

Visa Policies: The Belt and Road Initiative and Status-Seeking

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Abstract: How do visa policies function as infrastructural mechanisms within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework? This question investigates how mobility policies facilitate controlled labour flows and urban development to reconfigure global power centres. While China leverages visa policies to gain status and redirect economic activity, it remains subject to Western mobility regimes. Cases such as Sino-Serbian relations illustrate how Western-imposed mobility domination persist even as China ascends in global influence, and China is seeking strategic destination replacement to shift power away from the West. The Chinese government strategically facilitates visa liberalization agreements to promote cultural exchange, economic interdependence, and geopolitical alignment with participating countries. This paper argues that visa policies can be used as an important infrastructural tool to reshape global orders in the BRI to increase China's international status. China's pursuit of favourable visa policies within BRI states is a deliberate status-seeking strategy. By situating visa policies within the broader discourse on migration infrastructure and global mobility divides, this study contributes to understanding how states employ non-material infrastructural tools to advance strategic objectives. Through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates political science, migration studies, and international relations, this research underscores the significance of visa diplomacy in shaping the evolving global landscape under the BRI. This paper is structured as follows. Existing scholarship on migration infrastructure, global mobility divides, and China's visa diplomacy within the BRI framework is examined, and it identifies visa policies as a key yet overlooked aspect of international status-seeking. I seek to tackle this issue using the socio-psychology framework of Social Identity Theory with modifications: Firstly, China seeks favourable visa policies to increase its citizens' comparative status within its sphere of influence to project state social mobility and social creativity. Secondly, the concept of destination replacement is introduced with the case study of Serbia, where BRI is a strategic instrument for China to enhance its reputation by countering the influence of Western states. The paper concludes with a brief discussion on the motivation of BRI participants to engage with both unilateral and bilateral Chinese visa diplomacies and calls for more future research on visa diplomacy and global order-building within specific frameworks of regional geopolitics.

Keywords: Chinese Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, Visa Policies, Global Mobility, Status-Seeking, Soft Power.

1. Introduction

China's pursuit of favourable visa policies within BRI states is a deliberate status-seeking strategy. By situating visa policies within the broader discourse on migration infrastructure and global mobility divides, this study contributes to understanding how states employ non-material infrastructural tools to advance strategic objectives. Through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates political science, migration studies, and international relations, this research underscores the significance of visa diplomacy in shaping the evolving global landscape under the BRI.

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2. Literature Review

China's diplomatic success in securing favorable visa policies for its citizens contributes to constructing a new BRI sphere of international order. Contrary to popular belief, the BRI is not a rigid, hierarchical organization but rather an abstract concept that the Chinese government promotes. While flagship projects are initiated by the state and state-owned enterprises, local organizations, private businesses, and even individuals engage with the BRI narrative independently (Han and Webber, 2020). In its second decade, the BRI narrative shifted from focusing on physical infrastructure to broader international order-building.

Within the context of the BRI, Rezaei et al. further emphasise the concept of "circular mobility" and the creation of talent flowscapes. They examined how BRI-related policies facilitate the movement and exchange of skilled labor across borders, suggesting that talent mobility is orchestrated through deliberate policy frameworks

(Rezaei and Mouritzen, 2021). The debate within BRI scholarship regarding the impact and intention of Chinese international diplomacy on the existing post-WWII Western liberal order is largely focused on the analysis of economic policies and political consequences. Jones, for example, argues that the BRI's normative challenge to the existing global order is unintentional and that it is primarily intended to externalize China's surplus capital and industrial capacity (Jones, 2020). Contrarily, scholars like Shafi view the BRI as an example of neo-mercantilism, with the American-led world order being replaced by a more multipolar vision (Shafi et al., 2023). Granted, the BRI was first introduced with a heavy narrative focus on economic and physical infrastructural projects to create a "multi-dimensional infrastructure network" (Xi, 2017). But a detailed analysis of the role of non-economic policies and an examination of the evolving aims of the BRI more than 10 years since its introduction can further enhance the analysis. In particular, the public perceptions of China in the international community, as well as the legitimacy of the government domestically, can be affected by social mobility within the established framework of the BRI. Thus, a new analysis of China's motivation and intention to affect the existing West-centric international order is needed.

