhabi, UAE

Established in 2018

- Proposed collaboration between the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at UAEU and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; no further update on its activities.
- Aims to enhance research cooperation between the two countries in the field of social sciences and exchange expertise through holding seminars, conferences, and exhibitions.
- Aims to help students, researchers, and businesspeople learn Chinese language, culture, and literature and strengthen educational and cultural relations between the two countries.<sup>106</sup>

### *Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community: World Innovation Summit for Education*

Doha, Qatar

Established in 2015

- The World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), an initiative of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), has entered into a number of new partnerships and initiatives with key Chinese educational institutions following substantive discussions with a range of senior Chinese educators and research officials in Beijing.<sup>107</sup>

### *Allameh Tabataba'i University: Centre for Chinese Studies*

Tehran, Iran

Established in 2019

- The Centre for Chinese Studies opened in ATU College of Insurance; an MOU exists for further collaborations.
- In collaboration with China Renmin University.<sup>108</sup>

### *Sharif University of Technology*

Tehran, Iran

Established in 1966

- Mandated by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), Sharif University of Technology (SUT) is the leading home of Iran-China academic collaborations. The main task of SUT in this regard is to facilitate and improve academic collaborations between Iranian and Chinese academic institutions.<sup>109</sup>



*Iran National Science Foundation: Silk Road Science Fund*

Tehran, Iran

Year of establishment unknown

- Joint program with the Chinese Academy of Sciences in fields from advanced materials to renewable energy.<sup>110</sup>

*Boğaziçi University: Asian Studies Center*

Istanbul, Turkey

Established in 2009

- The Center's main purpose is to contribute to the development of Asian studies in Turkey and to expand research and academic exchange relations between Turkey and Asian countries.<sup>111</sup>
- Has exchange programs and mutual research projects with Peking University, Department of History.

*Koç University: Asia Center*

Istanbul, Turkey

Established in 2016

- Aims to produce and disseminate high-quality comparative and interdisciplinary academic and policy-relevant research on Asia.<sup>112</sup>

*İstinye University: Center for Belt and Road Studies*

Istanbul, Turkey

Year of establishment unknown

- A center dedicated to the study of the BRI at a young private university in Turkey; hosts several research groups on the global repercussions of China's international engagement, not limited to the Middle East.<sup>113</sup>
- Editorial home of Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly, a peer-reviewed journal launched in late 2019 with substantive collaboration with scholars based in China.<sup>114</sup>

*Hebrew University of Jerusalem: various units*

Jerusalem, Israel

- The Department of Asian Studies, the oldest in Israel, offers undergraduate students a structured curriculum with language studies at its core (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian Languages), along with historical, political, and cultural introductory classes about China, Japan, Korea, India, and Indonesia.<sup>115</sup>
- Louis Frieberg Center for East Asian Studies (founded in 2006) offers an interdisciplinary forum for relevant teaching and research.<sup>116</sup>
- Despite a strong foundation of China studies, neither unit appears to sponsor dedicated research on China and the Global South.

*Tel Aviv University: Department of East Asian Studies*

Tel Aviv, Israel

Established in 1995

- Offers a wide range of courses pertaining to classical history as well as the modern transformation of the civilizations of India, China, and Japan.<sup>117</sup>
- Despite a strong foundation of China studies, there appears to be little dedicated research on China and the Global South.

*University of Haifa: Department of Asian Studies*

Haifa, Israel

Year of establishment unknown

- Another strong department of Asian studies in Israel where students focus on China, Japan, or India complemented by courses pertaining to Korea, central Asia, and other areas of Asia. Studies include history and culture, society and economy, politics and international relations, psychology, philosophy, and art of Asia while clearly emphasizing modern times.<sup>118</sup>
- Little organized research on China and the Global South except for one faculty member working on China-Middle East Relations.

## PRC &amp; Greater China Comprehensive Institutions

This section lists institutions that have research capacity on China's engagement with multiple regions of Asia.

