

The Belt and Road Initiative and Islamic Trade Networks: Chinese Traders and Economic Transformation in Morocco

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Abstract: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a strategic effort to revive the historic Silk Road by enhancing economic connectivity, investment flows, and global trade cooperation. In Morocco, the implementation of the BRI, reinforced by the visa-free policy granted to Chinese nationals, has significantly increased the mobility of Chinese traders and investors, particularly in Derb Omar, Casablanca's largest commercial hub. This study aims to examine the influence of the BRI on the commercial activities of Chinese traders in Derb Omar and to analyze the socio-economic dynamics emerging from their interactions with local communities. Employing a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, the study utilizes document-based analysis drawing upon academic literature, policy reports, and relevant scholarly publications. The findings indicate that the BRI and visa liberalization policies have stimulated trade activities, investment flows, and local economic growth through the expansion of transnational trade networks, job creation, and improved access to affordable imported goods. Nevertheless, the growing presence of Chinese traders has also generated challenges, including intensified market competition, limited socio-cultural integration, and concerns regarding economic justice for local merchants. This study contributes to the fields of international political economy, transnational migration studies, and Islamic economics by demonstrating how global economic initiatives shape local commercial spaces while highlighting the importance of promoting justice, market equilibrium, and public welfare (maslahah) in cross-cultural trade relations.

Keywords: Belt and Initiative (BRI), Road Islamic Trade Networks, Chinese Diaspora, Transnational Trade, Morocco

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Abstrak: Inisiatif Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) yang digagas China merupakan upaya menghidupkan kembali jalur perdagangan Jalur Sutra melalui penguatan konektivitas ekonomi, investasi, dan kerja sama perdagangan global. Implementasi BRI di Maroko, yang diperkuat oleh kebijakan bebas visa bagi warga negara China, telah meningkatkan mobilitas pedagang dan investor China, khususnya di kawasan Derb Omar, Casablanca, sebagai pusat perdagangan terbesar di negara tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh BRI terhadap aktivitas perdagangan pedagang China di Derb Omar serta mengkaji dinamika sosial-ekonomi yang muncul antara pedagang China dan masyarakat lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif melalui studi dokumentasi yang bersumber dari literatur akademik, laporan kebijakan, dan berbagai publikasi terkait. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa BRI dan kebijakan bebas visa telah mendorong peningkatan aktivitas perdagangan, investasi, dan pertumbuhan ekonomi lokal melalui perluasan jaringan perdagangan transnasional, penciptaan lapangan kerja, serta peningkatan akses terhadap barang impor yang lebih terjangkau. Namun demikian, kehadiran pedagang China juga memunculkan tantangan berupa persaingan usaha yang semakin ketat, keterbatasan integrasi sosial-budaya, dan isu keadilan ekonomi bagi pedagang lokal. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian ekonomi politik internasional, migrasi transnasional, dan ekonomi Islam dengan menunjukkan bagaimana inisiatif ekonomi global memengaruhi ruang perdagangan lokal serta pentingnya penerapan prinsip keadilan, keseimbangan pasar, dan kemaslahatan dalam hubungan perdagangan lintas budaya.

Kata kunci: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), jaringan perdagangan Islam, diaspora China, perdagangan transnasional, Maroko.

Introduction

The Silk Road has been known for thousands of years as a network traversed by merchants from various parts of the world through both land and maritime routes. Historically, it played an important role not only in economic exchange but also in cultural interaction and the spread of religion across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The term “Silk Road” was first introduced in the nineteenth century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to describe the trade routes connecting China with the Roman Empire. Over

time, the Silk Road became a symbol of interregional connectivity and international trade.¹

Since 2013, China has attempted to revive the historical Silk Road through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced by President Xi Jinping. The BRI consists of two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.² Through this initiative, China aims to strengthen infrastructure development, improve transportation and communication networks, and enhance economic cooperation among participating countries. Currently, more than 151 countries are affiliated with the BRI, including Morocco, which occupies a strategic geographical position connecting Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.³

Morocco has become one of the important partners in the BRI due to its strategic ports, infrastructure projects, and growing economic relations with China. Chinese investment in projects such as Tangier Tech City and railway development demonstrates China's increasing economic presence in Morocco. In addition, the visa exemption policy introduced after King Mohammed VI's visit to Beijing in 2016 significantly increased the number of Chinese visitors and migrants in Morocco. Many Chinese traders and entrepreneurs have settled in Derb Omar, Casablanca's largest commercial district, due to its proximity to the port and its importance in regional trade distribution.⁴

