



Leaping over the Dragon's Gate: The "Air Silk Road" between Henan Province and Luxembourg

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Abstract

This article traces the process behind the implementation of the "Air Silk Road," a cargo flight connection between Luxembourg and Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province. Its origins lie in economic competition between Henan and its neighbouring provinces, dating back a decade before the official announcement of the Air Silk Road in 2017. Provincial and municipal governments in Henan displayed opportunistic risk-taking behaviour in persistently pushing for the development of Zhengzhou's airport economy, but only timing and coincidence allowed the province to gain a foothold in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With findings drawn from fieldwork in China between 2019 and 2020, we contribute to an understanding of the implementation of the BRI, the underlying rationale and the challenges inland provinces face in integrating into the world economy.

Keywords: Belt and Road; central–local; China–Europe; foreign policy; subnational actors

In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping 习近平 announced the "Silk Road Economic Belt," which was to stretch overland from China to Europe. Shortly afterwards, he made public plans for a related sea route, the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road."¹ Together, these projects formed the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Interpretations of the BRI are contested. While some researchers interpret the BRI as a "grand strategy" with geostrategic and geopolitical ambitions,² others see it as a framework of fragmented decentralization and competing interests.³ Far less is known about the subnational aspects of the BRI, such as subnational actors' driving interests.

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1 Botschaft der Volksrepublik China in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2015.

2 See, e.g., Ferdinand 2016, 956; Huang 2016, 315; Liu and Dunford 2016; Du and Zhang 2018, 189; Reeves 2018.

3 See, e.g., He 2018; Jones and Zeng 2019, 1–2; Li 2019, 274.

Findings exist for the border and coastal areas of Yunnan,⁴ Guangxi,⁵ Jiangsu⁶ and Yiwu,⁷ but work on landlocked inland Chinese localities, with the exception of Chongqing municipality and freight train connections between inland China and Europe, remains almost non-existent.⁸

Among the provincial BRI initiatives is the Zhengzhou–Luxembourg “Silk Road in the Air” (*Zhengzhou–Lusenbao “kongzhong sichou zhi lu”* 郑州—卢森堡“空中丝绸之路,” Air Silk Road hereafter) between Luxembourg and Zhengzhou, the capital of central China’s Henan province. President Xi highlighted the Air Silk Road during a visit by Luxembourg’s prime minister, Xavier Bettel, to Beijing in 2017.⁹ By 2020, the Air Silk Road had developed into a cargo connection, with 12 weekly flights between Zhengzhou Xinzheng International Airport (Zhengzhou Airport hereafter) and Luxembourg Airport,¹⁰ and had expanded to Hungary’s Budapest Airport.¹¹

The Air Silk Road is worth investigation for several reasons. First, it stands out in its preciseness and clear focus compared to other provinces’ initiatives, which vaguely seek to turn localities into “transport hubs” but which do not offer similarly catchy slogans. Of note is that, with regard to the fostering of international exchanges, Henan, like other central Chinese provinces,¹² suffers from structural, historical and geographical disadvantages compared to coastal and border provinces. The Air Silk Road, as a flagship BRI project from a central Chinese province, is therefore a surprising and unlikely case. Against this background, this research traces the development trajectory of the Air Silk Road to offer a more nuanced understanding of its drivers and subnational motivations and of central China’s decentralized integration into the world economy.

Our analysis goes back to the early 2000s, allowing us to anchor the Air Silk Road in its historical foundations. The Air Silk Road emerged from provincial economic competition and local hardships more than a decade before its launch in 2017, as well as within the context of China’s central government’s plans for regional transport infrastructure development. In addition, Henan’s provincial and Zhengzhou’s municipal governments pursued an approach of what we call “persistent opportunistic expansion.” At that time, Henan’s provincial government pushed for support from the central government in developing the airport economy in Zhengzhou to funnel international trade and investment into the region and to catch up with the rapid airport expansion in its vicinity. Opportunistic, entrepreneurial and risk-taking behaviour in making large investments in the short term, as well as expanding central governmental directions in a

4 Summers 2019.

5 Li 2019.

6 Zeng 2019.

7 Esteban and Li 2020.

8 Summers 2018; Tjia 2019; Esteban and Li 2020.

9 Belt and Road Portal 2017.

10 Cargolux 2019a.

11 Budapest Airport 2019b.

12 Central Chinese provinces usually include Anhui, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi and Shanxi.

persistent manner over a longer term, drove local cadres' initiatives to achieve long-term economic gains. The coincidental search by the Luxembourg government for a new investor for its cargo airline, Cargolux, came at the right time and ultimately allowed for an acquisition by the Henan Civil Aviation and Investment Corporation (*Henan minhang fazhan touzi youxian gongsi* 河南民航发展投资有限公司, HNCA hereafter). From then on, Henan's provincial and Zhengzhou's municipal governments paid several visits to Luxembourg to sign follow-up agreements, acknowledge existing achievements and offer a stepping stone to further initiatives. The Air Silk Road provided Zhengzhou with an international capability while opening a long-term window for the province to access BRI-related support from the central government.

Our findings make several contributions to the existing literature. First, they show that flagship BRI projects such as the Air Silk Road may find their roots in provincial economic interests and competition rather than being top-down endeavours. Accordingly, the BRI cannot be understood solely as a political and strategic venture; it follows significant local economically driven interests. Second, we show that local cadres' risk-taking behaviour in pushing for the development of the airport economy favours not only short-term but also long-term economic benefits.¹³ Third, we show that despite political recentralization under Xi Jinping in recent years,¹⁴ subnational actors have some discretion to push their own agendas and even stretch the scope of central government policies if these agendas remain aligned with the broad direction of the central government. However, agents in central Chinese provinces have less leeway than their counterparts in coastal and border provinces.

Our findings are drawn from two fieldtrips to China between November 2019 and February 2020. In total, we conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with provincial government officials, business representatives, scholars and stakeholders from international diplomatic services. We also undertook participant observations and observational trips to domestic transport construction sites and cooperation centres in Zhengzhou. Finally, we analysed official provincial and municipal trade and investment statistics, government reports and documents, as well as Chinese and international media coverage.