*Peking University 北京大学: various units*

Beijing Municipality

- Earliest national university (founded in 1898) with a longstanding tradition of researching China's engagement, particularly with the Global South.
- Institute of Afro-Asian Studies (亚非研究所 founded in 1964) at the School of International Studies is no longer a coherent unit. A handful of faculty members are working on Central and West Asia and at a separate Center for African Studies.
- Center for South Asian Studies (南亚研究中心 founded in 2009), affiliated with the Department of South Asian Studies at the School of Foreign Languages, was recognized by the Ministry of Education in 2011 as a key area studies program. Longstanding strengths in premodern language and culture, with some coverage of contemporary issues.<sup>119</sup>
- Institute for Global Understanding and Cooperation (中外人文交流研究基地 founded in 2011) began as an institute focusing on China-US people-to-people exchanges; now expanding to China and other major powers, including Indonesia and India.<sup>120</sup>
- Institute of Area Studies (区域与国别研究院 founded in 2018) is now the coordinating unit on campus of all area studies programs.<sup>121</sup>
- Sultan Qaboos Chair in Arabic Studies (卡布斯苏丹研究讲席 founded in 2007) promotes the teaching and learning of Arabic language and culture in China, as well as educational and cultural exchange between China and (particularly) Oman.<sup>122</sup>

*Tsinghua University: Institute for International and Area Studies 清华大学国际与地区研究院*

Beijing Municipality

Established in 2017

- Most prestigious Chinese university (founded in 1908) in science and technology, which has increased its capacity in humanities and social sciences in recent decades.
- The Institute grew out of an earlier PhD program on developing countries. It now has research capacity on all the major world regions, including Asia, and appears to be more than a coordinating body, as in the case of PKU.
- Collaboration with research institutions in South and West Asia and Latin America to facilitate research.<sup>123</sup>

*Beijing Foreign Studies University: Academy of Regional and Global Governance* 北京外国语大学区域与全球治理高等研究院

Beijing Municipality

Established in 2016

- Leveraging traditional strengths in foreign language instruction into area studies.
- Consolidated 40 or so separate centers previously attached to different academic units in order to promote Chinese understandings of different parts of the world, including Asia.<sup>124</sup>

*Fudan University* 复旦大学: *various units*

Shanghai Municipality

- Most prestigious comprehensive university in China's largest city (founded in 1905) with a longstanding tradition of researching China's engagement with the outside world.
- Permanent secretariat of NACAI at Center for China's Relations with Neighboring Countries (中国与周边国家关系研究中心 founded in 2013), part of an encompassing Institute of International Studies 国际问题研究院.
- The Institute now also includes dedicated units on Russia and Central Asia, South Asia, Middle East, and Pakistan.
- Asia Research Center (亚洲研究中心 founded in 2002) has received funding from a Korean foundation and focuses more on East Asia.<sup>125</sup>

*New York University (NYU) Shanghai: Center for Global Asia* 上海纽约大学环球亚洲研究中心

Shanghai Municipality

Established in 2015

- Part of New York University's branch campus in Shanghai, the Center is led by an Indian scholar with educational experience in both China and the United States.
- Promotes research that breaks down the traditional subregional boundaries within Asia; particularly active in building China-India studies and a database of Chinese language scholarship on Asian studies.<sup>126</sup>

*Shanghai University: Institute of Global Studies* 上海大学全球问题研究院

Shanghai Municipality

Year of establishment unknown

- Comprehensive research institute which includes global studies, regional (Turkey and the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and Africa) studies, and global themes.<sup>127</sup>

*China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations* 中国现代国际关系研究院: *various units*

Beijing Municipality

Established in 1965

- A top-ranked official think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security.
- Research areas cover all the major world regions (including Asia) and particular themes related to international security.<sup>128</sup>

*China Institute of International Studies* 中国国际问题研究院: *various units*

Beijing Municipality

Established in 1956

- Official think tank affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Research areas cover all the major world regions (including Asia) and particular themes related to international relations.<sup>129</sup>

*Development Research Center of the State Council: Institute of Eurasian Social Development* 国务院发展研究中心欧亚社会发展研究所