While states seek to increase the flows of goods and people as a necessity for economic, social, and cultural development, states also seek to control non-immigration mobility infrastructure in ways that align with national interests. Mau introduces the concept of the "Global Mobility Divide" through the analysis of mobility data across the 20th and 21st centuries (Mau et al., 2015). His findings of an increasing divide in mobility between the Global North, where mobility increased, and the Global South, where mobility remained or even decreased, show a parallel to states' international status. Cranston et al. further argue that mobility produces an "elite subject positioning" at both national and regional levels (Cranston and Duplan, 2023).

The gap in current literature mainly consists of bridging the global mobility divide with China's status-seeking policies, and a lack of analysis on China's soft power on the global south from a mobility perspective. With China's attempt to shift the global order towards the East through its BRI, it is important to analyze Chinese visa diplomacy in the context of international status-seeking and new order-building to counter Western spheres of influence. After all, as Barkonyi and Darwich suggest, infrastructures are always at the heart of power asymmetries (Barkonyi and Darwich, 2024).

3. Mobility as Status-Seeking

This paper aims to answer a key question that remains under-analyzed in existing literature: Why does China seek favorable visa policies for its citizens from BRI states?

First and foremost, status-seeking is a central concept when analyzing Chinese foreign policy. Although anarchy-centered approaches have dominated the field of international relations for years, reapproaching an increasingly interconnected international environment with contemporary actors such as independent, regional, cooperative, and global organizations through a hierarchy-centered approach becomes more appropriate. Such an approach emphasizes the logic of trade-offs, positionality, and productivity (Mattern and Zarakol, 2016).

Furthermore China is heavily dependent on the desire for esteem and "face" (Xue, 2023). While the desire for "face" is dominant with individuals in Chinese societies, it can most efficiently be translated into state status on an international scale. Status can be defined as "social recognition," which "concerns identification processes in which an actor gains admission into a club once they follow the rules of membership" (Duque, 2018). In the case of China, such social recognition is achieved through the Belt and Road Initiative foreign policy framework.

Fundamentally, China seeks favorable visa policies as part of its status-seeking strategy. These policies serve as both a diplomatic tool and a mechanism for economic and geopolitical influence. Internationally, visa liberalization enhances China's ability to leverage its BRI projects, creating a reciprocal dynamic where economic investments facilitate greater mobility rights and vice versa. By securing easier travel access for its citizens, China fosters deeper economic ties, encourages cross-border business activities, and strengthens its soft power influence in partner states.

BRI states often accept non-reciprocal Chinese visa policies as part of their strategic interests, viewing enhanced mobility for Chinese visitors as an opportunity for economic growth and political alignment (Busbarat et al., 2023). Many BRI countries, particularly those seeking infrastructure investment and trade partnerships, offer favorable visa arrangements to attract Chinese tourists, students, and business professionals. This asymmetry in visa policies allows China to shape regional migration patterns and reinforce its centrality within the BRI framework.

Thus, the new emerging global mobility divide is a result of international status-seeking and is of key importance in the Belt and Road Initiative. Instead of being a side effect of the BRI state negotiations, the increase in mobility of Chinese citizens is a goal of the BRI state.

4. Methodology

Larson and Shevchenko are some of the first scholars to use the framework of social identity theory (SIT) in international politics. First used in the field of sociology and psychology for understanding the relationship between social group behaviors, SIT emphasizes three main behaviors that individuals and groups act in a hierarchical order: “(1) joining a higher-status group (social mobility); (2) mobilizing resources to improve the group's relative standing (social competition); or (3) reevaluating the meaning of the group's negative features or finding new dimensions on which the group is superior (social creativity)” (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003). As international relations scholars also begin to understand the world as a hierarchy, such methodology of categorization can also be adapted for political analysis.

