

High-Speed Empire

SEASON 1
episode seven

Nick Lemann

Welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. I'm Nick Lemann, thank you for tuning in. Today, we welcome Will Doig, author of the new book *High-Speed Empire: Chinese Expansion and the Future of Southeast Asia*, which tells the story of One Belt One Road, China's trillion-dollar global infrastructure program.

While the US is struggling to fund repairs to aging roads, bridges and railways, China is building new high-speed rail lines, expressways, container ports and airports at breakneck speed. Their efforts extend beyond their borders with the aim of connecting China with half of the globe. Will Doig, the creator of Salon's "Dream City" column, is a journalist living in New York City. He's been an editor at the Open Society Foundation's Next City and The Daily Beast. For this book, he traveled to Thailand, Malaysia, and Laos to give us the first major report on China's ambitious plan, and the huge economic, political, and cultural collisions it's causing. Welcome.

Will Doig

Thanks for having me.

Nick Lemann

First, I should note that, you know, we publish a range of authors at Columbia Global Reports. Some of them are veterans and some of them are first timers. And you're one of the first timers. This is your first book.

Will Doig

My first book

Nick Lemann

So congratulations on that. Must feel good.

Will Doig

Thank you.

Nick Lemann

And let's start with just telling us how you became aware of this topic and thought it might be worth your first book.

Will Doig

Sure. So several years ago, when I was working for Next City, I was covering urbanization issues in Africa and Asia and taking a lot of reporting trips over there. And this was before One Belt One Road really became a topic. At least in the West, you rarely heard about it. But China was already starting to talk about plans to expand what was becoming a pretty formidable high-speed rail system into other countries beyond its borders.

At the time, it just sounded like such a crazy idea. And one particular part of that idea that I was intrigued by was their concept of extending their rail system beyond their southern border and through Southeast Asia all the way to Singapore. So I just had that idea, I thought, oh, that would make a good book. But it just kind of sat there for quite a while. And then, of course, once President Xi came in, One Belt One Road came in, and it started to have a more global significance. That's when I thought this is really something to explore.

Nick Lemann

There are a bunch of questions I want to ask you. Let's start with just tell us, what is One Belt One Road?

Will Doig

Sure. Excellent question. One Belt One Road is, in its simplest terms, it is a plan on China's part to extend infrastructure and trade throughout much of the world. Asia, Africa, all the way to Europe, doing this through two primary means. One is the Belt, which is the overland network of infrastructure that they plan to extend through railways, highways, airports, energy systems.

And the other one is the Road, which is actually the maritime system, which is a series of sea routes that would go to roughly the same regions of the globe. But really, it's a little bit more complicated than that. I mean, first of all, I wouldn't even call it a plan. It's more of an idea, and it's an idea that China can slot pretty much whatever it wants into. So a lot of One Belt One Road projects were planned well before One Belt One Road was even mentioned. And it's a way to extend Chinese influence and control beyond its own borders. So by that, what I mean is taking control of supply

chains, or getting political influence in other countries, things like that.

And so while it might seem like an infrastructure plan and it might seem like an economic plan, I would argue that it's actually more of a foreign policy plan. And at this point, almost inseparable from China's foreign policy just as a whole.

Nick Lemann

Let's just go back for a minute, and then I'll go forward again to the to One Belt One Road. You'll know why I'm asking this, and it's a trick question that might trip you up, but just – this will be familiar to listeners in New York, it might not be to listeners outside New York. Tell us about the Second Avenue subway line in New York City, which is our most recently opened subway.

Will Doig

The Second Avenue Subway. I wish there was more to say about it. So that's a plan that's been in the works for between 30 and 100 years, depending on how you want to start clocking it. But it basically extended one subway line somewhere around midtown Manhattan up to 96th, I believe it's 96th Street on the Upper East Side. I think it contains four or five stops, something like that. And it's considered one of the biggest expansions of New York City's subway in a generation.

Nick Lemann

And construction took how long, and cost how much? Do you remember?

Will Doig

Oh, gosh.

Nick Lemann

Many years, right?

Will Doig

Well, it was many years and it was billions. And I can tell you that it's one of the most expensive subway lines ever built in the world, if not the most expensive.