Beijing Municipality

Established in 1989

- High-profile think tank directly advising the State Council.
- Covers research on, among other topics, Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>130</sup>

*Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation* 国际贸易经济合作研究院

Beijing Municipality

Established in 1948

- Official think tank affiliated with the Ministry of Commerce.
- Research areas cover all the major world regions (including Asia) and particular themes related to international trade.<sup>131</sup>

*Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) 中国社会科学院: various units*

Beijing Municipality

- China's comprehensive national research think tank in humanities and social sciences, including area studies, which grew out of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.
- Institute of West Asian and African Studies (西亚非洲研究所 founded in 1961) is the oldest unit that studies China-West Asia (Middle East). It publishes West Asia and Africa 西亚非洲 and hosts the Chinese Association for Middle Eastern Studies.<sup>132</sup>
- Research on South and Southeast Asia did not begin until the early reform era, and was later consolidated into Asia Pacific studies. It is now under the National Institute of International Strategy (亚太与全球战略研究院 founded in 2011), which also publishes the journal South Asian Studies 南亚研究 and hosts the Chinese Association for South Asian Studies.<sup>133</sup>
- Research on Central Asia is an add-on to the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies (俄罗斯东欧中亚研究所 founded in 1965), which publishes the journal Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies 俄罗斯东欧中亚研究 and hosts the Chinese Association for Eastern Europe and Central Asian Studies.<sup>134</sup>

*China Foundation for International Studies* 中国国际问题研究基金会

Beijing Municipality

Established in 1999

- Semi-official think tank organized mainly by retired Chinese diplomats, with ties to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Research units on China's relations with all the world regions, including Asia, and international themes; publishes online commentaries.<sup>135</sup>

*Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences* 上海社会科学院: various units

Shanghai Municipality

- Largest provincial-level academy of social sciences, founded in 1958.
- Institute of International Relations (国际问题研究所 founded in 2011) integrates research capacity on different parts of Asia.<sup>136</sup>
- Institute of China Studies (世界中国研究所 founded in 2012) tracks Chinese studies in different parts of the world.<sup>137</sup>

*Shanghai Institutes for International Studies* 上海国际问题研究院: *various units*

Shanghai Municipality

Established in 1960

- Official think tank directly under the municipal government; comprehensive research capacity on China's engagement with the rest of the world.<sup>138</sup>

*Center for China & Globalization* 全球化智库

Beijing Municipality

Established in 2008

- Top ranked Chinese think tank without direct government ties; extensive research on BRI and education.<sup>139</sup>

*Charhar Institute* 察哈尔学会

Shangyi, Hebei Province

Established in 2009

- Semi-independent think tank; the founder has ties to the government.
- Focuses on public diplomacy and China's international image and offers commentaries on China's relations with different parts of the world, Asia included.
- Research team consisting of government officials, scholars, media and legal professionals, and religious leaders in China and abroad; publishes in various formats, from briefs to journals and book series.<sup>140</sup>

*Intellisla* 海国图智研究院

Guangzhou, Guangdong Province

Established in 2015

- Unofficial think tank founded by a Chinese scholar of international relations with a PhD from University of Chicago teaching at Jinan University.
- Name inspired by one of the most influential treatises in China after the Opium War (1839-42) which introduced the West; the organization also focuses on China and the world.
- Publishes a China and the Global South series, which integrates separate publications on Southeast and South Asia, Latin America, and Africa.<sup>141</sup>

*University of Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences* 香港大學香港人文社會科學研究所

Hong Kong SAR

Established in 2001

- Independent research institute at University of Hong Kong with particular strengths in interpretive methods (historical/ethnographic) on China's connection with different parts of Asia.
- Research projects on the role of soft power and religion in the BRI.<sup>142</sup>

*Chinese University of Hong Kong: Global China Research Programme* 香港中文大學全球中國研究計劃

Hong Kong SAR

Established in 2015

- Involves a dozen existing units on campus examining China's global impact, particularly the BRI.<sup>143</sup>

*Hong Kong University of Science and Technology: Global China Center* 香港科技大學全球中國中心

Hong Kong SAR

Established in 2019

- Aiming to promote a new paradigm of China studies through partnerships with institutions in the Global North and regional networking in East Asia.
- Currently sponsoring several projects on the global impact of the BRI, particularly in Asia.<sup>144</sup>

## PRC &amp; Greater China Region-Specific Institutions

This section lists institutions that focus on China's engagement with a particular region of Asia.