China's Provincial Integration into the Global Economy

Despite the dearth of literature on China's provincial integration into the global economy, there has been increasing scholarly interest in the role of China's provinces and municipalities in international relations and the BRI. For example, Audrye Wong highlights how the Yunnan government has successfully proposed pipelines, highways and railways to South-East Asia in its pitches to the central

13 Eaton and Kostka 2014.

14 Kostka and Nahm 2017, 568; Tseng and Habich-Sobiegalla 2020, 417.

government.¹⁵ Similarly, Mingjian Li shows how Guangxi has built infrastructure connections with ASEAN countries,¹⁶ and Mario Esteban and Yuan Li together illustrate Chongqing's approaches in pushing for a cargo train connection to Europe.¹⁷ In recent years, provinces and municipalities have hosted BRI information and business-exchange events,¹⁸ established their own provincial Silk Road funds,¹⁹ and invited international scholars to contribute to transnational BRI research projects.²⁰ Together, these factors demonstrate the increasing relevance of provincial and municipal actors in China's international relations and the BRI and thus the necessity of research in this realm.

In seeking to gain a better understanding of what drives subnational initiatives in China's international relations and the BRI, the existing literature serves as a solid foundation, having identified several provincial and municipal strategies. Audrye Wong conceptualizes three approaches used by provinces to exert influence: trailblazing, carpetbagging and resisting. Trailblazing refers to provinces taking initiatives in a bottom-up fashion. For example, without approval from the central government, subnational governments may make significant investments by themselves early on and thereafter present their projects as a *fait accompli* to secure final support. Carpetbagging refers to subnational actors mirroring the central government's rhetoric but pursuing their own, sometimes different, goals. Resisting occurs when provinces opt to not follow the central government's direction.²¹ Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng refer to these phenomena as influencing, interpreting and ignoring.²² More specifically, provinces lobby the central government for approval and financial support for their projects. They submit reports and proposals²³ and try to convince central government officials during joint seminars²⁴ and visits from top leaders.²⁵ Second, provincial governments establish coalitions with powerful actors, such as central state-owned enterprises and the military,²⁶ who are key partners when promoting specific projects in Beijing. Third, provincial and municipal governments frame projects in a way that appeals to central leaders' interests.²⁷ And fourth, provinces use the presence of business actors to justify a need for central government support for their plans.²⁸ Provinces can be persistent in their

15 Wong, Audrye 2018.

16 Li 2014, 288.

17 Esteban and Li 2020.

18 "Ningbo injects impetus in China-CEEC cooperation under BRI framework." *Zhejiang Daily*, 6 July 2016, http://www.cicgf.com/art/2019/6/6/art_9534_631345.html. Accessed 12 November 2021.

19 "Jiangsu 'yidai yilu' touzi jijin" (Jiangsu "One Belt One Road" Investment Fund). *Jiangsu Go-Global Comprehensive Service Platform*, n.d., <http://swt.jiangsu.gov.cn/zcq/jjzc-jsydy1.html>. Accessed 14 November 2021.

20 Participant observations, Hangzhou, November 2019.

21 Wong, Audrye 2018, 738, 742.

22 Jones and Zeng 2019, 4.

23 Wong, Audrye 2018, 741-42.

24 Summers 2019, 5.

25 Li 2019, 280.

26 Wong, Audrye 2018, 745.

27 Summers 2016, 1634.

28 Esteban and Li 2020, 45.

use of these measures over extended periods of time, as demonstrated by the steps taken by Yunnan and Guangxi to establish relations with South-East Asia, which began in the early 1990s and 2000s respectively.²⁹

While the above factors could, from a theoretical perspective, also apply to the Air Silk Road, the structural conditions in a landlocked inland province such as Henan provide a more difficult context for internationalization. For example, Zhengzhou was only added to the list of cities to be opened to the world in 1992.³⁰ Unlike coastal provinces, Henan was unable to attract foreign investors or establish a variety of international commercial relations early on. Other provinces did so and were able to build on those connections to form ties across the world.³¹ Furthermore, Henan is geographically disadvantaged compared to coastal and border provinces. Unlike Guangxi, Henan cannot establish cross-border economic development zones or host major regional economic forums such as the China-ASEAN Expo.³² And, unlike Yunnan, Henan cannot take advantage of neighbouring countries' natural resources to push for cross-border economic projects such as pipelines.³³ Lastly, Henan's financial resources are limited, making it more likely to remain dependent on support from the central government. This is in contrast to rich provinces such as Jiangsu, which was excluded from China's overarching framework document for the BRI, the "Vision and actions on jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (the Vision and Actions document hereafter), published in 2015.³⁴ Jiangsu's provincial government ignored the central government's decision and openly criticized it in this regard as "unwise" and continued with its own BRI plan.³⁵ Given the absence of such structural advantages in Henan, the development of the Air Silk Road from a landlocked inland province is surprising and suggests the involvement of an as-yet unobserved factor.

The Air Silk Road is even more puzzling: it is the only initiative from an inland Chinese province that has such detail and scope. Under the umbrella of the Vision and Actions document, provinces and municipalities have started issuing their own plans for the BRI. Out of the 16 provincial and municipal plans that are available to the public via China's online Belt and Road Portal, five come from China's inland provinces; however, none of these offers a similarly bold initiative or catchy slogan as the Air Silk Road. For example, "The action plan of

29 Li 2014; 2019.

30 "Duiwai kaifang" (Opening up). *www.gov.cn*, 11 September 2009, http://www.gov.cn/test/2009-09/11/content_1415347_2.htm#:~:text=1992%20%E5%B9%B4%EF%BC%8C%E5%BC%80%E6%94%BE%E9%87%8D%E5%BA%86%E3%80%81%E5%B2%B3%E9%98%B3,%E3%80%81%E6%88%90%E9%83%BD%E3%80%81%E8%B4%B5%E9%98%B3%E3%80%81%E8%A5%BF%E5%AE%89%E3%80%81. Accessed 26 February 2021.