Nick Lemann

And New Yorkers are very ecstatic about having five extra subway stops now that it's open finally. The reason I'm asking, of course, is you open the book by describing the building of the Shanghai subway line. So just by way of contrast, tell us about that.

Will Doig

Sure. So it was in the early nineties when Shanghai started talking about building a subway. And of course, they needed loans. And so they went to the World Bank. And the World Bank essentially scolded them for even coming up with this idea, saying that a city like Shanghai had no business building a subway, they could do fine with more busses or even more bicycles.

And, you know, in the World Bank's defense at the time, this was a city with, I think, you know, not even 200,000 motor vehicles, and most of those were delivery trucks. Most people got around on bicycles. It was a fairly poor city, and China as a country was a very poor country at the time.

And then at last Shanghai decided to build itself a subway anyway. Transportation firms from many countries all over the world bid for the project, and they built it extremely quickly and kind of shocked the world with their infrastructure building prowess. I think it was the first time that the world really became aware of what China can do when it comes to building things like railways.

And today the Shanghai subway is the longest subway system in the world, or I should say largest. And nobody's surprised when China does stuff like that anymore. And I think that they're just going to keep doing it more and more.

Nick Lemann

So I guess the question is, what's their secret? In other words, you know, for the class I teach, we were rereading recently Jacob Riis' book, *How the Other Half Lives*. Have you read that?

Will Doig

Sure.

Nick Lemann

Set in New York City, it came out in 1890, late 1880s. At that point, Manhattan

was the megacity of the world, and Lower Manhattan had the highest population density on the surface of the Earth. And I think at the time people would have said, “Wow, New York has just built a very extensive subway system quite quickly. It’s so impressive. How did they do it?”

And part of the answer was that all the subway lines were built by private companies. It wasn’t a government enterprise at all. But that’s not the case exactly in China. So at this point in history, we Americans seem incredibly slow, veering on unable to do anything like this. And China seems unstoppable, almost. Incredibly adept. What’s their secret? How do they do it?

Will Doig

Well, it’s interesting that you make that comparison, because I think it’s important to remember that when New York built its subway system, the United States was a developing country. And this is what developing countries that are destined for great power do.

China’s like, as you note, China’s railways are not being built by private corporations. They’re being built by the government. Although in China, the line between government and private enterprise is a lot blurrier than it is here. I think that – a couple of things. One, I think China desperately needed this infrastructure. For a rising superpower, China had a startlingly sparse amount of infrastructure. Just a few years ago, it was virtually impossible to get around in the interior of the country, and I’m not just talking about trains. Although they had an extensive train network, it had been built quite a while ago. It was fairly rickety. Now they have highways, high-speed rail, everything to go everywhere. And that’s what a country that has China’s ambitions needs. So I think that they saw the need for it.

But then I think they also, at the same time, see it as economic stimulus. And the government has used infrastructure building as a way to catalyze China’s incredible growth over the last ten, 20 years. The United States, there’s probably a lot of different reasons for it, I think just the overarching one is that we don’t have the appetite for it the way that we used to.

You know, the political winds do not favor public spending, and we’re a very divided country, politically. It’s hard to get these things built in a country that’s divided, and it’s hard to get them built in a country that, frankly, where everybody has a voice at the table. China doesn’t have to worry about that. They can just build pretty much what they want. That being said, once they try to build those same pieces of

infrastructure in countries beyond their borders, I think that they are finding things are not quite that easy. And that is part of what I try to get into in the book.

Nick Lemann

Right. Well, we'll get into that in a second, because that's one of the most interesting and original parts of the book, and vivid. But before we get to that, just generally on China, you know, if you go back to Nixon's trip to China and the first kind of opening up and modernization, which I'm old enough to remember watching from the sidelines at least, the feeling among many Americans was that these were first steps – including China's adoption of free market mechanisms – on the way to its becoming a US-like society that would become also not only more capitalist but more democratic politically, opening itself up to free speech and free press and so on. The picture looks pretty different now. So what's the Chinese model as it's developed?

Will Doig

Well, I think that the Chinese model continues to develop. And I think just over the last weeks and months, we've seen a lot of evidence of that. And it's been interesting to see China go in exactly the opposite direction – as you note – I think a lot of people thought that it would.