*Xiamen University: Center for Southeast Asian Studies* 厦门大学东南亚研究中心

Xiamen, Fujian Province

Established in 1956

- Located in a region with extensive historic and contemporary ties to Southeast Asia; research focus on political economy, international relations, and Chinese diaspora.<sup>145</sup>
- Earliest university center on Southeast Asia founded after 1949; hosts the China Society for Southeast Asian Studies, the only such area studies organization in China not affiliated with CASS.<sup>146</sup>
- Center for ASEAN Studies (东盟研究中心 founded in 2011) is part of the larger Center; the research agenda is very similar and the relationship unclear.<sup>147</sup>

*Jinan University: School of International Studies/Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies* 暨南大学华侨华人研究院

Guangzhou, Guangdong Province

Established in 1981

- Longstanding institutional interest in Southeast Asia dating back to the university's early history in Shanghai in the 1920s.
- Currently located in a region with extensive historic and contemporary ties to Southeast Asia; similar research focus as Xiamen University.
- Designated by the Ministry of Education in 1999 as a key humanities and social sciences base; the only mainland Chinese member of SEASIA.<sup>148</sup>

*Sichuan University* 四川大学: *various units*

Chengdu, Sichuan Province

- Institute of South Asian Studies (南亚研究所 founded in 1964) was the first such program recognized by Ministry of Education as a key humanities and social sciences research base. Its research focuses on contemporary political economy and touches upon history and culture.<sup>149</sup>
- China Center for South Asian Studies (中国南亚研究中心 founded in 2017) appears to function more as a think tank for government policies. Relationship with the Institute unclear.<sup>150</sup>

*Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences: China Institute of South and Southeast Asian Studies* 云南省社会科学院 | 中国 (昆明) 南亚东南亚研究院

Kunming, Yunnan Province

Established in 2015

- Located in southwest China in proximity to both South and Southeast Asia.



- Cross-regional integration of existing research strengths in separate institutes in order to build the province's economic competitiveness.<sup>151</sup>

*Yunnan University: Institute of International Relations* 云南大学国际关系研究院

Kunming, Yunnan Province

Established in 2002

- The university's area studies research on South and West Asia dates back to the 1960s. It recently consolidated different units on campus into one umbrella Institute.
- Particular strengths are still in Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, with which the province shares a border (as well as with Vietnam and Laos). Research topics focus on political economy and also cover environmental issues (e.g., international rivers flowing from the province to Southeast Asia).<sup>152</sup>

*Yunnan University of Finance and Economics: Institute for Indian Ocean Economies* 云南财经大学印度洋地区研究中心

Kunming, Yunnan Province

Established in 2011

- Cross-regional research center drawing on the university's disciplinary focus and the province's pivot to South Asia.<sup>153</sup>
- The university also has a branch campus in Bangkok.

*Guangxi University: China-ASEAN Research Institute* 广西大学中国-东盟研究院

Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region

Established in 2005

- Recognized by the Ministry of Education within the past decade as a key area studies program; located in Guangxi, bordering Vietnam.<sup>154</sup>

*Guizhou University: ASEAN Research Institute* 贵州大学东盟研究院

Guiyang, Guizhou Province

Established in 2009

- Recognized by the Ministry of Education within the past decade as a key area studies program; located in an underdeveloped inland southwest province with ambitions for economic integration with Southeast Asia.<sup>155</sup>