31 Rabe forthcoming.

32 Li 2019, 278–79.

33 Wong, Audrye 2018.

34 Botschaft der Volksrepublik China in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2015.

35 "Yidai yilu guihua chulu Shandong, Jiangsu deng luoxuan" (Release on the One Belt, One Road Plan – Shandong, Jiangsu, and others have been left out). *Guancha*, 31 March 2015, https://www.guancha.cn/Industry/2015_03_31_314365.shtml. Accessed 15 August 2020; Zeng 2019, 6–7.

Hunan province to join the One Belt, One Road Initiative (2015–2017)” details target host countries, sectors and relevant companies in 62 specific projects,³⁶ and Qinghai’s “Development and action plan for the Silk Road Cultural Industrial Belt (2018–2025)” rather vaguely encourages enterprises in the tourism and culture sectors to promote the province’s cultural reach.³⁷ Against these observations, the specific cooperation between Zhengzhou and Luxembourg under the Air Silk Road initiative is an outlier of subnational transborder cooperation. The subsequent sections detail the emergence of the partnership, its drivers and core motivations, and the measures taken at the provincial and municipal levels.

The Air Silk Road between Zhengzhou and Luxembourg

Pioneering and risk-taking: developing Zhengzhou’s airport economy (2007–2010)

The Air Silk Road between Luxembourg and Zhengzhou has emerged as Henan’s dominant internationalization initiative under the BRI, the origins of which lie in the mid-2000s, when provincial and municipal governments actively sought to spur Henan’s economic development as well as its position within China, particularly in competition with neighbouring provinces. The idea of turning Zhengzhou into an airport-based logistics hub thus pre-dates the Air Silk Road by almost a decade.

The airport economy was born out of Henan’s difficult economic situation in the mid-2000s. Although Henan is China’s fifth largest economy, the province has long been a base for mainly agricultural production, responsible for producing almost 10 per cent of China’s crops and 10 per cent of its meat as of 2005.³⁸ Similarly, its population was almost 100 million in 2005, among the highest in China, but with 69 per cent of the population living in rural areas,³⁹ Henan ranked 17th in GDP per capita.⁴⁰ When considering provincial internationalization based on outward FDI stock, Henan ranked only 18th in China in 2010. Although this was much better than neighbouring Hubei, Henan’s outward FDI stock was only slightly higher than those of Shanxi and Shaanxi and was significantly behind those of Anhui, Shandong, Hebei and Hunan.⁴¹

At this time, competition between China’s inland provinces intensified. One reason for this was that the central government’s Western Development

36 Hunan Provincial Government 2015.

37 “Qinghai sheng wenhua he xinwen chubanting guanyu yinfa Qinghai sheng sichou zhi lu wenhua chanyedai fazhan guihua ji xingdong jihua (2018–2025) de tongzhi” (Circular by Qinghai Provincial Office of Culture, News and Publication on Qinghai’s Development and Action Plan for the Silk Road Cultural Industrial Belt (2018–2025)). *Yidaiyilu.gov.cn*, 21 December 2017, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydlgw/201801/201801161054051.pdf>. Accessed 15 January 2020, 47.

38 MOFCOM n.d.

39 Ibid.

40 “Diqu shengchan zongzhi (2005 nian)” (Regional GDP (2005)). *Stats.gov.cn*, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsjs/2006/html/C0309c.htm>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

41 MOFCOM, NBS and State Administration of Foreign Exchange 2016.

Strategy (announced in 1999 and formally inaugurated in 2000) (*Xibu dakaiifa zhanlue* 西部大开发战略) had allowed for better infrastructure connecting China's inland provinces with the coast. In addition, in 2004 China's prime minister, Wen Jiabao 温家宝 began to promote the idea of the "rise of the central regions" (*zhongbu diqu jueqi* 中部地区崛起),⁴² which became the central government's development framework for central China. The Rise of the Central Regions Plan seeks to develop hub airports in central Chinese provincial capitals, as well as railway and road connections along north–south and east–west transport arteries, to link central China with the rest of the country.⁴³

As a result, Henan started to compete with its neighbouring provinces, particularly Hubei, Shaanxi and Anhui, to attract foreign investment and production and to develop its provincial transport infrastructure.⁴⁴ Especially of note is that Hubei province began expanding its provincial capital airport, Wuhan Tianhe International Airport 武汉天河国际机场, throughout 2005.⁴⁵ With heavy reliance on much slower and more regionally confined overland transport, Henan's government feared economic losses if Henan could not keep pace, in which case the province would be reduced to a feeder to an emerging airport hub in its vicinity. This was not an unlikely scenario, because the position of Zhengzhou Airport vis-à-vis other provincial airports, such as those in Luoyang 洛阳 and Nanyang 南阳, was not clear. Additionally, overall infrastructure was regarded as too poor and airline connections as too few.⁴⁶

Confronted with economic hardship and pressure from neighbouring provinces, Henan's provincial and Zhengzhou's municipal leaders began to embark upon ambitious measures to enlarge Zhengzhou Airport and keep pace with surrounding developments.⁴⁷ Henan's government echoed the central government's language, envisioning turning Zhengzhou into an international aviation hub⁴⁸ – one with a specific focus on cargo traffic and direct flight connections, especially with East and South-East Asian countries and North America, as well as with the Middle East, Africa and the European Union.⁴⁹ The vision was not without risk, as space for regional airport hubs in inland China was limited. Lacking many alternative options, the Henan provincial Party committee and the Henan government first gave approval to an economic pilot project, the Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone (*Zhengzhou hangkonggang jingji zonghe shiyanqu* 郑州航空港经济综合试验区), in

42 "2004 nian zhengfu gongzuo baogao" (Government work report 2004). *Xinhua*, 16 February 2006, http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-02/16/content_201193.htm. Accessed 24 February 2021.

43 State Council General Office 2006.

44 Henan Provincial Government 2007; interview with scholar, Zhengzhou, November 2019.

45 "Wuhan Tianhe International Airport, Hebei Province," n.d., https://www.airport-technology.com/projects/wuhan_tianhe/. Accessed 1 July 2020.