In the case of Gorbachev's foreign policy, Larson and Shevchenko argued that the implementation of New Thinking—a social creativity strategy—successfully increased the international status of the USSR in ways that military power would never have. In the case of China, the BRI takes a multi-dimensional approach that shows multiple behaviors justified by the SIT. This historical usage of the SIT remains to be relevant today, especially concerning scholarships around China's rising international influences.

With such a framework in mind, I seek to first argue that the BRI's purpose is beyond economic and geopolitical; instead, it is a status-seeking project with increasing citizen mobility at its core: State status mobility and social creativity from a developing third-world country to a global power are achieved through increasing its citizens' relative status in its sphere of influence. Secondly, destination replacement is used to mobilize resources to improve the group's relative standing (social competition) and decrease the influence of former and current global powers in the West. Lastly, the paper concludes with a reverse analysis of BRI participating states, which will be examined using Wohlforth's smaller states' status aims and calls for further research directions (Wohlforth et al., 2018).

5. Status Mobility through BRI Visa Diplomacy

China's pursuit of favorable visa policies within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) states is not merely a diplomatic courtesy but a strategic tool that enhances its influence in global economic and political negotiations that can directly translate into state status in the international community. Visa diplomacy operates as a reciprocal mechanism—China offers economic investment, infrastructure development, and trade incentives to BRI states, and in return, these countries grant more favorable mobility conditions for Chinese citizens. This mutually beneficial arrangement reinforces China's international standing, strengthens economic interdependence, and solidifies political alliances through increasing diplomatic leverage.

The existence of a social hierarchy has been supported by contemporary scholars in the 21st century, which justifies many state behaviors, especially occasions when states focus on soft power status standing instead of traditional realist military/economic/demographic powers. Stolte defines the global order twofold: “There is a social hierarchy in international relations, and Great Powers enjoy the highest status within that social hierarchy; and states strive for higher status in the international social hierarchy and apply different status-seeking strategies in order to achieve that goal” (Stolte, 2015).

At the core of these strategies is the idea that visa liberalization enhances soft power and enables a higher international status. While every destination wants China's tourist population due to the massive income, it has a more significant political and social impact in modern China under Xi's new rhetoric. This is parallel to the power of cultural restoration projects introduced by Yanik and Subotić (2021), where infrastructural policies shape socio-cultural norms and perceptions of states. The regime has emphasized “world-leading strength and influence” as a primary goal for its grand strategy heading towards the new era, with goals set to be reached by the middle of the century (Lee et al., 2023). The narrative also makes economic progress and national strength/influence inseparable, establishing a collective notion of state hard/soft power that can be best conceptualized as state status. This expresses a desire not only to match material prosperity with national identity and perception, but also to define itself as a “modern” power with “international influence leading the world” (Lee et al., 2023). Such influences that are deemed as necessary for the status-seeking of a great power are tied to citizens' mobility rights. Neumayer argues that states seek to control access to foreign citizens'

mobility to maintain their international status (Stolte, 2015). Given the relative nature of status in a hierarchical international order, such an argument can be reversed to suggest that seeking to increase the state's citizen mobility is an effort to raise its status.

Furthermore, many scholars would argue for the importance of economic interdependence as one form of status (Barth, 2000). In addition to soft power, economic incentives are another aspect behind the motivation for visa diplomacy to be an important factor in China's BRI framework for status-seeking and identity enhancement. Mobility can be understood as access to markets, and China has comparatively little access to other states that hold great power status, with access to only 7% of the global GDP visa-free, compared to the 43% for American passport holders (Steffen, n.d.).

Thus, given the importance of markets for China, especially in the wake of an increasingly isolationist United States under Trump's second presidency, visa policies have become the backbone for shifting economic dependence from the West to its own BRI sphere of influence. By negotiating non-reciprocal visa agreements—where Chinese citizens enjoy easier access to BRI states without necessarily offering the same privilege in return—China creates an asymmetry that benefits its long-term strategic interests. These policies, in turn, facilitate deeper socio-economic integration between China and BRI member states, ensuring that Chinese businesses, professionals, and workers can operate with fewer restrictions. As a result, countries that rely on Chinese investments and trade opportunities are incentivized to adopt lenient visa policies for Chinese tourists, students, and business travelers.

