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Domestic Reasons for the Belt and Road Initiative

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The Belt and Road Initiative and the Development of Western China.

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SINCE THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) was put forward in 2013, 172 countries and international organizations have signed cooperation agreements with China, and the cumulative trade volume of goods has reached 9.2 trillion US dollars. At the same time, the study of the BRI has gradually become a “promising research field”, which has aroused the warm attention of scholars in China and around the world. However, while foreign scholars focus more on the international factors and global impact of the BRI, Chinese scholars prefer to analyze the domestic background of the BRI and its great contribution to China’s development. Among them, *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Development of Western China*, written by Professor Zhao Lei, is a representative work in Chinese academia. Zhao Lei is a well-known Chinese political scientist whose research focuses on

Chinese diplomacy and international relations. He currently works at the Party School of the CPC Central Committee and is the author of *The Belt and Road Initiative: China’s Civilizational Rise* and many other books and articles.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Development of Western China consists of eight chapters, which can be divided into three parts. The first part consists of chapters 1, 2, and 3, introducing how Western China has greatly improved its opening up to the outside world by actively participating in the BRI. The second part includes chapters 4, 5, and 6. It mainly introduces that the western region has made remarkable progress in economic development by strengthening economic and trade cooperation, cultural tourism cooperation and Green Silk Road construction with Central Asia countries un-



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der the framework of the BRI. The third part includes chapters 7 and 8, taking the case of the China-Europe Railway Express to introduce the great impetus brought by the BRI for the development of the western region, western countries' cognition of the BRI, and China's response.

In general, how to make use of the BRI to promote the formation of a high-level opening-up pattern in western China is the target theme of Zhao's book, and how to rely on the BRI to realize the grand blueprint of a community with a shared future for mankind is its purpose and philosophy.

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First, the internal reason for China to propose the BRI is to achieve a high-quality opening-up in Western China. Narrowing the development gap between the eastern and western regions has long been one of the priorities of the Chinese government. As early as 2000, the Chinese government has put forward the "Great Western Development" plan and carried out key projects such as the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the south-to-north water diversion project, and the west-to-east gas transmission project. These projects have greatly promoted energy industry development in western China, but the problem of unbalanced development between the east and the west is still quite prominent.

Therefore, the BRI was put forward in this context, and western provinces have carried out a series of practices under the initiative. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region has continuously strengthened its aviation construction and has achieved a magnificent transformation

from a single airport in Urumqi to 21 airports (p. 81). Shaanxi Province has established several international production capacity cooperation centers, such as Aiju Grain and Oil Industrial Park in Kazakhstan and Zhongda Industrial Park in Kyrgyzstan. Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region continues to promote the construction of the China-Indochina Peninsula International Economic Corridor, strengthen cooperation with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to build a "Digital Silk Road", and build a Beidou navigation service base facing ASEAN. Yunnan Province, which faces South Asia and Southeast Asia, strives to build a regional international economic and trade center. In 2019, its foreign trade volume exceeded 200 billion yuan for the first time, accounting for more than 70% of the total trade share with countries along the BRI.

Second, international cooperation promoted by the BRI, especially cooperation between China and Central Asia countries, has reaped rich fruits. Neighborhood diplomacy is an important part of China's major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. As a neighboring region, Central Asia is not only at the forefront of the Westward push of the BRI but also a demonstration area for promoting China's international cooperation. As soon as the BRI was put forward, it received positive responses from the five Central Asian countries.

In terms of infrastructure construction, Chinese companies have assisted and undertaken several infrastructure projects in Central Asia, including but not limited to Almaty Solar Power Station, Almaty Wind Power Station, Turgusun Hydropower Station, Capital Ring Road (Kazakhstan), and the Kamchik tunnel of the Anglian Pappu railway (Uzbekistan), have solved the long-standing problems of power supply, heating, transportation, and other livelihood issues for the local people.

At the economic and trade cooperation level, high-quality Chinese enterprises have entered Central Asian countries with capital investment and industrial technology and built industrial parks such as the China-Kazakhstan Border Cooperation Center, China-Tajikistan Industrial Park, and Djizzak Industrial Park. The-

se investments promote the economic transformation of this region and achieve win-win cooperation. Take the Caspian Sea Asphalt Plant as an example. It is an important project for the joint construction of the BRI between China and Kazakhstan. After the plant began operation, it quickly met the demand for asphalt in Kazakhstan, and at the same time, it showed good social benefits in terms of employment and personnel training.

The Chinese have an old saying when facing a crisis, “A chopstick is easily broken, but ten pairs of chopsticks hold together into a ball”. This ancient historical wisdom is still quite suitable for today’s current situation.

At the level of people-to-people and cultural exchanges, labor dispatch has deepened the exchanges between workers on both sides in terms of infrastructure technology, overseas tourism has spawned a wave of Chinese citizens traveling to Central Asia, and cultural exchanges have expanded the scale of international students from both sides and improved cultural understanding. So far, 13 Confucius Institutes have been set up in Central Asia.

Third, the BRI is a global public product that China, as a responsible country, provides to the world. Taking the China-Europe Railway Express as an example, China hopes to deeply participate in the economic integration of the Eurasian continent. The Eurasian continent’s population accounts for 75% of the world’s population, and its trade volume accounts for more than 60% of the world’s total, with huge potential for economic development. However, many countries in the Eurasian continent are restricted by many factors and fail to share the fruits of economic development.

The cross-border flow of products, personnel, and services brought by the China-Europe Railway Express will give these countries unprecedented development opportunities. The China-Europe Railway Express launched a

single line (Chongqing, China - Duisburg, Germany) in 2011. With the advantages of price, speed, and service, it has formed three major west, middle, and east channels. Raw materials such as textiles, electronic products, and rubber can be exported from Southeast Asia to Central Asia and Europe, and products such as fast-moving goods, machinery, and non-ferrous metals can be exported from Europe to Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea (p. 248).

This book also expounds on the influence of Confucianism on the BRI. Prof. Zhao proposed two concepts to explain the philosophical meaning of the BRI. One is “Confucius’ Improvement”, and another one is “Mencius’s Optimal” (p. 177). “Confucius’ Improvement” emphasizes that the realization of self-interest and the interests of others are closely related, and only when the related interests of others are realized can self-interest be realized. “Mencius’s Optimal” emphasizes that individual interests and group interests are coexisting and co-promoting. Only in groups with sufficient cooperation and harmonious member relationships can the individual interests of group members be optimally realized.

In the BRI, any country can be self-interested and other-interested, reflecting the idea of “Confucius’ Improvement”. Respecting the diversity and complementarity of cooperating subjects is the practical concept of the Belt and Road Initiative, which embodies the idea of “Mencius’s Optimal”.

Since the Great Discovery in the 1500s, our world has become a whole. The economy and war have deepened the world’s connection, and the global spread of COVID-19 has cemented it. The Chinese have an old saying when facing a crisis, “A chopstick is easily broken, but ten pairs of chopsticks hold together into a ball”. This ancient historical wisdom is still quite suitable for today’s current situation. History can testify that adhering to the principle of the inclusiveness of Chinese culture and building a community with a shared future for mankind through the BRI is not a rigid slogan but a deliberate and vivid practice of China for the whole world. 