You know, it's funny. In the West, we see economies like China's and we think, oh, well, they're going to democratize. I mean, they have to. That's what happens. You become a liberal economy and then you become a democratic society. In a funny way, being a more authoritarian society is what has helped China's growth so much. And I think that once you sync up incredible capitalistic growth with an authoritarian government, if you can get those two things running parallel, you can get the kind of explosive growth that we could never really achieve in a country that's run like ours.

So I think that's one reason why it maybe hasn't gone in that direction. And then another reason is purely President Xi Jinping's vision for the country and his rallying the Communist Party and the people of China behind him. You know, he sees this as a moment when China can really ascend not just economically, but geopolitically. I think he sees China as the future dominant, you know, sphere of influence in Asia. And he is not content to simply keep China on the track of a "peaceful rise," as it used to be called, and he is more interested in flexing Chinese muscle.

And those two things are highly interrelated. Once you have a global economy and interest to protect all over the world, you really need to become a world player. You

need to strengthen your military, you need to control supply chains. And I think that he realizes that. And I think that that's why we are seeing China trend in a more authoritarian direction now.

Nick Lemann

So what's the geopolitical vision? You used the word "empire" in the title of your book. Do we is this going to be like the Roman Empire? Like the British Empire? Empire in what sense? And how big?

Will Doig

So when I say that One Belt One Road is essentially a stand-in for Chinese foreign policy, what I mean by that is that China's a somewhat unique country in that, unlike most countries, it doesn't easily form alliances. It's more interested in forming partnerships. And those partnerships are usually buttressed by trade and mutual interests.

And so the reason I call the book High-Speed Empire is I think that China's infrastructure build-out and its, you know, global ambitions are related on the basis of those sorts of relationships, not on traditional alliance building. So I think that China's – I think that what we're seeing when they partner with these other countries, almost all of which are weaker than China, is its attempt to expand its influence globally, much as an empire might. But through the means of trade, of supply chains, of infrastructure building and of exerting influence on these other countries through those kinds of projects.

Nick Lemann

And again, when we say empire, do we mean influence? Do we mean control? What do we mean exactly? Where is this all going ultimately?

Will Doig

Sure. I think it's a bit of a mix. And I wouldn't rule out the idea that China wants to control some of these countries. I mean, some of these projects are being built, as I said, in countries that are much weaker than China, and they're being built with loans from China. I mean, it's a bit like a drug addict borrowing money from his dealer so that he can buy more drugs.

So, say, take the case of Laos. I mean, China is loaning Laos an enormous amount of

money, billions, to build this high-speed railway through Laos into Southeast Asia. So for China, of course, this is a project that gets them into Southeast Asia, which helps fulfill their One Belt One Road ambitions. And Laos, it turns them from what they call a landlocked into a land-linked country.

So it sounds good for both sides, but it's also going to put Laos into a position that some other countries have found themselves in with Chinese loans, where they really find themselves beholden to almost anything that China wants. And once you get a country like Laos that can't really repay its loans to China, it becomes somewhat of you could call it a client state, a vassal state that really kind of has to bend to China's will.

So when I say empire, I do mean control to a certain degree, but I mean control through those sorts of mechanisms. Not, you know, at the tip of a bayonet, not that type of control.

Nick Lemann

So now let's get into the specific story you tell in this book. Tell us about the vision behind the Chinese rail line in Southeast Asia. Why did they want to do this? And let's get into some of the specifics of it.

Will Doig

Sure. First of all, I'm not sure even China could give you a straight answer to that question. But I think that if you had to pick a reason, it's to give China a foothold in Southeast Asia. China has a lot of interest in Southeast Asia. It has a lot of people in Southeast Asia. Businesses, things that it's built. It has communities there. It has a very large expat population there. But what it doesn't really have is sort of a link to it, like a hard link.

Now, when we talk about building a railway from China to Singapore, we're not really talking about somebody getting on a train in Kunming, China, and then taking it all the way down to Singapore. What we're talking about is a series of trunklines and branches and things like that, that sort of spread out into Southeast Asia. And each of those has its own purpose, depending on the country you're talking about.

