

BRI-Tagged Chinese Official Finance Dataset, Version 1.0

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Citation

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1. Overview

As the volume of its overseas investments have quantifiably grown over the last decade, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become synonymous in both media coverage and policy discourse with the expanding global footprint of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, it is unclear whether BRI did indeed represent a fundamental shift in the PRC's investment portfolio in terms of what and whom it funded, as opposed to serving as more of a way to package or (re)package what it was already doing.

For all the public scrutiny and policy discussion swirling around the BRI, there is a surprising lack of hard data to accurately assess whether and how it has altered the PRC's overseas development finance program in substantive ways—until now. This dataset is the result of an initial application of a new systematic project tagging methodology that allows us to tag projects—irrespective of time period, geography or membership status—that are “BRI-like” in that they correspond to clearly identified thematic foci laid out in key speeches and strategic frameworks introducing the BRI to the world. It is an important step forward to being able to better understand whether and to what extent there has been a change in the PRC's revealed priorities—not only what Beijing says it wants to fund, but how this translates into actual funded projects—before and after the announcement of BRI in 2013.

This tagging schema builds upon AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0, which encompasses over 13,000 overseas development projects bankrolled by the Chinese government between 2000 and 2017, and is best considered as a value addition to that foundational dataset (Custer et al., 2021; Dreher

et al., forthcoming).¹ This is the first comprehensive approach to systematically define a taxonomy BRI-like activities, apply this tagging schema at the project level to AidData’s historical database, and use the results to monitor the presence of activities pertaining to BRI themes.² For more information on how we developed the BRI-tagging schema, please refer to our full methodology document “BRI-Project Tagging Methodology to Monitor the Historical Focus of Chinese Development Projects (Version 1.0)” which outlines the taxonomy development and coding process in depth.³

This project was made possible with funding from a buy-in to a USAID/DDI/ITR Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN) cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096). This ReadMe, along with the supporting methodology and companion dataset, are available for download via aiddata.org. For an early application of this data, see AidData’s “Delivering the Belt and Road” (Horigoshi et al., 2022) publication released in October 2022. The report incorporates the BRI-tagged data, along with other information, to assess whether and how Beijing’s overseas development program has changed with the advent of BRI in terms of revealed funding priorities, along with the expectations and experiences of partner countries in the Global South.

¹ For more information see:

<https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-2-0>.

² Not all projects from the original Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset have been BRI-coded. The AidData team only applied the codes to projects recommended for aggregates. Projects that were not suitable for aggregates were primarily umbrella projects or other descriptions that would have skewed any higher-level quantitative analysis of PRC finance, so this exclusion should not negatively impact most researchers. For more information on this distinction between umbrella and non-umbrella projects, please refer to the supporting ReadMe and methodology for the original dataset available at: <https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-2-0>.

³ We also want to acknowledge helpful input received from Thai Binh-Elston, Ana Horigoshi, Brook Lautenslager, Ammar Malik, Justin Schon, Kyra Solomon, Katherine Walsh, and Sheng Zhang along the way to refine the BRI-tagging methodology approach.

Table 1. Files Included in the BRI-Tagged Chinese Official Finance (Version 1.0) Data Release

File Name	Description
BRI_Tagged_Chinese_OF_FullDataset_v1.xlsx	Excel spreadsheet containing the full set of 10,849 BRI-tagged projects from AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0.
methodology_BRI_tagged_projects_version_1.0.pdf	Methodology document that provides full documentation of the BRI-tagging approach.
readme_BRI_tagged_projects_version_1.0.pdf	The accompanying readme file (or codebook) describing the parameters of the dataset, caveats, and suggested uses.

2. Methods Overview, Data Dictionary, and Data Coverage

In designing and applying the BRI-like tagging schema, we used a semi-automated approach (blending human- and machine-coding) to balance precision and scalability. We used a 10-step process that can be broadly categorized within three stages: (i) conceptualization and identification of the key thematic foci of BRI, as articulated in official documents and speeches by senior Chinese government leaders; (ii) developing a standardized taxonomy to cross-walk the types of projects, by activity, captured in our historical database of Chinese state-financed overseas development project to the thematic foci of BRI; and (iii) assigning a code to each project to capture which areas of BRI activity it encompasses (if applicable). Please refer to our supporting methodology documentation for more information.

Data Coverage

- Scope: Chinese Official Development Finance
- Year Coverage: 2010-2017.
- Geographical Coverage: Global coverage.