46 Henan Provincial Government 2007.

47 *Ibid.*

48 State Council General Office 2006.

49 "Guoji hangkong shuniu — Zhengzhou jichang menghuan guihua chutai" (International Airport Hub – official release of dream plan for Zhengzhou Airport). *Zhengzhou wanbao*, 21 December 2007, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-12-21/103713120921s.shtml>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

2007.⁵⁰ The plan outlined short- to long-term targets until 2035. Direct flight connections were to be opened with South-East Asia and North America by 2010. Furthermore, the airport zone was to be expanded from 4.6 square kilometres to an area of 138 square kilometres and supplemented with related connecting land transport infrastructure.⁵¹ Henan was first off the mark among the other provinces such as Shaanxi, which only announced the expansion of the Airport New City of its Xi'an Xianyang International Airport to 146 square kilometres in 2014.⁵² In addition, the Henan government decided to invest in aviation development, committing 100 million yuan annually for a period of five years.⁵³ By contrast, total provincial expenses in 2010 for other areas, such as environmental protection, amounted to more than 700 million yuan.⁵⁴

To ensure success, the Henan provincial government engaged in network building. First, it formed a powerful coalition with the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) (*Zhongguo minyong hangkongju* 中国民用航空局) in 2009. As an authority under the central government's Ministry of Transport, the CAAC became Henan's direct link to Beijing and an important partner when support was needed from Beijing later on. In addition, the CAAC provided subsidies for expanding airport-related infrastructure.⁵⁵ Second, Henan's provincial and Zhengzhou's municipal governments went after foreign investors to increase the province's production and export capacities. One such investor was Foxconn, Taiwan's producer of electronic devices for brands such as Apple, Dell and Nokia.⁵⁶ Foxconn had started to build factories in inland China, such as in Hubei's Wuhan.⁵⁷ To keep pace, the Zhengzhou municipal government established the Foxconn Technology Group Zhengzhou Investment Project Coordination and Promotion Leading Group under the guidance of Zhengzhou's mayor, Zhao Jiancai 赵建才, in 2007. The leading group tried persistently over a period of almost three years to persuade Foxconn to open production facilities in Zhengzhou.⁵⁸ The provincial government offered incentives to foreign investors such as free land-use rights, buildings for plants and workers' dormitories.⁵⁹ In 2010, Foxconn finally agreed and set up its new plant close to Zhengzhou Airport.⁶⁰ Although Henan's lower wages were an

50 Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone n.d.

51 *Zhengzhou wanbao*, 21 December 2007.

52 "Shaanxi sheng: dazao 'kongzhong sichou zhi lu' xin qidian" (Shaanxi province: creating a new starting point for the "Silk Road in the Air"). *Xinhua*, 6 July 2014, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-07/06/content_2713142.htm. Accessed 14 August 2020.

53 CAAC 2009.

54 Henan Provincial Department of Finance 2011.

55 CAAC 2009.

56 Hille 2011.

57 "Henan shi ruhe qiangdao Fushikang de" (How did Henan grab Foxconn). *Nanfang zhoumo*, 18 August 2010, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/chanjing/gsnews/20100819/11008509851.shtml>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

58 Ibid.

59 Wang, Xuefeng, and Tomaney 2019, 108.

60 *Nanfang zhoumo*, 18 August 2010; "Half of iPhones manufactured in central China's Zhengzhou city." *China Daily.com*, 19 September 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/tech/2017-09/19/content_32191283.htm. Accessed 1 July 2020.

asset,⁶¹ Foxconn's decision was a result of Henan's persistence over the previous years and the personal relationship between Henan's Party secretary, Lu Zhangong 卢展工, and Taiwanese Foxconn founder, Kuo T'ai-ming 郭台銘.⁶² Subsequently, from 2010 to 2011, Henan's foreign trade increased by 83 per cent, with a significant share being attributed to Foxconn's production in Zhengzhou.⁶³

National upgrade: persistence in pushing for central government support (2010–2013)

In 2010, Henan's early aviation development plan caught a tailwind from the central government. Shortly after the signing of the strategic cooperation agreement framework with Foxconn,⁶⁴ China's State Council approved the Zhengzhou Xinzheng Comprehensive Bonded Zone (*Zhengzhou xinzheng zonghe baoshuiqu* 郑州新郑综合保税区), located north-east of Zhengzhou Airport. This gave Zhengzhou a lead in the competition with its neighbouring provincial capitals. As the first bonded zone in central China and an extension of the initial area of the airport zone with processing facilities, logistics, port-based operations and other related services, the expansion put Zhengzhou ahead of other provincial airports.⁶⁵ The close distance between the bonded zone and Zhengzhou Airport was favourable for production and for the import/export of components and goods, which became better integrated later on, for example, through a joint customs clearance system.⁶⁶ After receiving approval from the central government, the Henan provincial Party committee and the Henan government continued to draw up additional measures. In 2011, they established an enterprise under the Henan provincial government, the HNCA. The HNCA became the provincial government's vehicle to implement a multitude of tasks in relation to the airport economy zone, including transportation and aviation logistics, making it a lead actor in establishing the airport development zone.⁶⁷

The subsequent development of the airport also took place under the national and provincial 12th Five-Year Plans (2011–2016) aimed at expanding the railroad, railway and airport infrastructure development in central China, along with transport networks and airport hubs.⁶⁸ The State Council also issued guiding opinions for the Central Plains Economic Zone (*Zhongyuan jingji qu* 中原经

61 Hille 2011.

62 *Nanfang zhoumo*, 18 August 2010.

63 Wang 2013.

64 *Nanfang zhoumo*, 18 August 2010.

65 Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone n.d.

66 "Zhengzhou to Luxembourg: the Air Silk Road takes flight." *HKDTC*, 1 August 2018, <https://hkmb.hktdc.com/en/1X0AEP8P/hktdc-research/Zhengzhou-to-Luxembourg-The-Air-Silk-Road-Takes-Flight>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

67 HNCA 2013.

68 "Guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shi'er ge wu nian guihua gangyao (quanwen)" (Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (full text)). *Xinhua*, 16 March 2011, http://www.gov.cn/2011/03/content_1825838_4.htm. Accessed 27 February 2021; Henan Provincial Government 2011.