A lot of them are about access to the sea. China is very interested in gaining access to the sea through Southeast Asia. As it is, to sail westward from China, you have to leave the eastern coast of China, sail southward, and then go up through the Malacca Strait, which, as is often discussed, is a big chokehold for Chinese trade.

Getting control of Southeast Asian seaports essentially gives China a west coast or a California, as it sometimes said.

It's also about, you know, actually creating real estate. I mean, China is in the real estate building business, that's what they do. And so they have overbuilt at home, and now they're looking for other places where they can pour their concrete. And so urbanization along the rail line, as a rail line tends to do, is a big goal of China's as well.

So it depends on where you're talking about. I think they have a lot of different interests in building a rail line. And so that's, I think, why the project seems so piecemeal and a little bit strange, to be honest, because when you look at it, you think, well, who needs a railway from China to Singapore? But it's not really about the railway, it's about using the railway as a tool to achieve means that really have nothing to do with transportation a lot of the time.

Nick Lemann

So I left this book, and I hope this is taking the right thing from it, thinking maybe that China is not so all-powerful and maybe it will run into, you know – not to make a pun – roadblocks in this ambition and maybe other ambitions. Did you feel that way as a result of your reporting?

Will Doig

I did. Even I, when I went into this project, thought, you know, China's unstoppable, China can do anything. And I think by the time I was finished with the reporting, I thought, hmm, maybe China's unstoppable. You know, I think that the One Belt One Road backlash is in full swing. I mean, if you Google News search One Belt One Road, you just get headlines questioning everything from whether it could even work, to is that the beginning of the end of China? I think last week's Washington Post headline was, is China making trillion-dollar mistake? And Westerners, I think, are very eager to find signs of Chinese fallibility. You know, it's the kind of thing that we like to hear because it makes us feel better about ourselves.

I think that they're having a lot more trouble than they thought they would, because as we were talking about earlier, when they built their high-speed rail system at home, it was very easy. It's easy to build things in China. But when you get into countries outside of your borders, especially countries in a place like Southeast Asia, which is a very – it's a politically churning region filled with cultural differences, economic upheavals, corruption, poverty, dysfunction – and you try to build a

project in there and literally get countries into a line to make that project work, you run into a lot of problems that I think even Beijing probably didn't foresee. It's interesting the things that made Southeast Asia so accessible for China – poverty, corruption, dysfunction – I think now that China is there, are the same things that are really knocking this project back on its heels.

Nick Lemann

So let's get into some of the specifics of this, some of the stories you tell in the book and just, you know, working our way, perhaps south from China to Singapore, country by country. Tell us some of what you found in the way of difficulties for this project.

Will Doig

Sure. So I think it's interesting that each country really has thrown up its own unique roadblock to China. So let's start with Laos, that's the first country below China's southern border. It's one of the poorest countries in the world, and it desperately needs infrastructure development.

It's also a very corrupt country. And China essentially gained entry into Laos through deals with its government. Laos likes to make deals with other countries where it gives up a little bit of its own land in exchange for some infrastructure building. And that's exactly what happened with this project.

So for Laos, and it's no coincidence, by the way, that Laos is the country of all the countries in Southeast Asia, where the project has made the most progress, because it's the easiest country for China to manipulate, I would say. So in Laos, though, the problem has really been – it's a mix of terrain, I would say. Laos is an incredibly mountainous country in the north. It's essentially the foothills of the Himalayas.

My reporting took me up to the border of Laos and China, which is an extremely remote region where it would be hard to imagine a less hospitable terrain for a railway. And that's why the railway that they're building in Laos contains mostly bridges and tunnels. So it's an incredible feat of engineering, China's trying to deal with that. And also a pretty dysfunctional country that, while that has helped China gain entry, has made things more difficult now that they're there.

So that's what's giving them difficulties in Laos. If you follow it further south, you would get to Thailand. Thailand's an interesting case right now because they had a coup a few years ago. It's under the control of a military government. And that

military government is very eager to keep the economy running because as everyone knows, military governments, you know, they do okay until the economy slides southward. But once people aren't, you know, making money anymore, they start to grow weary of authoritarianism.

