



# Exploring the Dissolution of Data Colonialism under the “Belt and Road” Initiative from the Perspective of Marxist World History Theory

Siqi Wan<sup>a</sup>, Hongyu Qi\*

Guangzhou University, School of Politics and Public Education, Guangzhou, 510006, China

<sup>a</sup>wan1721952349@icloud.com

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: laukongnam@foxmail.com

**Abstract.** From the perspective of Marx's theory of world history, data colonization, as the latest form of capital exploitation in the era of digital capitalism, is essentially a new form of oppression and exploitation of developing countries by developed capitalist countries. Developing countries are in the position of sub-users who provide data resources in the entire digitalization chain, while developed countries monopolize and exploit global data resources for their own enrichment. Therefore, the nature of data colonization is destined to be unsustainable, as with transitional capitalism and colonialism in general. The material basis of world history is the change in the mode of production, and the trend of world history is essentially the historical inevitability towards communism. Under these circumstances, in order to achieve the transcendence of the original world market order and the effective dissolution of data colonialism, China has put forward the Belt and Road Initiative, which is an important part of the development of world history and a higher stage of the development of world history. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, we can build a digital community of common destiny, break the monopoly of data interests, realize data justice, and ultimately dissolve data colonialism in a mutually beneficial and win-win manner.

**Keywords:** world history; Belt and Road; neocolonialism; data colonization

## 1 Introduction

In his speech to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed the need to study and practice Marxist Thought on World History, and that "we must examine the development trends and major issues facing the world today from the perspective of world history" (Xi Jinping, 2018). With its profound connotation and broad vision, Marx's Theory of World History provides us with a solid theoretical foundation for interpreting the development of today's world. And looking around the world, with the fourth technological revolution of the 21st century, the wave of digitalization is surging strongly, and humanity is facing a great historical opportunity of global digital development and digital transformation. The whole of humanity

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is moving towards a digital society, and data has become an important factor of production and a strategic resource.

Faced with such a situation, developed countries and transnational corporations have taken control of data resources on a global scale through technological means, exacerbating the inequality in the distribution of data resources and creating a new type of economic dependency based on data collection. This has led to a new form of colonialism that controls the politics, economy and even ideology of other countries in the world, and China, from its own reality, has come up with a new way of global cooperation and win-win situation - "One Belt, One Road" - which is different from the global expansion of Western capitalism after the Second World War. "The Belt and Road Initiative, guided by the four principles of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and understanding, and mutual benefit and win-win", has transcended the original world market order, conformed to the trend of the world's historical development and global needs, and demonstrated the effective elimination of neo-colonialism, especially data colonialism.

## **2 Data Colonization is the Latest Form of Neocolonialism**

Unlike the old colonial-style expansion of capital before the Second World War, which was characterized by direct geographic and territorial control, resource plundering and political domination, neo-colonialism is more likely to extend the influence of capital in the economic and political spheres through non-directly controlled and covert means, such as economic intervention, cultural infiltration and value transformation.

In the age of digital capitalism, the expansion of capital has shifted to the control of data and information resources; this new form of expansion no longer relies on control in the physical realm, but rather influences and controls the economy, society and culture through the collection, processing and use of data by means that are more insidious, more pervasive and more widespread. Data resources have become a new kind of colonial target, with capital controlling and exploiting digital resources through the gratuitous appropriation and use of individual data and the realization of data monopoly through digital platforms. At the same time, through the widespread use of digital platforms, the concept of "data supremacy" has been established as the new religion of the digital age, giving data excessive economic value and social status. This has led to a new kind of data fetishism in society at large, in which the daily lives of individuals are held hostage and capitalized by data.

From the perspective of the global market, capital is carrying out "data colonization" through the monopolization of digital technology, the dumping of digital commodities, the export of digital capital and other means in order to achieve control of the world market at the digital level. Data colonialism is a new type of social order that has emerged under the domination of digital capitalism through the plundering of data resources, the export of digital capital and the dumping of digital commodities. Specifically, some developed countries or transnational corporations have used their technological advantages and market power to collect, analyze and exploit large amounts of data from developing countries or regions in order to gain economic benefits, political

influence and cultural discourse power, thus creating a new type of inequality based on digital technology.