Lastly, China also seeks to mobilize its own status as a great power in the form of diplomatic leverage through visa diplomacy. The BRI itself has been defined and narrated in close relation to the Silk Road, and governments involved in diplomatic relations, or those who seek to improve economic and social ties with China, have been attracted through the cross-section of geo-cultural identity between the historic Silk Road and the BRI. Such is argued by Tim Winter as a “platform for China to accumulate power and influence by building connectivities and entanglements across multiple sectors” (Winter, 2021). While Winter explains Chinese focus on cultural and historical narratives with the concept of China as a “civilization state” (Xia, 2014), such narratives have only surfaced and increased after the initiative took effect. Alternatively, it can be best argued that China is redefining and justifying its foreign policy, which has the fundamental goal of increasing status in the international hierarchy through historical and cultural narratives. Such social creativity with a cultural lens supports visa diplomacy as a tool to strengthen, or reshape ties between states. One effective case is relations with Africa, where China redefines itself as an anti-colonial power, and a former victim of European colonialism (Karugia, 2023). With the largest outbound tourist market in the world, and an urgent goal to shift from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive economy (Yu, 2024), China resorts to visa diplomacy by easing travel restrictions to approach African states that respond well to the victimhood mentality.

Thus, China's visa diplomacy within the narrative and structural framework of BRI acts as a vital infrastructural project to increase its international status through social mobility and creativity in the global order. Building on top of this framework, another critical dimension of visa diplomacy emerges: the manipulation of visa infrastructure to control and redirect its own outbound tourists.

6. BRI and Destination Replacement (Case Study: Serbia)

To solidify its status and elevate in the global hierarchy, the government needs to effectively control the massive tourist and student population that generates wanted incomes for all foreign tourist destinations. While tourists and exchange students are temporary visitors, they can often become new investors and migrants to these states after positive travel experiences. This is within the framework of social competition, which suggests that countries compete for resources to gain status. In this case, China needs to effectively control or influence its population, which is a resource for other competitors. While the state must increase citizen mobility as an effort to obtain a status as a liberal, globalized, and free trade power, it can alter the behavior of its people through the manipulation of infrastructural incentives.

Namely, the convenience for travel determined by immigration infrastructures can play a significant role. This is not a new phenomenon. Colonial powers that sought to establish their self-sustaining sphere of influence across the globe built their intra-empire mobility infrastructures around the goal of altering their citizens' preferences within their sphere of influence. Scholars such as Castro argue that European imperial policy encouraged travel within their spheres of influence and aimed to “(re)define their territory geographically” and act as “a privileged means for legitimating the overseas provinces and for spreading propaganda about them” (Castro, 2017).

One major difference between China and European empires is that China still lives in the shadow of Western colonial centers. European colonial empires sought to project a power imbalance between citizens and colonial subjects through deliberate infrastructural systems that contributed to the global mobility divide today. On the other hand, China's policy is a reaction to such a mobility divide and seeks to free itself by establishing a new framework (Mau et al., 2015). Such a global mobility divide reveals the weakness of the Chinese passport, which in turn weakens the infrastructural mechanisms of the Chinese state to maintain its domestic narrative and control.

A key strategy used by China is destination replacement: a strategic shift in tourist patterns through visa diplomacy. By facilitating mobility, China redirects tourist preferences away from high-status core states of the Western global order toward non-Western states that offer greater economic and political leverage. This approach strengthens alternative global networks and fosters deeper ties between China and its partner nations. Serbia's visa-free policy for Chinese tourists has positioned it as a more accessible and cost-effective European destination, effectively replacing traditional Western European hotspots for Chinese travelers.