And so I think what's happened in Thailand is China is dealing with a government that kind of wants the railway for its own economic stimulus purposes, but doesn't actually need a railway. Thailand doesn't need this railway at all. And so that has become a game of political football in Thailand where they make a deal, they sign a memorandum of understanding, they start to build something, then they stop because the government changes its mind.

So really, in Thailand, it's been more of a political problem than anything else. And then you go south to Malaysia, which before Singapore is the last country that the railway would run through. And in Malaysia, they've been dealing with a government that China essentially has bailed out economically.

So without getting too much into the weeds on it, the prime minister of Malaysia was embroiled in a very expensive scandal called 1MDB, in which he is alleged to have essentially embezzled billions of dollars. And China essentially bailed out the prime minister by purchasing a large piece of real estate in Malaysia. So they've achieved that. But at the same time, they are dealing with a government in Malaysia that is, you know, again, doesn't really need this railway. It's accommodating China for reasons that have nothing to do with actual infrastructure needs.

And so because of that, it's been hard for China to actually get the project off of the ground there. And then Singapore, it's part of the story, but not entirely. That would be the terminus of the railway. But Singapore is a rich country, it really doesn't need China's help with this sort of thing, except to maybe hire China to build its own railway. But yeah, each country has produced its own series of problems for China, and China is dealing with those piecemeal with mixed results, depending on which one you're talking about.

Nick Lemann

So what is the status of the project as we're sitting here talking today? And where do you think it's going to go in the future?

Will Doig

So the status is, in Laos it's actually being built. I mean, if you go to Laos, you can

see tunnels being dug, you can see tracks on the ground. And that has all happened within the last year or so. It's very new and it's moving fairly quickly.

Once you get past Laos, there's really not much to speak of. Thailand, It's a lot of talk. In Malaysia, they're still trying to cut the deal to, you know, create the terminal in Kuala Lumpur. I would say that this project at this point exists more in press releases, very enthusiastic press releases that Beijing likes to issue about it, and in ceremonial ground breakings that it often holds in different countries.

I think it's more of an aspiration right now, if nothing else. And that's a really important – you know, if it's not moving forward quickly, that is a really important signal for China's larger One Belt One Road ambitions, because this is their first big, big attempt to build a single piece of the One Belt One Road infrastructure beyond its own borders. And I would say it's not going nearly as well as they had hoped.

Nick Lemann

Just for interest. You know, this is not a book that reads like a public policy analysis. It's a wonderful travelog and it's fun to read. Could you just share with us some of the interesting, couple of the interesting places, most interesting places and people you encountered on your travels as a reporter?

Will Doig

Yes, I would have to say Laos was, and especially the northern region of Laos, which as I said is incredibly remote, was some of the most interesting. In part because we're talking about a place where not only have most people never ridden on a train, they've never even seen a train. This is a place where it's basically like stepping back in time about a thousand years.

But it's also interesting because while it is like stepping back in time, you can feel and see the spillover of the Chinese economy just kind of pouring across the border. So when you get to the northernmost city in Laos, which is called Boten, which is where the train would enter into Laos, that is essentially a city that has a very strange history that is completely intertwined with China.

So to give you the abbreviated version of it, many years ago – by many, I mean in the early 2000s – China built what was essentially a gambling town in the Lao jungle. Why do they do it in Laos? Because gambling is illegal in China. So they built it right on the border and Chinese tourists could cross the border and go into Laos and they could gamble.

And essentially the entire city was Chinese, but it was in Laos. It was in Laos, but it was it was run by China. And by run, I mean, you know, the utilities were Chinese run. The police were on China's payroll. The, you know, everything from the electrical sockets to the clocks on the wall to the currency used to buy things, everything was Chinese. And everybody who worked there was Chinese. And everybody who visited there was Chinese.

They essentially created this city in Laos and turned it into a small piece of China. And I find that very interesting because it's not only, you know, sort of a quirky, strange footnote in all this hyperactive Chinese development, but it really says something about what China sees as negotiable national sovereignty. I mean, they really cut a deal with the government of Laos and said, we want to make this little piece a part of China, and that's what they did.