However, the increasing presence of Chinese migrants and businesses in Derb Omar has created various social and economic dynamics among local traders and communities. Competition in trade, cultural differences, language barriers, and changing business patterns have become increasingly visible. Despite the growing importance of Chinese migration in Morocco under the BRI framework, studies specifically examining the impact of Chinese traders in Derb Omar remain limited. Most discussions of the BRI focus primarily on

¹ Hanifah, N. "Mengkaji Pola Perdagangan Jalur Sutra." *At-Tahdzib: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Muamalah* 4, no. 2 (2016): 2–7.

² Juani, M. K. *Transformasi Jalur Sutra China Era Xi Jinping Tahun 2012–2018*.

³ Zreik, M. *The Belt and Road Initiative and Morocco: Opportunities and Challenges for Strengthening Economic Relations with China*. Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 2024.

⁴ Taing, Jean-Pierre. *La diaspora chinoise à la croisée des nouvelles routes de la soie : le cas du Maroc*. PhD diss., Aix-Marseille Université, 2023.

infrastructure development and state-level economic cooperation rather than the local socio-economic consequences experienced by communities in commercial districts.

Several previous studies have discussed the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese migration in Africa. First, research by Deborah Brautigam highlights the expansion of Chinese economic influence in Africa through infrastructure investment and trade cooperation. Second, studies by Jonathan Fulton examine Morocco's strategic role in China's BRI diplomacy and economic partnerships in North Africa.⁵ Third, research by Emmanuel Ma Mung discusses the mobility and business networks of Chinese migrants in global trading cities.⁶ Nevertheless, these studies pay limited attention to the local dynamics between Chinese traders and Moroccan merchants in Derb Omar, particularly regarding everyday economic competition, adaptation, and social interaction.

Therefore, the originality of this article lies in its focus on the socio-economic dynamics of Chinese migrants in Derb Omar within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Unlike previous studies that mainly analyze macroeconomic policies and international cooperation, this research emphasizes the local experiences, interactions, and challenges faced by both Chinese migrants and Moroccan traders in one of Morocco's most important commercial centers.

This research aims to analyze how the Belt and Road Initiative has influenced Chinese migration and commercial activities in Derb Omar, Casablanca, and to examine the socio-economic dynamics that emerge between Chinese migrants and local communities as a result of these developments.

This study employs a qualitative approach using document-based data collection techniques, data validation techniques, clear primacy sources, framework of analysis, Document study refers to a literature review encompassing academic journals, scholarly articles related to the revitalization

⁵ Fulton, Jonathan. "The Gulf between the Indo-Pacific and the Belt and Road Initiative." *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2018): 175–193.

⁶ Emmanuel Ma Mung. "Chinese Migration and China's Foreign Policy in Africa." *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 4, no. 1 (2008): 91–109.

of the ancient Silk Road within the BRI framework, and its impact on global trade. It also analyzes Moroccan policies in responding to the BRI initiative and provides an overview of the interaction dynamics between Chinese traders and local merchants, as well as local economic growth through the analysis of journalistic reports.

The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive approach through three stages:

1. Data reduction: selecting and filtering relevant information from various sources.
2. Data presentation: organizing the data into thematic categories such as the role of BRI, Chinese traders, local economic impacts, and social dynamics.
3. Conclusion drawing: interpreting and synthesizing the findings to provide a factual and systematic understanding of the relationship between the BRI scheme, social interactions, and its impact on local economic growth.

The Influence of BRI on Trade in Derb Omar

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents China's strategic effort to strengthen bilateral cooperation and expand global economic connectivity. Introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI emphasizes infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and regional integration among participating countries. According to Ekman (2018), the BRI functions as an "open project" characterized by geographical and sectoral expansion, allowing China to deepen economic relations with strategic partner countries.

Within this framework, Morocco occupies an important position due to its strategic location connecting Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Chinese investment in infrastructure, logistics, and trade sectors reflects the broader objectives of the BRI, namely securing trade routes, expanding markets, and strengthening economic partnerships (Carroué, 2018).