*Shanghai International Studies University* 上海外国语大学: *various units*

Shanghai Municipality

- Middle East Studies Institute (中东研究所 founded in 1980) was the first such program recognized by the Ministry of Education as a key humanities and social sciences research base in 2000.
- Based at a university specializing in foreign language instruction and international studies, focusing on contemporary situations.<sup>156</sup>
- Center for Central Asia Studies (中亚研究中心 founded in 2010) builds upon the university's strengths in Russian studies and language training.<sup>157</sup>

*Beijing International Studies University: School of Middle Eastern Studies* 北京第二外国语学院中东学院

Beijing Municipality

Established in 2018

- Among the first Chinese universities to offer majors in Arabic dating back to the 1960s.
- The School now also hosts 中阿改革发展研究院 Institute of China-Arab World Reform and Development and 阿拉伯研究中心 Center for Arab Studies, and publishes a Chinese language journal, Arab Studies 阿拉伯研究论丛.<sup>158</sup>

*Lanzhou University: Institute for Central Asian Studies* 兰州大学中亚研究所

Lanzhou, Gansu Province

Established in 1994

- Established after the collapse of the Soviet Union in Central Asia; first such center to be recognized by Ministry of Education as a key area studies program.<sup>159</sup>

*Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences: Institute of Central Asian Studies* 新疆社会科学院中亚研究所

Urumqi, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

Established in 1980

- One of the most important research institutes in China focusing on Central Asia, but no institutional website.<sup>160</sup>

*Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics: Institute of Silk Road Economy and Management* 新疆师范大学丝路经济与管理研究院

Urumuqi, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

Established in 2019

- Incorporates existing studies of Central Asia and regional economy; promotes cooperation between Xinjiang and Central Asia.
- Branches in two cities near the border with Central Asia; website not fully developed.<sup>161</sup>

*Northwest University: Institute of Middle Eastern Studies* 西北大学中东研究所

Xi'an, Shaanxi Province

Established in 1964

- Largest program in the field recognized by the Ministry of Education in the past decade, with a long history.
- Significant coverage of history in addition to the present, recently extending to Central and South Asia.<sup>162</sup>

*Shaanxi Normal University: Institute of Central Asia* 陕西师范大学中亚研究所

Xi'an, Shaanxi Province

Established in 2004

- Advises the provincial government on collaboration with Central Asia.
- Also researches broadly defined China-Central Asia connections in history and at present, from migration to security.<sup>163</sup>

*Ningxia University: Arab Nations Research Institute* 宁夏大学中国阿拉伯国家研究院

Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region

Established in 2012

- Recognized by the Ministry of Education within the past decade as a key area studies program; located in China's only Hui (Chinese Muslim) Autonomous Region.<sup>164</sup>

*City University of Hong Kong: Southeast Asia Research Centre* 香港城市大學東南亞研究中心

Hong Kong SAR

Established in 2001

- Hong Kong's only university center focusing on Southeast Asia; member of SEASIA.
- Recent research on China-Singapore connections in governance.<sup>165</sup>

*National Cheng Chi University: Center for Southeast Asian Studies* 國立政治大學東南亞研究中心

Taipei, Taiwan

Established in 2016

- Member of SEASIA; no substantive operation except for two researchers affiliated with the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies who study China-Taiwan-Southeast Asia.<sup>166</sup>

## Global North

*New School for Social Research: India China Institute*

New York, NY, USA

Established in 2005

- Unique center promoting research and public engagement on India, China, and beyond at a university that has a legacy of breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries.
- Thematic programming beyond the narrow focus on international relations; ambitions for using Global South perspectives to rethink global politics and culture.<sup>167</sup>

*University of Virginia: Assessment of China's Belt and Road Initiative*

Charlottesville, VA, USA

Established in 2019

- Conceived at a major conference, "Complementing and Competing Visions of China's Belt and Road Initiative," which brought together researchers from across campus.
- Comprehensive tracking of BRI-related literature, including that on Asia, and a few working groups on pan-area studies, historical antecedents, data collection and environmental issues, global smart cities, and global ethics and governance.<sup>168</sup>