And, you know, since then, they abandoned the city eventually. It was a casino town that got taken over by gangsters and a lot of people started – crime was rampant and there were some deaths, and the Chinese government freaked out a little bit and shut down the whole project.

But now they're opening it up again so they can bring the railway through there. And they still do effectively have control of it. And that type of control, it's really what they are, you know, hoping for going forward with this project. They want to move into countries and sort of control a piece of them, and they effectively will with this railway.

So I think, you know, it says a lot about what could happen with other countries as far as other Chinese cities springing up along the line, how much control China might have over them. But I would say yeah, Boten, Laos, that was one of the strangest places I've ever been.

Nick Lemann

It reads that way in the book. You know, you give us a very vivid sense of problems China can encounter externally. I'm curious if you have a take on this internally as China modernizes, at least in the sense of economic prosperity. Would you see the population becoming less willing to tolerate authoritarianism?

Will Doig

It's hard to say. I mean, you would think so, but at the same time, you know,

nationalism in China makes nationalism in the US look like nothing. I mean, it's an incredibly nationalistic society and that nationalism is both encouraged and leveraged by the Communist Party, because the Communist Party knows that the more it has the public sort of rallying behind it, the more it can do the sorts of things that it wants to do, some of which cause short-term pain.

So I think that it's a mistake to think, again, as we were talking about earlier with democratization, that, you know, modernization equals, you know, more, I don't know, more rights or more opening up on a societal level. I do think that China, where Chinese society is really opening up, is in its sort of like outward expansion.

So where it was once a fairly inward place, you know, now you see Chinese expats really moving out, you know, throughout the world, and really joining the world. Joining the world in the sense that they're moving to other countries, but often moving to those countries and then creating their own enclaves.

So one of the places that I visit in the book is this, it's essentially a Chinese city called Forest City, that's being developed on a manmade island off the coast of Malaysia. And a Chinese developer is building the entire thing. It has room for 700,000 people. It has hospitals, schools, everything you would need in a regular city. And it is very explicitly marketed towards mainland Chinese.

And so when you go to visit the city, as I did, and you go in to say, one of the model apartments in the sales showroom, there's a TV screen on the wall and it has pictures of Chinese families saying things like, "We love living in Forrest City. It's almost like we never left China." And I talked to a lot of people while I was over there who said, you know, there are – one particular businessman, foreign businessman who is working over there said to me, you know, there's a lot of Chinese who don't want to live in China, but they want to live in, quote-unquote, China.

And there's a lot of good reasons for that. Malaysia is a better place to live in a lot of ways. The air is cleaner, the food is safer, they can get better education for their children. So while there is a closing of society at home, I think in an interesting way there is a more, a broader opening of Chinese society abroad where the, you know, the expat community is really forming its own spaces and deciding what they want to do on their own.

Nick Lemann

Well, the book is just a fascinating look at really both at the extent of China's

expansionist dreams with a very vivid particular set of examples. And at the same time, it sort of unsettles some of the assumptions of the moment, which are, as you noted, that China can do anything it wants and is all powerful. So it's quite original in both these ways. And thank you for writing it, and thanks for joining our show. If people who are listening want to find you online, where should they look?

Will Doig

You can find me at [@will_doig](#) on Twitter.

Nick Lemann

And Doig is D-o-i-g.

Will Doig

D-o-i-g. You can also find me at [WillDoig.com](#).

Nick Lemann

And that's a wrap for season one of our podcast. We hope you've enjoyed the first eight episodes of Underreported from Columbia Global Reports. We'll be back in your feed this August with an exciting fall lineup from authors Bethany McLean, John Judis and Tim Wu.

Until then, here's one last-minute reminder to write a review if you have something to say about the show. This lets us know your thoughts and also helps others discover our show on iTunes.

And please stay in touch. You'll find all of our social profiles and much more at [globalreports.columbia.edu](#). That's globalreports, all one word, .columbia.edu. Underreported is a production of Columbia Global Reports. Our digital producer, who produces this podcast is Miranda Sita. Our editor is Jimmy So and our publisher is Camille McDuffie. A special thank you to Columbia Journalism School, where we record the show, and to Airiayana Sullivan and AJ Mangone, our studio technicians. I'm Nick Lemann. Thank you for listening to Underreported.