The implementation of the BRI has also contributed to the increasing mobility of Chinese migrants and traders. In Morocco, the rise of Chinese commercial activity is particularly visible in Derb Omar, Casablanca's largest

commercial district. Chinese traders mainly engage in wholesale and semi-wholesale businesses by importing manufactured goods directly from China.⁷

From the perspective of international political economy, this development reflects the process of economic globalization in which trade networks, migration, and investment flows become increasingly interconnected.⁸ Chinese traders in Derb Omar function not only as economic actors but also as agents of transnational commercial networks linking Morocco with Chinese production centers.

At the same time, these trading practices can also be analyzed through the framework of Islamic economic principles, particularly because Morocco is a predominantly Muslim society. Islamic economics emphasizes justice (*`adl*), transparency, ethical business conduct, and fair competition in commercial activities. According to Ibn Khaldun and contemporary Islamic economic scholars such as M. Umer Chapra, economic activities should promote social welfare and avoid exploitation, monopoly, and unfair market domination.⁹

In the context of Derb Omar, the presence of Chinese traders creates both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, affordable imported goods increase consumer access to low-cost products and stimulate market activity. On the other hand, intense price competition may create pressure on local traders and raise concerns regarding economic justice and market balance. Therefore, the influence of the BRI on trade in Derb Omar cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of economic growth, but also from the broader perspective of ethical and socially balanced trade practices.¹⁰

The Impact of Visa Exemption on the Increase of Chinese Traders

The Moroccan government's decision to abolish visa requirements for Chinese citizens significantly accelerated the mobility of Chinese tourists, traders, and

⁷ Taing, Jean-Pierre. *La diaspora chinoise à la croisée des nouvelles routes de la soie : le cas du Maroc*. PhD diss., Aix-Marseille Université, 2023.

⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *The Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Global Maritime Trade Flows*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.

⁹ Chapra, M. Umer. *Islam and the Economic Challenge*. Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation and The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992.

¹⁰ Belmekki, H. (2018, May 4). *Derb Omar, stronghold of the Chinese traders of Casablanca*. Francophone Africa & China Series.

entrepreneurs. This policy reflects Morocco's broader strategy to strengthen bilateral relations with China under the BRI framework.

The increase in Chinese migration demonstrates how state policies and international economic cooperation influence patterns of transnational mobility. According to migration network theory, easier mobility encourages the formation of business networks that facilitate further migration and commercial expansion. In this context, visa liberalization not only increased tourism flows but also contributed to the expansion of Chinese commercial activities in major Moroccan cities such as Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakesh.¹¹

From an Islamic economic perspective, the expansion of trade and mobility is generally encouraged as long as commercial activities are conducted ethically and contribute to mutual prosperity (*maslahah*). Islamic trade principles support openness in commerce while emphasizing honesty, fairness, and social responsibility.¹² Therefore, the growing presence of Chinese traders can be interpreted both as an economic opportunity and as a challenge to maintaining fair competition within local markets.¹³

Interaction Between Chinese and Local Traders

The interaction between Chinese and local Moroccan traders in Derb Omar reflects the dynamics of globalization at the local level. Before the arrival of Chinese traders, Derb Omar was primarily dominated by Moroccan merchants from regions such as Fez and Souss. The arrival of Chinese traders in the early 2000s initially generated tension due to increased competition and cultural differences. However, over time, coexistence gradually developed between the two communities.

Social interaction between the two groups remains largely economic and transactional in nature. Chinese traders tend to focus primarily on commercial activities and maintain limited social engagement outside business contexts. This pattern can be understood through the concept of temporary economic

¹¹ Taing, Jean-Pierre. *La diaspora chinoise à la croisée des nouvelles routes de la soie : le cas du Maroc*. PhD diss., Aix-Marseille Université, 2023.

¹² Chapra, M. Umer. *Islam and the Economic Challenge*. Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation and The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992.

¹³ Horesh, Niv. "China and Morocco: Improbable Partners?" *Janus.net e-journal of International Relations* 14 (2023).

migration, in which migrants prioritize profit accumulation over long-term cultural integration.¹⁴

From the perspective of Islamic social ethics, interaction between communities ideally involves not only economic exchange but also mutual understanding (ta'aruf) and social harmony. While the limited interaction between Chinese and local traders may reduce social conflict, it may also restrict deeper cultural integration and social cohesion within the community.