Its historical roots lie in the colonial expansion and hegemony of Western countries, and its practical motivations lie in the economic decline and global competition of Western countries, as well as in the rapid development of data technology and the enormous value of data resources. Ultimately, these means of colonization in the economic and cultural spheres serve the superstructural needs of the advanced Western capitalist countries to maintain their leading and dominant position in the world market.

This new and unjust form of colonial expansion has caused serious damage to the economic development, political security, social stability and cultural diversity of the colonized countries or regions, deprived them of their data sovereignty, right to development and right to discourse, and gained full control over the political spheres of other developing countries, which in turn has exacerbated global digital inequality and injustice.

### **3 The Intrinsic Grasp of Data Colonialism in Marx's Theory of World History**

Marx's world historical theory refers to the theoretical system in which Marx, on the basis of his critical inheritance of Hegel's world historical theory, reveals the laws and tendencies of the formation, development and change of world history through his profound analyses of the capitalist mode of production and the world market. Marx's complete exposition of the theory of world history is not a special work, but is mainly concentrated in such related works as *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, but this does not diminish the importance of the theory of world history as a guide and reference for the development of the contemporary world. Marx pointed out that "in this process of development, the sphere of activity of the various mutual influences is ever widening, and the primitive isolation of the peoples is ever more completely destroyed by the increasing perfection of the mode of production, by the intercourse, and consequently by the division of labor, which develops spontaneously among the peoples, and history becomes more and more the history of the whole world." [6](Marx and Engels, 1846) Marx's theory of world history emphasizes that world history is determined by the degree of development of the productive forces, the division of labor and the intercourse between peoples, that the development of world history is driven by the development of the productive forces, that the changes in world history are triggered by the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces, and that the goal of world history is the achievement of a communist society.

From the perspective of the productive forces, relations of production and class struggle, Marx's theory of world history reveals that the essence of data colonialism is a completely new form of modern capitalist expansion, a new type of exploitation and oppression of developing countries and regions in the era of digital capitalism, perpetrated by the developed countries of capitalism and their representatives of interests in global expansion - the transnational corporations - in order to maintain their dominant

position in the global market and reap more excessive profits. It is a new type of exploitation and oppression of developing countries and regions in the era of digital capitalism, perpetrated by the developed countries of capitalism and their representatives of interests in global expansion - the transnational corporations - in order to maintain their dominant position in the global market and reap more excessive profits. It is a new form of exploitation and oppression of developing countries and regions in the era of digital capitalism, in order to maintain their dominant position in the global market and make more excessive profits. Data colonialism follows the logic of the proliferation and expansion of capital, and its essence is not fundamentally different from historical colonialism.

### **3.1 Data Colonialism is the New Hidden Form of Modern Capitalist Expansion**

In the context of digital capitalism, global relations of production have undergone a profound reorganization, with data becoming a new type of productivity factor. The advancement of technology has rendered the collection, processing and utilization of data a pivotal aspect of contemporary society. Developed countries and transnational corporations have leveraged their sophisticated data technologies to exert control and exploit global data resources, thereby enhancing their own productivity and facilitating the further expansion of capital.

In particular, this new type of production relations has enabled developed countries to rapidly accumulate and concentrate digital capital through their technological and market advantages. In the context of the world market, a new type of productive and exploitative relationship has emerged in which developed capitalist countries and transnational corporations hold the data resources, while developing countries provide the data resources and become sub-users. For instance, technology giants from developed countries, such as Google, Amazon and Facebook, collect a considerable amount of user data from developing countries through their globalized platforms. This data is used to improve their services and increase advertising revenue, while developing countries derive only a minimal economic benefit from it. Consequently, these new relations of production exacerbate global inequality.

The phenomenon of data colonialism has served to exacerbate the economic and technological dependence of developing countries on developed countries, particularly in terms of data control and the distribution of economic benefits. In India, despite a large internet user base and a wealth of data resources, the lack of advanced computing technologies and platforms has meant that India's data resources are mainly used by foreign technology companies, making it difficult for India to extract the economic value it deserves from them. This dependence puts developing countries in a weak position in the new division of labor system of the global data economy. As developed capitalist countries monopolize control of data resources and the lion's share of the profits, developing countries are unable to access the true value of data, further exacerbating global inequality. Developed countries not only reap excessive profits from data control, but also influence developing countries in terms of technical standards and data policies to consolidate their dominant position in the global data economy.