*AidData*

Williamsburg, VA, USA

Established in 2013

- Research lab at College of William & Mary with extensive data collection and publications on Chinese development finance and public diplomacy abroad, including in Asia.<sup>169</sup>

*Boston University: Global Development Policy Center*

Boston, MA, USA

Established in 2017

- Global China Initiative collecting data and publishing research on the social and environmental impact of China's global economic presence, including in Asia.<sup>170</sup>

*Harvard University: various units*

Cambridge, MA, USA

- Harvard-Yenching Institute (founded in 1928) is an independent institution affiliated with Harvard with a long history of supporting Chinese and East Asian studies; it has more recent programming on Indian and Southeast Asian studies, encouraging both Chinese studies in India and Indian studies in China.<sup>171</sup>
- Regions and China's Belt and Road Initiative Seminar Series, cosponsored by Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies Program on Central Asia and Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, started in 2020 and brings together scholars, policy researchers, and journalists to discuss the impact of BRI in the world, Asia included.<sup>172</sup>

*Columbia-Harvard China and the World Program*

New York, NY, USA

Established in 2004

- Aims to integrate study of China's foreign relations into the field of international relations with postdoctoral fellowships and to create conversations with policy makers.
- Recent publications by alumni fellows often cover China's engagement with different parts of Asia and the Global South in general.<sup>173</sup>

*George Washington University: Central Asia Program*

Washington, DC, USA

Established in 2012

- Active university program sponsoring wide-ranging research on Central Asia, including China's impact.<sup>174</sup>
- Publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Central Asian Affairs* and books, which also cover China.
- Collaborated with Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in 2017-18 on studying BRI and Central Asia.<sup>175</sup>

*McGill University: Indian Ocean World Centre*

Montreal, QC, Canada

Established in 2011

- Focuses on a transnational maritime space that spans from China to East Africa.
- Research agenda tilts towards interdisciplinary environmental studies.<sup>176</sup>

*University of London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS): China Institute*

London, UK

Established in 2014

- Largest Chinese studies center in Europe, based at the only British institution that focuses on former British colonies in the Global South.
- Cross-fertilization with SOAS; broad strengths in Asian studies, with two research themes specifically focusing on "China in Asia, Africa and the Middle East" and "China: Global Power."<sup>177</sup>

*London School of Economics and Political Science: Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre*

London, UK

Established in 2014

- Recent research project "The Urban Spectre of Global China" examines the impact of large-scale property development by Chinese capital in Malaysia, among other places.<sup>178</sup>

*Australia National University: Australian Centre on China and the World*

Canberra, Australia

Established in 2010

- Global China is a specific research theme, currently focusing on China-Southeast Asia and the Pacific given Australia's proximity.<sup>179</sup>
- With Lund University's Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, jointly supports Made in China (established in 2012), an online open-access journal on Chinese politics and society. The journal has produced special issues and book publications on China's global presence in Asia, among other places.<sup>180</sup>

*Kyoto University: Center for Southeast Asian Studies*

Kyoto, Japan

Established in 1965

- Most prominent Japanese university in the field; China-Southeast Asia not yet a prominent research focus except for a handful of titles in English-language publications.<sup>181</sup>

*Sinophone Borderlands*

Olomouc, Czech Republic

Established in 2018

- Jointly funded project (until 2023) by the European Union and Czech government, administered by Department of Asian Studies, Palacký University.
- Partner institutions in mainland China, Taiwan, Central Asia, Russia, Mexico, United States, and Western Europe.
- Supports research on China's interactions with its land and maritime borderlands in Southeast and Central Asia using both political economic and linguistic cultural approaches.<sup>182</sup>

*Eurasianet*

New York, NY, USA

Established in 2000

- Provides independent news and analysis on Central Asia, with China being a consistent topic.
- Originally sponsored by Open Society Foundations; now based at Columbia University's Harriman Institute with funding also from Google, National Endowment for Democracy, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.<sup>183</sup>

*Atlantic Council: Global China Hub*

Washington, DC, USA

- New, consolidated China program at a think tank (founded in 1961) whose traditional focus is trans-Atlantic.
- Focuses on policy solutions to big questions regarding the implications of China's global presence, including in Asia: 1) China's growing influence on countries, global institutions, and democratic values; 2) the global ramifications of political and economic change in Xi Jinping's China; and 3) China's drive to dominate emerging technologies and consequences for individual rights and privacy.<sup>184</sup>

*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: various programs*

Washington, DC, USA

- Prestigious think tank founded in 1910 with a broad portfolio of programs on all the world regions.