Contribution to Local Economic Growth

The strengthening of Morocco–China relations under the BRI framework has contributed significantly to infrastructure development, trade expansion, and investment growth in Morocco. Chinese involvement in sectors such as transportation, renewable energy, telecommunications, and manufacturing demonstrates the increasing strategic partnership between the two countries.¹⁵ In Derb Omar, Chinese commercial activities contribute to local economic growth by increasing market supply, creating employment opportunities, and expanding access to affordable goods. Local residents benefit through employment opportunities such as translation services, retail assistance, restaurant work, and technical services.¹⁶

From the perspective of development economics, these activities contribute to economic diversification and market expansion.¹⁷ However, Islamic economic principles emphasize that economic development should not focus solely on growth indicators, but also on social justice, equitable distribution, and community welfare. As argued by Islamic economists such as M. Umer Chapra, sustainable development requires balancing economic efficiency with moral responsibility.

¹⁴ Abdel Ghafar, Adel, and Anna Jacobs. "Beijing Strengthens Its Presence in the Maghreb." Brookings Institution, September 9, 2019.

¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *The Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Global Maritime Trade Flows*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.

¹⁶ Ibrahim, Maulana Malik. "Observasi Lapangan di Derb Gellf dan Derb Omar, Casablanca." Field notes, February 12, 2024.

¹⁷ Abodohoui, Alexis, Zhan Su, and Imelda Aurore Da-Silva. "Chinese Investments in Africa: What Have We Learnt?" *Management International / International Management / Gestión Internacional* 22, no. 3 (2018): 129–142.

Therefore, while Chinese investment and trade activities have positively contributed to Morocco's economy, challenges such as unequal competition, dependency on imported goods, and cultural tensions remain important considerations. The long-term success of these economic relations depends on the ability of both communities to maintain ethical, inclusive, and mutually beneficial trade practices.¹⁸

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the revitalization of the modern Silk Road through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly influenced trade activities and economic development in Derb Omar, Casablanca. The findings indicate that the BRI has not only strengthened commercial relations between Morocco and China but has also contributed to broader sectors such as infrastructure development, investment expansion, tourism, transportation, and energy cooperation. The increasing presence of Chinese traders in Derb Omar reflects the growing integration of Morocco into transnational trade networks under the BRI framework.

The study further reveals that the visa exemption policy implemented by the Moroccan government played an important role in increasing the mobility of Chinese tourists, entrepreneurs, and traders. This policy accelerated the growth of Chinese commercial activities in Morocco and contributed to local economic development through increased trade, employment opportunities, and market diversification. At the same time, the study finds that interactions between Chinese and local Moroccan traders remain primarily economic in nature, with limited social and cultural integration.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to discussions in international political economy, migration studies, and Islamic economics. The findings demonstrate how global economic initiatives such as the BRI influence local commercial spaces through migration, trade networks, and investment flows. In addition, this study contributes to Islamic economic discourse by showing that economic cooperation and globalization can create opportunities for growth while simultaneously raising concerns regarding fair competition, economic justice (*'adl*), and social balance within local markets.

¹⁸ Ezzehouany, Imane. "Morocco's Assets: A Strategic Hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Journal of International and Prospective Studies* 1, no. 1 (2025): 43-54.

This study also has several policy implications. First, the Moroccan government should continue maximizing the economic benefits of the BRI while strengthening regulations that protect local traders and ensure fair market competition. Second, policies encouraging cultural exchange, language training, and community engagement between Chinese migrants and local communities could help strengthen social integration and reduce cultural barriers. Third, improving support for local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) would help maintain balanced economic participation within increasingly globalized markets.

Despite these findings, this research remains limited in scope, particularly regarding long-term socio-cultural impacts and comparative economic analysis. Therefore, future research should examine the long-term effects of Chinese economic presence on local business sustainability in Morocco, compare Chinese commercial activities in different Moroccan cities, and explore how Islamic economic principles are applied in cross-cultural trade relations under the BRI framework. Further studies could also investigate perceptions of local Moroccan traders toward Chinese business practices and the extent to which these interactions influence social cohesion and economic inequality in urban commercial centers.

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Author Contributions Statement

Maulana Maik Ibrahim conceived the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

AI Usage Statement

AI tools were used solely for language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to generate core research ideas, conduct analysis, interpret findings, or formulate conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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