In the new context, data is not only a means of production, but also a tool of control and surveillance for capitalists. The collection of data allows capitalists to manage and control workers more closely. This is achieved by monitoring workers' work behavior and production data, which enables firms to track the progress of production in real time, assess employee performance, and even prejudice employee behavior. This pervasive surveillance not only enhances production efficiency but also significantly diminishes the autonomy of workers, intensifies their occupational stress, and reinforces capital's control over labor.

### **3.2 The Colonization of Data Hinders the Course of World History**

Marx pointed out that colonialism and the colonialists themselves "will neither emancipate the masses of the people nor radically improve their social conditions, for both are determined not only by the development of the productive forces, but also by whether the productive forces are owned by the people or not." [5](Marx, 1853). From a materialist historical perspective, while data colonialism is a new form of extension of the capitalist mode of production that objectively contributes to the development of world history and the productive forces in the digital age, it is itself contrary to the general trend that world history is moving in a more just and balanced direction.

First, data colonialism has promoted technological innovation and global informatization, but this progress has been concentrated mainly in the hands of the capitalist developed countries and large transnational corporations, which, instead of enabling the countries of the world to enjoy equal rights to digital development, has exacerbated the global digital divide, with developing countries unable to fully benefit from these digital innovations due to lack of control over data resources and technology. In the long run, data colonialism's unequal access to technology and information hinders the ability to innovate and share knowledge globally, limiting the progress of world history towards fairness, justice and inclusive development;

Second, while data colonialism has strengthened the integration of the global economy, its main manifestation is the economic exploitation of developing countries by developed countries and transnational corporations. The new system of division of labor in the data economy has not changed the nature of capitalist relations of production, namely the bourgeoisie's monopoly of the means of production and its reliance on the exploitation of the proletariat for surplus profits. The unequal distribution of data economy resources and benefits of the new global data economy division of labor system dominated by developed capitalist countries and transnational corporations, followed by the economic dependency and exploitative nature of the global data economy, undermine the healthy development of the global data economy, restrict the economic autonomy and innovation capacity of developing countries, and greatly hinder the transformation of world history towards a more balanced development model.

The critical understanding of data colonialism in Marx's theory of world history shows that the scientific and technological progress and the spread of digital technology brought about by data colonialism have indeed contributed to the development of world history to a certain extent, but due to the exploitative essence behind data colonialism, these advances have not been transformed into opportunities for global sharing and

equal development in the true sense of the word, and have not led to the improvement of the living standards of the world's people and satisfied the development needs of the world's people; On the contrary, they have aggravated inequality and confrontation among the countries of the world, undermined the sovereignty and security of the countries of the world and threatened their development and interests, thus sowing the seeds for the transformation of world history.

## **4 Marx's Theory of World History Points to the Basic Direction of Dissolving Data Colonization**

The emergence and development of capitalism ushered in world history, but due to the endogenous contradictions in its own development and its unequal basis of expansion, capitalism was unable to solve its own chronic problems and thus failed to bring world history to an end. As world history continues to advance, capitalism and its associated unequal model of expansion are increasingly being questioned, and people are beginning to seek a new paradigm of global development that is more open and equitable, which is an inevitable trend in the development of world history. The historical limits and unsustainability of capitalism's global expansion suggest that the future global development paradigm should be more egalitarian and inclusive, capable of ensuring that the fruits of development are shared by all countries and regions on the basis of mutual respect and equality.

### **4.1 The Dissolution of Data Colonization is an Inevitable Condition for a More Balanced and Just Development of the World**

Data colonialism, as a new form of economic control and political manipulation by developed countries against developing countries, has a distinctive threefold character: economic control, political manipulation and cultural domination.

Data colonialism uses technology and data as tools, with multinational technology companies accumulating wealth and power globally by controlling the flow of data and data processing, while developing countries often become data providers and henceforth data colonies. The lack of control by colonized countries over their own data creates a new kind of dependency that not only deprives colonized countries of their data sovereignty, but also poses a serious threat to the economic independence and political autonomy of colonized countries. At a time when the global economy is increasingly dependent on data and information technology, data colonialism has exacerbated international inequality and widened the development gap between the North and the South, not only posing a serious challenge to global security and stability, but also becoming a major source of instability in international relations. Against this backdrop, the elimination of data colonialism is not only an inevitable choice for safeguarding international justice and the sovereignty of all countries, but also a key step towards the realization of a community of human destiny and the establishment of a new type of global multilateral cooperation and the reconstruction of the international order. Cracking the expansion code of data colonialism is an inevitable requirement for safeguarding the

sovereignty and autonomous development rights of all countries, and for advancing the international community's progress towards more equitable and just development.