- China Local/Global series (starting in 2021) is supported by the Ford Foundation and solicits scholarly essays that explore China's "adaptive" strategies "ignored by Western policymakers" in diverse local conditions in the Global South, including Asia.<sup>185</sup>
- China in the World podcast series (starting in 2013) brings Chinese and international scholars and policymakers together to talk about China's foreign relations. Focus on US-China, some coverage of China-Asia.<sup>186</sup>

*Center for Strategic and International Studies: various programs*

Washington, DC, USA

- Prestigious think tank founded in 1962 with a broad portfolio of programs on all the world regions.
- China Power project focuses on China's relationship with world powers and touches on China-India.<sup>187</sup>
- Reconnecting Asia program has covered BRI extensively and offers digital mapping.<sup>188</sup>

*East-West Center (EWC): The Mekong, China, & Southeast Asian Transitions Series*

Honolulu, HI, USA

Ongoing in 2022

- Public nonprofit organization founded by the US Congress in 1960 to facilitate conversations and analysis of common interest to the Pacific region given Hawai'i's strategic location.
- The series is a four-part thematic webinar with invited scholars from different countries. It is funded by the Luce Foundation and jointly organized by EWC, University of Hawai'i's Center for Southeast Asian Studies and Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan State University's James Madison College and Asian Studies Center, and Chiang Mai University's Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development.<sup>189</sup>

*Foreign Policy Research Institute: various units*

Philadelphia, PA, USA

- Think tank founded in 1955 with comprehensive research capacity on major world regions.
- China Center has two inaugural research initiatives in geoeconomics and technology, which cover China's impact on the internal stage (including Asia) and its implications for the United States.<sup>190</sup>
- Eurasia Program (founded in 2015) examines China's presence in Central Asia.<sup>191</sup>

*International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*

London, UK

Established 1958

- Influential think tank with offices worldwide, including in Singapore and Bahrain.
- BRI project aims to offer a layer map of connectivity and infrastructure data, not yet live.<sup>192</sup>
- Hosts Shangri-La Dialogue, a prominent forum on security in Asia-Pacific, in Singapore since 2002 with participants from, among other places, China and Southeast Asia.

*Mercator Institute for China Studies*

Berlin, Germany

Established in 2013

- Young think tank focusing on China-Europe, with a research theme on BRI in Asia and beyond.<sup>193</sup>



*Middle East Institute: All About China*

Washington, DC, USA

Established in 2015

- The Institute is a well-known think tank focusing on the Middle East, founded in 1946.
- Published a series of solicited essays by international scholars that shed light on the “lasting imprint of China’s past encounters with the Islamic world as well the increasingly vibrant and complex dynamics of contemporary Sino-Middle Eastern relations.”<sup>194</sup>

*Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs: China’s Belt & Road*

Washington, DC, USA

- Central Asia-focused think tank examining the BRI with publications and curated media reports.<sup>195</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Author names appear here and the references as they appear in the publication referenced; we have chosen to do this in order to avoid imposing our own editorial choices on authors and how they render their names. For example, for scholars writing in Chinese, author names appear family name first; for scholars writing in English, we follow the name order of the publication. This means that for references where Chinese scholars are writing in English, family name often comes last; but in some instances, even when publishing in English, Chinese scholars maintain Chinese name order. In the in-text citations throughout this report, where there are multiple works by scholars with the same family name, we have included each author's complete name (or, for multi-authored works, the first author's complete name) to avoid confusion.
- 2 In the field of Southeast Asian studies for example, historians have long confronted how to reconcile Southeast Asian history on its own terms with the history of the region through colonial encounters (Smail 1961).
- 3 In the US context, see Ross (1991).
- 4 Data sources: CNKI and Web of Science. See also Cao Qiang and Wang (2022).
- 5 There is still “a lack of clarity” over the definition of “middle powers” (Patience 2014, 210). A functional definition describes middle powers as “states that are neither great nor small in terms of international power, capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system” (Jordaan 2003, 165).
- 6 For the most recent title in the series, see Wang Qin 2021.
- 7 There is extensive literature on this topic: for example, Saklani et al. (2020), Urban et al. (2013), and Barua, Vij, and Rahman (2018).
- 8 For China's existing free trade agreements and those under negotiation and consideration, see <http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/>. The URL is current as of the date of publication.
- 9 See, for example, *West Asia and Africa* 西亚非洲, no. 6 (2015), nos. 2 and 5 (2016), no. 4 (2019), no. 6 (2020), no. 4 (2021); *Arab World Studies* 阿拉伯世界研究, no. 6 (2016), nos. 2 and 5 (2018), no. 2 (2019), no. 5 (2020); *Middle East Studies* 中东研究, no. 1 (2015), no. 1 (2020).
- 10 Throughout the capacity section and the annex, URLs are correct as of the date of publication, but may change over time. The rate of churn for websites belonging to Chinese institutions is particularly high.
- 11 <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/hist/jseas/>
- 12 These institutes are: East Asian Institute, Institute of South Asian Studies, Middle East Institute, Asia Research Institute, and Global Asia Institute. <https://www.nus.edu.sg/research/research-capabilities>

- 13 See, for example, those affiliated with the Chinese Studies Center, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University. <http://www.ias.chula.ac.th/en/tag/chinese-studies-center-en/?navmenu=researchers>
- 14 <https://en.chinaseasia.net/articles>
- 15 Confucius Institute, Peking University, <https://www.gsm.pku.edu.cn/hygjtggbgs/kzxy1/tgzllg-dxkzxy.htm>
- 16 Universitas Indonesia, Find Profiles, <https://scholar.ui.ac.id/en/persons/?showAdvanced=false&andConceptIds=1ff4e818-3a43-4c26-a1a6-3412d73df947&allConcepts=true&inferConcepts=true>
- 17 <https://jgu.edu.in/research-centres/>
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- 19 [saathsaathmusic.com/](http://saathsaathmusic.com/)
- 20 <https://www.icsin.org/all-india-conference-of-east-asian-studies>
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- 22 [https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/IIWS/Conferences/Islamic\\_China.aspx](https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/IIWS/Conferences/Islamic_China.aspx)
- 23 <https://www.sharjah.ac.ae/en/Administration/oir/International/Pages/sep.aspx>; <https://www.sharjah.ac.ae/en/Administration/oir/International/Pages/ip.aspx>
- 24 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/middle-east-centre/research/collaboration-programme/2018-19/aula-hariri>
- 25 [www.guoxue.com/jybrwskzdyjjd.htm](http://www.guoxue.com/jybrwskzdyjjd.htm)
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- 27 [srs.ruc.edu.cn/zwsy/zs/zsjz/2d7f0058739b416f905be74b5290b2d6.htm](http://srs.ruc.edu.cn/zwsy/zs/zsjz/2d7f0058739b416f905be74b5290b2d6.htm)
- 28 [www.gjgxy.ynu.edu.cn/hzjl.htm](http://www.gjgxy.ynu.edu.cn/hzjl.htm)
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- 30 <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1ngJGpQyaMwIM8HCdA9-mYgRX7Mx-Vom0Q&usp=sharing>
- 31 <https://www.caorc.org/>

- 32 <http://www.siiainline.org/our-network/>. Throughout, website links are correct as of this report's date of publication, but may change over time.
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- 34 [www.gmsarn.com/sitegmsarn2009/about\\_histo.html](http://www.gmsarn.com/sitegmsarn2009/about_histo.html)
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