济区, CPEZ hereafter) as part of China's national development strategy for central China.⁶⁹ However, the central government decided that agriculture should be the major sector for development in Henan under the CPEZ, with development of the transport infrastructure receiving less attention. Not satisfied with this outcome, the Henan provincial Party committee and the provincial government began to lobby the central government using their pre-established links with the CAAC, and jointly introduced the Zhengzhou Comprehensive Experimental Zone for an Airport-based Economy.⁷⁰ In 2013, Henan's persistence yet again paid off when the State Council ratified the "2013–2025 Planning and development of the Zhengzhou Comprehensive Experimental Zone for an Airport-based Economy," which included Zhengzhou Airport, the Zhengzhou Comprehensive Bonded Zone, and the emerging surrounding industrial parks, encompassing a total area of 415 square kilometres.⁷¹ Henan's location in the centre of China and its favourable infrastructure connections to elsewhere in the country were an asset, but Henan's early and bold investments to develop an economy around Zhengzhou Airport were also significant. With its related construction of highways, logistical demands of existing export capacities associated with Foxconn and related manufacturers, and its free-trade zone and bonded logistics centre, Henan had something to offer.⁷² The chief of the CAAC, Li Jiayang 李家祥, summarized Henan's bottom-up approach, saying, "Henan ... has acted earlier as well as taken substantial measures," which took place "in the new round of regional competition."⁷³

The incorporation of Henan's airport plan into the CPEZ indicates a particular success for Henan and Zhengzhou. This was the first time that an airport pilot zone had been upgraded to a national strategy.⁷⁴ The upgrade also expanded Henan's experimental zone into a strategy to open up central China and even western China, as Zhengzhou was designated a national air logistics hub, with both freight transit and distribution services and the additional ambitious goal of becoming a "mega hub" by 2025.⁷⁵ Henan's airport was yet another step ahead of those in other provinces.

This shows that early provincial entrepreneurship, bold and persistent measures, and incentive-driven behaviour to develop the local airport in line with interprovincial competition went beyond mere implementation of central government policies. The provincial and municipal governments made significant early

69 "Guowuyuan guanyu zhichi Henan sheng jiakuai jianshe zhongyuan jingji qu de yindao yijian guofa (2011), 32 hao" (Guideline by the State Council for accelerating the construction of the Central Plains Economic Zone (2011), No. 32). *www.gov.cn*, 7 October 2011, http://www.gov.cn/zw/gk/2011-10/07/content_1963574.htm. Accessed 1 July 2020.

70 "The State Council approved the planning and development of Zhengzhou Comprehensive Experimental Zone for airport-based economy." *China.org.cn*, 3 April 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-04/03/content_28438663.htm. Accessed 4 July 2020.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Zhang 2013.

74 *China.org.cn*, 3 April 2013.

75 Ibid.

investments, thereby taking high financial risks, and formed ties with Beijing by aligning with the CAAC. Having something to offer, Henan could push for its own agenda at the central level, even extending the scope of the central government's development plan for the province. Those provincial initiatives were key to the local development strategy being elevated from a provincial to a national plan.

Grasping the opportunity: building a relationship between Zhengzhou and Luxembourg (2013–2014)

The early origins of the Air Silk Road between Zhengzhou and Luxembourg can be traced back to a well-timed yet coincidental opportunity. In 2012, Qatar Airways decided to sell its 35 per cent stake in Luxembourg's cargo airline, Cargolux, which the Luxembourg government then had to purchase. Since that time, Luxembourg had been trying to find a new investor.⁷⁶ These events were external to Henan and beyond the control of the province. However, in May 2013, Luxembourg's minister for sustainable development and infrastructure, Claude Wiseler, visited China with a delegation of representatives from Cargolux, Luxair and the airport operator, Lux-Airport. First, he introduced Luxembourg's logistical capabilities to his Chinese counterparts, the minister and vice-minister of transport, Yang Chuantang 杨传堂 and Li Jiexiang 李家祥.⁷⁷ Owing to Henan's cooperation with the CAAC, Li Jiexiang had a positive opinion on the previous substantial measures taken by the province. It is therefore unsurprising that, based on that impression, Wiseler then travelled to Henan, where he discussed the idea of developing a logistics hub at Luxembourg Airport at the highest provincial level, notably with Henan's Party secretary, Guo Gengmao 郭庚茂, and the governor of Henan province, Xie Fuzhan 谢伏瞻.⁷⁸

Based on this first meeting, Henan's provincial government sensed an emerging opportunity and became active in building and consolidating a relationship with Luxembourg. Henan's long-term interest in developing its airport economy matched well with the comparatively urgent financial need of the Luxembourg government to find a new investor for Cargolux and with Luxembourg's mid-term interest in attracting new flights to Luxembourg.⁷⁹ Shortly after Wiseler's trip to Henan, Henan's vice-governor, Zhao Jiancai 赵建才, paid a high-level return visit to Luxembourg, where he expressed Henan's interest in developing a European–Chinese logistics hub. This meeting also allowed for the start of negotiations regarding a potential investment by Henan in Cargolux.⁸⁰ Soon after, in 2014, the governor of Henan province, Xie Fuzhan 谢伏瞻, and Luxembourg's minister for sustainable development and infrastructure, François

76 Wang, Wen 2013.

77 Consulate General of Luxembourg in Shanghai 2013.

78 Ibid.

79 Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 2012.

80 "Chinese investors in negotiation over Cargolux stake." *Luxembourg Times*, 17 September 2013, <https://luxtimes.lu/archives/21163-chinese-investors-in-negotiations-over-cargolux-stake>. Accessed 4 July 2020.