#### **4.2 Ending Data Colonization Requires Building a Better Global Data Governance System and Mechanism**

Data inequality is the root cause of the phenomenon of data colonization. In the framework of data colonization, developed countries collect and control data through unequal power relations and, in the name of the state or large multinational corporations, use technological and market dominance to collect and use the data of other countries, thus undermining the ability of countries to control and manage their own data and violating the autonomy of each country over its own data, data sovereignty. Data sovereignty. At the same time, the data of colonized countries has been illegally accessed and misused by developed countries, creating a wide range of cybersecurity threats at the national level. By controlling the collection, processing and use of data, developed countries and large multinational corporations have reaped huge economic benefits and excessive profits, while developing countries are often unable to make full use of their own data resources, which is reflected not only in the inequality of economic benefits, but also in the inequality of access to and use of data. Many developed countries and multinational corporations have accumulated large amounts of data on digital platforms, but have restricted access to and sharing of data in order to maintain their monopoly in the global data market, which naturally hinders the circulation and open sharing of data among themselves, and thus impacts.

Therefore, the key to eliminating data colonialism lies in the establishment of a global data governance framework based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit, win-win and shared governance, where countries must cooperate in formulating and enforcing international data laws and regulations to ensure fair use and security of data, and to prevent data misuse and cross-border data theft; and in the establishment of a special international institution responsible for coordinating and managing global data affairs to ensure equal rights and responsibilities of all countries in data governance. At the same time, technology transfer and resource sharing should be promoted so that developing countries can acquire advanced data technology and management experience, enhance their data processing and use capacity to achieve the fundamental goals of data sovereignty, data security, data equity and data sharing, and build a data governance system and mechanism that meets the interests and needs of all countries.

### **5 Practical Paths to Dissolve Data Colonialism on Belt and Road**

It is true that capitalism is indispensable to the formation and development of world history, and although data colonialism has initially achieved the spread of global digitalization and promoted the development of world history, due to its inherent exploitative and oppressive nature, data colonialism is incapable of realizing the vision of a future in which all the people of the world enjoy adequate development. The Belt and

Road Initiative is also a historical presence in the world that directly responds to the phenomenon of data colonialism and proposes an effective solution to the current state of global digital inequality.

### **5.1 Solving the Dilemma of Digital Alienation by Building a Digital Community of Destiny**

Under the modern capitalist system, data colonialism highlights the global display of capital accumulation and profit maximization, leading to the concentration of capital and 'alienation' between those who control data resources and those who use them. In modern production, the products of workers' labor are not only material, physical products, but also produce a new, virtual, digital commodity of value - data. Under the capitalist mode of production, the means of production and the products of production around the world are all owned by the developed countries. That is to say, although people are constantly producing such new quality productivity, this data is used and appropriated by the developed countries behind the digital platforms, creating countless wealth and value, while the developing countries, as the providers of the data resources, have become secondary users, empty-handed and with nothing to show for it. The more and more valuable data products people produce, the poorer and more alienated they become. Data has become a tool for developed countries to control world markets and reap exorbitant profits, rather than serving their own or the public interest. This inequality and alienation has created profound inequality and injustice in the global marketplace.

Xi Jinping pointed out that innovation is a powerful driving force for development. We should follow the development trend of science and technology, more actively promote scientific and technological exchanges and cooperation, and join hands to create an open, fair, equitable and non-discriminatory environment for scientific and technological development. We should accelerate the digital transformation and narrow the digital divide. [3] In June 2018, the Belt and Road Digital Economy Alliance was established with the aim of building a "Belt and Road" digital economy community of destiny. The digital community of destiny is not only an economic and technological alliance, but also a concept based on sharing, fairness and mutual benefit. Through the establishment of the community, countries can share data resources and jointly develop and use technologies, thereby reducing economic and social disparities caused by inequalities in technology and resources. In practice, building a digital community of shared destiny requires the participating countries to engage in in-depth cooperation at the political, technical and economic levels. For example, by jointly building data infrastructure, countries can improve their data processing and analysis capabilities. In addition, common standards and principles for data governance need to be established to ensure that the exchange and use of data not only follows commercial principles, but also reflects fairness and equity.