Table 1. BRI-Tag Field Definitions

Field Name	Definition ⁴
BRI_1 Policy Communication	Binary indicator for projects identified as related to BRI thematic area #1: Strengthening Policy Communication. Xi Jinping's description of this policy area was: "Countries in the region can communicate with each other on economic development strategies, and make plans and measures for regional cooperation through consultations."
BRI_2 Infrastructure Connectivity	Binary indicator for projects identified as related to BRI thematic area #2: Improving Infrastructure Connectivity. Xi Jinping's original description of this policy area was: "To open up the transportation channel from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea and to gradually form a transportation network that connects East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia." This includes ports, roads, railways as well as power plants, telecommunications networks.
BRI_3 Trade	Binary indicator for projects identified as related to BRI thematic area #3: Promoting Trade Facilitation. Xi Jinping's original description of this policy area was: "All the parties should discuss the issues concerning trade and investment facilitation and make appropriate arrangements."
BRI_4 Monetary Circulation	Binary indicator for projects identified as related to BRI thematic area #4: Enhancing Monetary Circulation. Xi Jinping's original description of this policy area was: "All the parties should promote the realization of exchange and settlement of local currency, increase the ability to fend off financial risks and make the region more economically competitive in the world."
BRI_5 People to People	Binary indicator for projects identified as related to BRI thematic area #5: People-to-People Exchanges. Xi Jinping's original description of this policy area was: "All the parties should strengthen the friendly exchanges between their peoples to promote understanding and friendship with each other."
BRI-Like	Binary indicator for projects that included at least one of the five BRI thematic areas.
Non-BRI	Binary indicator for projects that were not within the scope of BRI activities.
Vague-BRI	Binary indicator for projects that include a blend of BRI and non-BRI activities and research assistants are unable to identify which activities are the primary focus of the project. This may also be applied if there is an

⁴ Note: This includes descriptions from Xi Jinping's 2013 speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University announcing the Silk Road Economic Belt.
https://web.archive.org/web/20201017031834/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml

	activity that appears connected to BRI, but the documentation does not provide concrete enough details to move forward with a BRI tag.
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Note: This table only covers the new BRI-Tag related fields created in this process (Columns 71-78 / BS-BZ in the accompanying Excel dataset). The full list of field definitions for the dataset can be found in AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0's 'Definitions' tab.

3. Data Use Recommendations and Limitations

With the addition of this BRI-like tagging schema to AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, we hope that policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and scholars around the world will be able to use this data to answer a whole new set of critical questions. For member countries, what are the actual benefits of joining the BRI in differential levels of financing, types of projects, and terms? For non-member countries, what are the drawbacks or penalties for being a hold-out? For great powers that seek to compete with, or counter, the PRC's growing global influence, does BRI represent something fundamentally new to outmaneuver or more of what has come before, but with shinier packaging? How should Beijing assess its success in aligning its rhetoric with how the PRC manages its extensive development finance portfolio?

For projects that include a blend of BRI and non-BRI activities and research assistants were unable to identify which activities are the primary focus of the project, we include a "Vague-BRI like" tag. This may also be applied if there is an activity that appears connected to BRI, but the documentation does not provide concrete enough details to move forward with a BRI tag. This indicator allows researchers to "round up" to a more inclusive definition of BRI when computing aggregates, or "round down" to stay conservative and only work with the projects with a clear link to BRI in the project descriptions.

Thematic area #4, Enhancing Monetary Circulation, was one of the most challenging to work with in our BRI-tagging process. This is due to the frequently opaque nature of activities like currency swaps, which were not recorded in AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0. Therefore, this particular sub-indicator likely underreports the value of this pillar of BRI finance and its share of total BRI funding. AidData is currently piloting a methodology to capture official Chinese

currency swaps, which will be included in a future release of the Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset. Further research on BRI issues may choose to include these data when assessing the full impact of the BRI.

We made an intentional decision to base our BRI-like project taxonomy and methodology on the Chinese government’s documentation related to the announcement of BRI in 2013 and the initial years of implementation through 2017 (i.e., BRI-1.0) that best corresponds to the time period covered by AidData’s Global Chinese Development Finance database (version 2.0) which includes projects from 2000-2017. We recognize that in doing so, this methodology may not entirely address subsequent adjustments, such as 2018’s “BRI Recalibration” or how BRI may evolve in future in light of President Xi’s announcement of China’s proposed Global Development Initiative at the U.N. General Assembly in 2021. In future years, as data becomes available, we may revisit this methodology to develop additional BRI-2.0 or BRI-3.0 tags, but that is presently beyond the scope of this first pilot effort.

Based upon our preliminary assessment, the 2018 recalibration and even the more recent 2021 announcement, do not appear to be a full restructuring of priorities; but we anticipate a greater emphasis in future on the “software” of development (e.g., human knowledge, institutional capacity) in response to scrutiny of the “hard” infrastructure investments,⁵ suggesting that these categories will still apply to projects moving forward.

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⁵ <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

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