Bausch, signed an investment agreement according to which the HNCA could purchase a 35 per cent stake in Cargolux for US\$120 million, allowing for an initial proposed scheduled of four weekly flights by Cargolux to Zhengzhou.⁸¹ However, the investment was not free of risk. At that time, Cargolux was experiencing monthly deficits, and freight growth in general was slowing, especially in the Asian region where Cargolux was active.⁸² But Henan's provincial government was determined to take on those risks and even promised an additional investment by the HNCA of US\$15 million to extend the initial proposal for a logistics hub at Zhengzhou Airport via a "dual-hub strategy" with a European counterpart at Luxembourg Airport.⁸³ Cooperation between Henan and Luxembourg was further secured through an additional agreement between Lux-Airport and its counterpart, the Henan Airport Group (*Henan sheng jichang jituan youxian gongsi* 河南省机场集团有限公司), to cooperate in freight and passenger transport.⁸⁴

In sum, the cooperation between Zhengzhou and Luxembourg came about because the timing was good and provincial leaders sensed a unique long-term opportunity to integrate with the global economy in exchange for making short-term investment commitments. The investments in Cargolux and in the dual-hub strategy appear great and risky, yet the provincial government had the capacity to put those resources together at short notice to grasp a rare opportunity and, with that, the potential for long-term gains.

Consolidation: towards the Air Silk Road (2014–2019)

In 2015, more than a year after the HNCA had purchased a share in Cargolux, China's central government issued the Vision and Actions document, a new framework which prescribed the roles of Chinese provinces in the BRI. The document gave Henan room to further expand its transport corridors to Europe. But, more explicitly, it also emphasized the role to be played by Zhengzhou: to become a leader in opening up the inland regions. Major tasks for the city included the construction of the airport and an international land port, the strengthening of customs clearance, the furthering of cooperation with ports in China's coastal areas and border regions, and the implementation of e-commerce pilot projects for cross-border trade. In addition to the references made to Zhengzhou, the Vision and Actions document designated other central Chinese cities to play a key role in the BRI, in particular Wuhan and Xi'an, which is likely to spur on further interprovincial competition.⁸⁵

The new document provided a further opportunity and framework, which Henan's Development and Reform Commission (DRC) used to announce its

81 "HNCA signs on the dotted line for Cargolux." *Luxembourg Times*, 14 January 2014, <https://luxtimes.lu/archives/19170-hnca-signs-on-the-dotted-line-for-cargolux-shares>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

82 Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 2012.

83 *Luxembourg Times*, 14 January 2014.

84 Chamber of Commerce Luxembourg 2018a.

85 Botschaft der Volksrepublik China in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2015.

own BRI plan, scaling up its local initiative to the central government, in November 2015. While echoing the contents of the Vision and Actions document, the DRC went a step further and reiterated the existing but still vague idea of an “air silk road” (*kongzhong silu* 空中丝路).⁸⁶ To secure support from the central government, the DRC aligned its interest in developing the local airport economy with the central government’s Silk Road framework and provided its own interpretation of the BRI. A prompt reaction to the Vision and Actions document was important, because in 2014, competition with Xi’an intensified over the starting point of what both cities called an “air silk road,” which came after Zhengzhou had opened its flight corridor to Luxembourg, as Xi’an connected with Kuala Lumpur only a few days later.⁸⁷

In 2016, the idea of an “air silk road” caught on at the central level. China’s national and Henan’s provincial 13th Five-Year Plans reiterated the need for north–south and east–west horizontal and vertical railway and expressway arteries to connect Henan with the rest of China and for airport hub development.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Zhengzhou was set to become an important hub for an “air silk road.”⁸⁹ Further specification of these plans took place at the provincial and municipal levels.⁹⁰ In 2017, the concept of an “air silk road” gained new momentum.⁹¹ In June of that year, President Xi highlighted the Zhengzhou–Luxembourg “Silk Road in the Air” during Prime Minister Bettel’s visit to Beijing – this was the first official announcement of the project.⁹² The announcement did not bear much risk of rejection, nor was it unexpected, as Luxembourg had already begun to develop links with Henan under the dual-hub strategy. Although the new framework gave a label to an ongoing process that had been unfolding over the previous years, the central government’s reiteration laid a path for follow-up measures, further deepening bilateral relations between Henan and Luxembourg. During Bettel’s visit, Cargolux and the HNCA agreed to further enhance their cooperation by establishing a joint venture airline, the Henan Cargo Airlines, with 25 per cent of the stake being held by Cargolux and the remaining shares by Henan through the HNCA, the Henan Airport Group and the Zhengzhou Airport Xinggang Investment Group Company (*Zhengzhou hangkonggang xinggang touzi jituan youxian gongsi* 郑州航空港兴港投资集团有限公司).⁹³

86 Henan Development and Reform Commission 2016.

87 “Sichou zhi lu cong na qifei Zhengzhou Xi’an konggang anzheng” (Where is the start of the Silk Road? The hidden competition between the airports of Xi’an and Zhengzhou). *Yicai*, 15 July 2014, <https://www.yicai.com/news/3992991.html>. Accessed 23 July 2020.

88 NDRC 2016a; “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shisan ge wu nian guihua gangyao” (Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China). *Xinhua*, 17 March 2016, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm. Accessed 27 February 2021.

89 NDRC 2016a; 2016b.

90 Zhengzhou Government 2017.

91 Interview, Beijing, December 2019.

92 Belt and Road Portal 2017.

93 Tasch 2017.

Henan's government acted quickly following the official announcement of the Air Silk Road. In September 2017, the general office of the Henan government published a circular to implement the Air Silk Road and clarified individual actors' responsibilities. The major actor, the HNCA, was tasked with 11 of the 13 implementation steps, which included the expansion of the cargo network, the founding of the joint venture airline and the establishment of a visa facilitation programme.⁹⁴ Second, Henan published an overall plan for the development of the Air Silk Road, which listed major goals and was to be implemented between 2017 and 2025.⁹⁵ In October 2017, the CAAC and the provincial general office issued a strategic plan for the development of a global cargo and transportation hub, which outlined three implementation periods until an extended long-term period to 2035.⁹⁶