Ultimately, the Belt and Road Initiative promotes the balanced development of the global economy by building a digital community of common destiny. This is not only an economic and technological advance, but also a profound reflection and positive response to the problem of the unequal distribution of data resources in the process of



globalization. From the perspective of Marx's theory of world history, this process is not only a technological and economic transformation, but also a major restructuring of the social structure and global governance model. In this way, it can be expected that in the future the dilemma of digital alienation will be resolved, the inequality caused by data colonialism will be reduced, a more just and equitable global data environment will be created, and ultimately data resources will be democratized and universalized, so that all countries in the world can enjoy the right to co-develop equally in the digital age.

## 5.2 Global Data Justice by Breaking Global Economic Dependencies

The Marxian theory of world history examines traditional economic dependencies from a historical and theoretical perspective, revealing the inevitability of the capitalist economic system leading to the concentration of capital and the division of labor, which in turn has led to the formation of the economic structure of the center and the periphery. In the context of globalization, the world's economic dependency is mainly reflected in the unequal relations between developed and developing countries. Developed countries occupy a dominant position in the world economic system and, as the 'center', possess advanced technology, powerful capital and the dominant right to data, and control and exploit the resources and labor of the periphery through technology, finance and trade, thereby reinforcing the unequal relationship in the global economy. This center-periphery structure not only creates inequality in the distribution of material resources, but also creates a huge gap in the circulation and application of information and data. Developed countries, as the developers and primary users of information technology, control the flow and processing of data globally, while developing countries have become the providers and secondary users of data resources. This unequal economic relationship has been replicated and exacerbated in the digital realm. Developed countries have an advantage in data technology and resources, and are able to collect, analyze and use global data more efficiently, thus achieving greater benefits in the global economy. This uneven global data pattern has led to serious inequalities in the distribution of resources and information asymmetries, exacerbating the global North-South economic divide and creating a new type of economic dependency. Developing countries have often become passive providers of data in this process and lack the capacity to control and use their own data. This not only limits the development potential of developing countries in the digital economy, but also makes it more difficult for them to reap the corresponding benefits of the data-driven global economy.

The Belt and Road Initiative stresses the principles of interconnection and mutual benefit, and provides a common development platform for all countries to achieve a fairer distribution of data resources, promote the dissemination and sharing of technology and knowledge, and break the unequal monopoly of developed capitalist countries and multinational corporations in the control and use of data resources, thus breaking the dependency under digital capitalism, providing a realistic practical way to break the global economic dependency and achieve global data justice. As of 24 August 2023,

152 countries and 32 international organizations have signed more than 200 cooperation documents on the construction of the Belt and Road. (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2023)

The Belt and Road Initiative provides an effective way to reshape global data resources through a multidimensional cooperation framework. The Belt and Road is committed to narrowing the data gap among developing countries, promoting the sharing and dissemination of data knowledge, technology and innovation capabilities, and breaking the information asymmetry and technological monopoly caused by data colonialism; and building a data-justice-oriented global digital ecosystem framework and a more inclusive and mutually beneficial cyberspace by promoting policy coordination, enhancing information sharing, and improving cybersecurity cooperation and data governance. As the Belt and Road Initiative continues to advance and develop, all parties are steadily promoting cooperation in areas such as internet finance, cross-border e-commerce and smart cities," he said. In the second Global Digital Trade Expo in 2023, more than 50 countries (regions), 50 international organizations (associations) and 50 of the world's top 500 enterprises participated in the event, signing projects with a total investment of RMB 100 billion. The Global Digital Trade Expo will also be held annually for the next five years (2024-2028), providing a fairer and more sustainable way for countries along the route to break new forms of dependency. Implement the Belt and Road to promote profound changes in the global governance system and make the development of the global data economy fairer and more balanced by injecting development momentum into the construction of a new architecture of global digital governance.