Serbia's dependence on BRI projects and Chinese tourism also makes it a valuable target for the strategy of destination replacement. As a non-EU state that is not directly under any sphere of influence from the West, contemporary Serbian-Chinese relations have been mostly bilateral. Serbia's dependency on early BRI projects is shown in its tangible economic and social benefits at the local level and a large trade deficit with China (Stojanović et al., 2023). Such leverage that China has over Serbia with BRI projects is later translated into visa diplomacy, when a mutual visa exemption treaty was signed to take effect in 2017 (Republic of Serbia, 2016).

Another key strategy China uses within the framework of geo-cultural power is shared victimization through history (Winter, 2021). Memory politics come into play when specific historical sentiments are emphasized and fueled by diplomatic narratives, shaping a particular bond between the victims. Thus, victimhood nationalism, which often is the founding narrative of the regime in power in various developing countries that faced recent economic and security troubles, is evoked socially with the approval of those in power (Lim, 2010). In the case of Serbia, the national victimization narrative from the Yugoslav Wars, specifically the NATO bombing of Belgrade and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in 1999, is used by both states to establish a historical shared victimhood (Zhou, 2022). Such historical sentiments act as grounds for BRI projects and further social cooperation.

Fast forward to 2025. During the speech of President Vucic at the 46th International Tourism Fair in Belgrade, he emphasized Chinese tourism as "our biggest success." In 2024 alone, Chinese tourists accounted for 6.5% of all foreign visitors to the country (Xinhua News, 2025). This not only highlights visa's infrastructural convenience as a dramatic appeal to Chinese tourists, but also suggests a reciprocal reliance that makes Serbian-Chinese cooperation inseparable under the BRI framework.

The BRI serves as a tool for China to build its own international reputation and establish a new non-Western-centric global order. Scholars have argued that China has been staying within the liberal-capitalist theoretical framework of the existing international order (de Graaff et al., 2020); it is more apparent that China is seeking to replace the Western-centric order through a reconfiguration of status. The economic, cultural, and technological dominance of core states in the Global North has attracted migration patterns to shift towards the EU, with China losing its talent and resources needed to shift from a labor-intensive market to capital-intensive societies. Western states have capitalized on this movement and increased their citizens' relative mobility by seeking favorable visa policies to increase their international status. While China can not directly counter this, destination replacement can increase China's relative international status and control the flow of market forces, especially in tourism, in a framework within its economic-political influences.

7. Conclusion

Visa diplomacy has proven to be the key for China to mobilize its international status to a great power and change its global identity to one that supports a multi-centric, liberal, anti-colonial global order. It also employs its BRI resources to alter mobility infrastructure for its citizens and create new destination replacements to free itself from the influences and reliance on Western states that are competitors for the highest status in the global order. By focusing on mobility infrastructure, scholars may better understand the power dynamics between China, the Global South, and the West in a changing world order. Through the case of China, this paper further exemplifies the usage of the Social Identity Theory in an international relations context, which provides a solution to the methodological gap in soft power comparative analysis.

Then comes the question: Why would states willingly cooperate with China's non-reciprocal mobility treaties? Wohlforth effectively summarizes the incentive for smaller states to compromise with greater powers in order to also increase their status-aims: "On the one hand, they seek standing in one or more peer groups of similar states. On the other hand, they might seek recognition by great powers, as useful allies, impartial arbiters, or contributors to systems maintenance" (Wohlforth et al., 2018).

With the first justification, China indeed has a comparatively different approach to European colonial powers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead of acting as a developed state, it uses various approaches, including historical ties and anti-colonial approaches (Chan, 2019), to redefine itself as a peer with similar experiences, interests, and goals. Although this paper outlines the importance and significance of visa diplomacy within the BRI for China, more research is needed to understand the driving forces behind states that compromise Chinese policies through not only a socio-economic lens but also through the perspective of status. A revisit to earlier investigations of tourist industries of BRI states, such as those in Tunisia (Nadhif, 2024), in Serbia (Stojanović et al., 2023), or in Africa as a whole (An et al., 2023), might benefit from considering the domestic sentiments of Chinese tourist markets and Chinese international status seeking.

Ethical and AI Declaration

Ethical clearance was not needed; AI was not used.

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