High-level visits by top provincial and municipal leaders to Luxembourg acknowledged the cooperation through a series of follow-up agreements, making a reversal of the existing path unlikely. Shortly after Xi's announcement in June, a delegation led by Henan's vice-governor, Shu Qing 舒庆, who was also responsible for trade, tourism and foreign relations, paid a visit to Luxembourg in August. During that visit, the HNCA and the Henan Airport Group signed agreements with Cargolux to expand the airfreight infrastructure.⁹⁷ One year later, a second delegation visited Luxembourg, this time headed by Henan's Party secretary, Wang Guosheng 王国生 and including other leading provincial officials as well as the deputy general manager of the HNCA, Guo Yanhong 郭艳红, and the deputy mayor of Zhengzhou, Wan Zhengfeng 万正峰.⁹⁸ A letter of intent between Luxembourg and China was issued, reaffirming the aim of cooperating in terms of passenger traffic to complement the cargo route.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Cargolux signed an agreement with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and received a credit line from the Bank of China in 2018.¹⁰⁰

The HNCA's earlier investment in Cargolux offered a new window of opportunity for Henan to expand its cooperation from Luxembourg towards a wider European market. In 2019, the Air Silk Road was complemented by a cargo connection via Hungary to Central Europe, with Cargolux launching its first direct flight between Zhengzhou and Budapest Airport in April.¹⁰¹ Again, this was a coincidental opportunity for Henan, because a cargo route between Luxembourg and Budapest had existed since 2002. In that way, the new connection to Budapest, as a stopover during Cargolux's return flight from Zhengzhou,

94 Henan Provincial Government General Office 2017.

95 Belt and Road Portal 2017.

96 Shi 2018.

97 Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 2017.

98 Chamber of Commerce Luxembourg 2018a.

99 HNCA 2018.

100 Grunwald 2018.

101 Budapest Airport 2019b.

could be added relatively easily.¹⁰² In May 2019, hoping to expand into Central and Eastern European markets, the HNCA also agreed to further the evolution of Budapest Airport into a new cargo hub in Central Eastern Europe, which consolidated the relationship.¹⁰³ A forum was therefore held in Budapest, with the Chinese delegation headed by Henan's deputy Party secretary, Yu Hongqiu 喻红秋.¹⁰⁴ This new cooperation with Budapest emerged amid regional competition. The deputy managing director of the Xi'an Xianyang International Airport, Wang Zhendong 王振东, signed a memorandum of understanding with his Hungarian counterpart at the end of April 2019 during a BRI forum in Beijing.¹⁰⁵

The choice of Hungary as a partner was smart. Introducing the Budapest stop-over was relatively easy, given Cargolux's pre-existing flight connection. Hungary is also a core European partner for China as it provides a window into the European Union and towards Eastern Europe. Despite criticism from other EU member states towards China,¹⁰⁶ relations with Hungary have been excellent for many years¹⁰⁷ – indeed, Hungary's state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Tamás Menczer, stated that they have been “never as positive.”¹⁰⁸ By choosing to cooperate with a strategically important partner for China, Henan once again extended the original scope of the Air Silk Road beyond Luxembourg and thus put itself in a favourable starting position to possibly secure further support from the central government to expand its international reach in the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

Tracing the development of the Air Silk Road over time allows for reflection and for several conclusions. China's central government played an important role in elevating Henan's airport economy zone to the national level and allowing the zone to become part of China's international initiatives. With its five-year programmes and the Rise of the Central Regions Plan, the central government provided Henan with an umbrella framework under which provincial and municipal leaders were able to pursue their interests. Additionally, the announcement of the Air Silk Road by President Xi in 2017 gave new momentum to Henan's cooperation with Luxembourg and made it stand out from other provinces with regards to its use of the Air Silk Road framework.

Such frameworks and approval by the central government enabled Henan to push its interests further. The above analysis reveals several strategies that were

102 Cargolux 2019b.

103 “Budapest and Henan establish Aviation Silk Road.” *CargoForwarderGlobal*, 26 May 2019, <https://www.cargoforwarder.eu/2019/05/26/budapest-and-henan-establish-aviation-silk-road/>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

104 Budapest Airport 2019b.

105 Budapest Airport 2019a.

106 Rabe and Gippner 2017.

107 Duan 2019.

108 Budapest Airport 2019b.

key to launching Henan's Air Silk Road: lobbying the central government, building alliances, framing interests using the central government's language, and using domestic business interests to justify the need for a specific initiative. In these ways, Henan used strategies similar to those used by other provinces when influencing and interpreting the central government's broad direction.¹⁰⁹

However, Henan is not the only inland province to have used the above strategies to integrate with global value chains. For instance, Shaanxi also formed relations with the CAAC, which, in 2014, approved the Airport New City and provided financial support.¹¹⁰ And Henan was not alone in attracting foreign investors. In 2007, Foxconn had already begun to build its production factories in Hubei's Wuhan.¹¹¹ Other multinationals, such as HP, Acer and ASUS, settled in the Chongqing municipality in as early as 2009.¹¹² Other provinces have also used the central government's language to frame their interests, as did Shaanxi when presenting itself as the starting point of the Air Silk Road.¹¹³

There are three other important factors that distinguish Henan's efforts from those of other landlocked inland provinces: measures taken towards development came early and were persistent, bold and grasped emerging opportunities – an approach we call “persistent opportunistic expansion.” Although Wuhan was initially ahead of Zhengzhou – it began the expansion of the Wuhan Tianhe International Airport in 2005 and had started to attract foreign manufacturers three years earlier than Zhengzhou – Wuhan lacked sufficient successful follow-up initiatives. For example, it was only in 2019 that the provincial government issued a plan to further expand its airport.¹¹⁴ Although the plan was comprehensive and the anticipated size of the area was remarkable (501 square kilometres),¹¹⁵ Henan had already received State Council approval six years earlier to expand its airport economy zone to 415 square kilometres.¹¹⁶ Likewise, Shaanxi's plan for its Airport New City was approved in 2014, yet Shaanxi was not only later than Henan in completing the project but also ultimately had a smaller planned expansion area of 146 square kilometres by 2020.¹¹⁷ This illustrates that Henan and Zhengzhou successfully combined bold initiatives relatively early on with persistent behaviour over a longer period of time, which made it possible for the province to come out ahead of its competitors.