### **5.3 Bridging the Digital Development Divide by Enhancing Digital Technological Autonomy Innovation**

In his discussion of the contradictory movement of the productive forces and the relations of production, Marx stated: "Social relations and the productive forces are closely linked: with the acquisition of new productive forces, people change their mode of production, and with the change in the mode of production, i.e. in the way of securing one's life, people change all their social relations"[7] (Marx, 1847), Technological innovation is therefore not only the key to changing traditional modes of production and social structures, but also an important way to break old global economic dependencies and achieve economic development and social progress. Against the backdrop of increasing data colonialism, technological autonomy and innovation have become the core of national competitiveness. This autonomous innovation is not only about economic growth, but also about power structures in the information age, equality in international relations, and the independence and autonomy of national economic development.

"The Belt and Road Initiative promotes technology exchange and sharing through a multilateral cooperation mechanism, and provides a platform for technology cooperation and independent innovation, which, by enhancing the capacity for independent innovation in digital technology, will help bridge the global digital development divide, thereby dissolving the economic basis of neocolonialism. In the era of digital capitalism, technology is not only part of the productive forces, but also a catalyst for social

relations and global economic transformation. Therefore, enhancing the independent innovation capacity of digital technology is an important way to bridge the digital development divide. Under the Belt and Road framework, through technological cooperation and knowledge sharing, developing countries will reduce their dependence on developed countries' technologies, promote economic diversification, reduce their dependence on a single economic sector, and increase the voice and influence of developing countries in the global digital economy to promote balanced economic and social development. Tyson Barker believes that China has established extensive technological links with the outside world through the Digital Silk Road. [1](Tyson Barker, 2023) Whether it is the second "Global Digital Trade Expo" in 2023, by focusing on the whole industry chain of digital trade, focusing on the display of information and communication, big model, WEB3.0, digital security, intelligent manufacturing and other cutting-edge technology exploration and innovation results. By providing a platform for fair cooperation, helping countries to participate in global data governance, and breaking the monopoly of developed countries in the field of data and information technology, it will contribute to building a fairer and more balanced global data order. Or China's public sharing of its experience and practices in social network management and cross-border data control under the Belt and Road Initiative, its support for digital infrastructure construction in Vietnam, Tanzania and Nigeria, and its investment in fiber-optic interconnection in Afghanistan are all important parts of the Digital Silk Road. "An important part of the Digital Silk Road," Professor Tian Lihui concludes, "is promoting digital development and cooperation among countries along the Belt and Road, which will help economies and sectors share the dividends of digital development. " [2](Tian Lihui, 2024). The Belt and Road Initiative is not only a platform for economic and technological cooperation, but also an important way to break the digital divide and barriers in the process of globalization and achieve a more just and sustainable world order, reflecting the practical application and value of Marx's theory of world history in modern international relations and the development of the global economy in the digital era.

## 6 Conclusion

After entering the digital age, the profit-seeking nature of capital has further promoted its unlimited proliferation and external expansion, and it has taken a dominant position in the world market through its seizure of world resources (especially data resources). However, this does not mean that the capitalist mode of production will always be the dominant force in the development of the world market, nor does the future of world history belong to capitalism. From the perspective of the Marxist concept of material history, the emergence and development of capitalism is the starting point rather than the end point of world history. The productive forces generated by data colonialism and the system of wealth distribution derived from it "have come into violent contradiction with this mode of production itself, and the contradiction has reached such a level that, if the downfall of modern society as a whole is to be avoided, it will be necessary to bring about a change in the mode of production and distribution which will eliminate

all class distinctions" [4](F·Engels, 1878). Thus, as conflicts intensify, data colonialism will eventually be replaced by a new digital development path that is more capable of meeting the common development needs of people all over the world, and world history will move forward.

From the perspective of Marx's theory of world history, the Belt and Road Initiative has achieved sustainable development at the data level by adhering to the path of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, and has innovated the development logic of the data economy in the digital era. "The Belt and Road Initiative does not seek to dismantle neo-colonialism by negating capitalism's contribution to world history, but rather innovates the logic of the development of the data economy in the digital age through the realization of sustainable development at the data level, and then realizes the transcendence of the old capitalist world order. "The Belt and Road Initiative has written world history with practical actions, made historic contributions to the practice of sustainable development of the human data economy, and opened up a new road for human economic development in the digital era.

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