Yet meeting the above conditions was not sufficient to enable the inland province of Henan to elevate its provincial initiatives to a national and then an international level. Coincidence and timing are often crucial factors for inland provinces who ordinarily struggle with a lack of opportunity to internationalize.

109 Wong, Audrye 2018; Jones and Zeng 2019.

110 *Yicai*, 15 July 2014.

111 *Nanfang zhoumo*, 18 August 2010.

112 Esteban and Li 2020, 44.

113 *Xinhua*, 6 July 2014.

114 Development and Reform Commission 2019.

115 *Ibid.*

116 Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone n.d.

117 *Xinhua*, 6 July 2014.

As such, the province had to be ready. Without Luxembourg's search for a new investor in Cargolux, Henan would not have been able to establish ties with Luxembourg and, from there – via Hungary – with other parts of Europe, and it would not have been able to consolidate its own bilateral relationships. However, coincidence and timing lie beyond the control of any province, and because a vast number of other conditions were necessary to establish this specific relationship, our findings illustrate that internationalization is extremely difficult for China's landlocked inland provinces.

This “persistent opportunistic expansion” makes the case of Henan different also from those of Chinese coastal and border provinces such as Yunnan and Hainan. Coastal and border provinces are, owing to their location or resources, in a better situation by default to trailblaze their own policies to shape transnational relations. Henan was more reliant on external factors, focusing more on carpetbagging – namely, the purposeful expansion and utilization of central governmental directions.

Because internationalization is difficult, continuity and persistence are of vital importance. As such, Henan's provincial and municipal leaders tried to secure the airport economy plan even when it became apparent that new leaders would come into office before its actualization. This finding expands on previous research which suggests that local leaders have only incentive-driven short-term interests.¹¹⁸ Henan thus tried to make the maximum use of existing initiatives to lock in already achieved stepping stones. For example, in Zhengzhou's central business district, Henan is constructing a Henan–Luxembourg Centre (*Henan–Lusenbao zhongxin* 河南–卢森堡中心), which comprises business offices, commercial facilities and apartments.¹¹⁹ It is intended to give Henan an “international touch,”¹²⁰ which is important in the long term for a province with limited international relations.¹²¹ Yet, for Henan, its initiatives appear to have been successful also in the short term. The acquisition of Cargolux has allowed Henan not only to gain access to the Western European market but also to benefit from the comparatively low airport fees at Luxembourg Airport¹²² and more stable cargo transfers to Europe.¹²³ From 2014, the number of cargo flights between Luxembourg and Zhengzhou increased from two to 12 flights per week by 2019.¹²⁴ With Cargolux transporting items to other countries including the United States, Henan has also gained access to markets further overseas.¹²⁵

However, the development of the Air Silk Road was not as straightforward as it seems. As is the case in other policy areas, different parties pursue their own and at times diverging interests, and it is likely that such diverging interests

118 Eaton and Kostka 2014, 378–79.

119 Chamber of Commerce Luxembourg 2018b.

120 Interview, Beijing, December 2019.

121 Interview with consultant, Zhengzhou, November 2019.

122 Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 2012.

123 Wang, Wen 2013; Budapest Airport 2019b.

124 Chamber of Commerce Luxembourg 2018a; Cargolux 2019a.

125 Interview, Beijing, December 2019.

were also at play at the genesis of what became the Air Silk Road. For example, Henan's provincial government expanded the original scope of the Air Silk Road to include Hungary, although President Xi had initially confined it to Luxembourg within his official announcement in 2017. Furthermore, a climate of fierce interprovincial competition across central China suggests that Henan had to expedite processes, a move which certainly did not go uncontested within the province as resources are limited. Finally, aspects of the Air Silk Road were contested internationally. For instance, the joint venture airline was originally envisaged with the name "Cargolux China" but was later on renamed "Henan Cargo Airlines." In addition, Henan's provincial government would have approved a 35 per cent share held by the European side, but the central government insisted on the lower share of 25 per cent.¹²⁶

Provincial agency and bold initiatives have their risks. For example, Christine Wong illustrates how financial overextension by decentralized agents can be a result of interprovincial competition.¹²⁷ Problematic outcomes of this competition are evident in the phenomenon of various cities sending empty cargo trains to Europe to compete with one another for central government subsidies.¹²⁸ Yin-nor Tjia finds that competition for freight trains among inland cities can lead to developments that make no economic sense, such as longer transport routes.¹²⁹ Provincial agency can also entail political risks for China as a whole. For example, Audrye Wong describes how Yunnan's push for a cross-border pipeline caused a worsening of bilateral relations between China and Myanmar.¹³⁰

In sum, our findings on the case of Henan counter previous works that advocate for interpreting the BRI as a geopolitical vision. Instead, our findings support and align with previous research that has shown that what might appear as "grand strategy" can actually be the result of a long process. The Air Silk Road has evolved gradually over a protracted period of time, with its foundations lying in the central and provincial governments' interests in developing Henan's land and air-based infrastructure. It also shows the plan's emergence as a clear result of subnational economic interests and interprovincial competition in central China. A nuanced understanding of provincial and municipal motivations, drivers and determinants is therefore crucial for developing a better grasp of the complexities inherent to China's BRI, as well as the associated risks and implications.

126 Adam 2017.

127 Wong, Christine 2020, 283–84.

128 Leng 2019.

129 Tjia 2019.

130 Wong, Audrye 2018, 743.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

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摘要: 本文追溯了河南省省会郑州和卢森堡之间货运航线——“空中丝绸之路”——的实施过程。这项 2017 年推出的规划是河南在过去十年间与周边省份的经济竞争的产物。河南省省、市级政府在持续推动郑州临空经济发展方面体现了冒险性的机会主义特点；但只有在合适的机遇下，这一策略才能帮助该省在“一带一路”倡议（BRI）中获得立足点。通过笔者 2019 年至 2020 年间在中国田野调查发现，本文有助于读者更好地理解“一带一路”倡议的贯彻落实以及内陆省份参与世界经济的基本动因和所面临的挑战。

关键词: “一带一路”；中央-地方；中欧；对外政策；次国家行为体

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