

Subnational Agency and the BRI: Guizhou's Strategic Activism from the Periphery

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Abstract

This study examines how the provinces unmentioned in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in its initial stage respond to their marginalized position. Using Guizhou as a case study, this article shows that Guizhou did not passively accept this position, but actively sought integration into the BRI by creating development opportunities and strategic space. These efforts received positive feedback from the central government and resulted in tangible economic gains. The study concludes that exclusion from the original BRI national plan does not necessarily deprive provinces of development opportunities. Instead, outcomes depend on provincial strategic activism and the resulting positive central-local interaction. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the implementation and practice of China's national strategy and foreign policy.

Keywords: *China's subnational diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, China's foreign relations, China's central-local interaction*

1. Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed in 2013, is an important strategy that aims to create a new development pattern focused on domestic and international dual circulation through interconnection with countries along the

BRI. However, it cannot be successfully implemented without the active participation of China's provinces. Therefore, in March 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce jointly issued the Vision and Actions for Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (henceforth referred to as the Vision and Plan document) to mobilize provinces in support of the initiative.

Many border and coastal provinces were included in the BRI blueprint and given important strategic positioning. For instance, Xinjiang was expected to utilize its unique geographical advantages to become a key gateway to the west, building the core area of the SREB, while Fujian was designated to form the core area of the MSR. On the other hand, Guangxi was to become a significant gateway connecting the MSR and the SREB, while Yunnan was to focus on economic cooperation in the Greater Mekong subregion, becoming a center that radiates toward South Asia and Southeast Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

Although some provinces were not explicitly mentioned in the BRI, their representative cities were designated as important "node cities," including Chengdu, Chongqing, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Nanchang, Hefei, Qingdao, and Yantai. However, four provinces were not referenced in the national plan, namely Hebei, Shanxi, Jiangsu, and Guizhou. This raises an important question: did these provinces passively accept their marginal position, or did they actively seek to create opportunities for development within the national strategy? Thus, this paper examines how such provinces, with Guizhou as a representative case, responded to their marginalized position. Through this perspective, this article contributes not only to a deeper understanding of provincial activism within China's unitary political system, but also to new insights into the implementation and practice of China's national strategy and foreign policy.

Additionally, it should be clarified that, in this article, "marginalization" specifically refers to the situation faced by these provinces that were not mentioned or granted significant strategic positioning in the Vision and Plan document, particularly inland provinces. These provinces did not receive similar

policy and financial support from the central government as those given to border or coastal provinces under the BRI framework. Furthermore, “activism” refers to the agency exercised by these marginalized provinces to reposition themselves as active participants within the BRI. Accordingly, positive central-local interaction is understood as the policy feedback generated when local strategies align with central priorities, including verbal recognition, and policy and financial support. Conversely, misalignment is reflected in negative dynamics such as limited recognition and weaker policy responses.

This article is divided into five main parts. It begins with a literature review of the role of Chinese provinces in foreign relations and the BRI. Next, it justifies why Guizhou was chosen as a case study over the other three unmentioned provinces in the BRI blueprint. Subsequently, the strategies Guizhou utilized in response to its marginalized position are discussed, along with the outcomes on Guizhou’s activism. Finally, the main findings and the article’s contributions to both policy practice and the literature on Chinese subnational diplomacy are summarized, while discussing the applicability of the Guizhou experience to other marginalized provinces.

2. A Review of Provinces in China’s Foreign Policy and the BRI

Chinese provinces’ participation in foreign affairs stemmed from the reform and opening up that began in 1978. With the transfer of financial and managerial autonomy from the central to provincial governments, the provinces obtained an institutional guarantee to participate in foreign affairs, thus enhancing their enthusiasm and initiative. An asymmetric decentralization process, in which the coastal provinces started earlier while other domestic provinces lagged behind, enabled the eastern coastal provinces to take the lead in the internationalization of the local economy and the participation in foreign affairs (Chen, 2016). As a result, these eastern coastal provinces, including Guangdong (Goodman & Feng, 1994), Fujian (Long, 1994), Shanghai (Lampton, 2001; Zhu, 2016) and Shandong (Kim, 2007), have drawn the attention of scholars.

From the 1990s to around 2010, the provinces' participation in foreign affairs entered a rapidly developing phase. As the reform and opening up continued to progress, China's strategic focus began to move from initially the coastal provinces to the central and western areas, providing an opportunity for inland provinces and border regions to participate in foreign cooperation. Moreover, during this stage, a series of important subregional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Tumen subregion cooperation and the Greater Mekong subregion cooperation, were gradually built and improved.

This prompted the border provinces from northeast, northwest, and southwest China to participate in the regional cooperation to varying degrees. They actively participated in foreign affairs, effectively cooperated with China's overall diplomatic work, and became important participants, executors, and promoters of China's foreign affairs, demonstrating an elevated level of enthusiasm. For example, Yunnan and Guangxi have actively "gone global," becoming important players in China's participation in neighboring subregional cooperation. Thus, these border provinces, such as Yunnan (Colin, 2013; Summers, 2012, 2013), Guangxi (Li, 2014), and Xinjiang (Clarke, 2003; Mackerras & Clarke, 2009), have also attracted much scholarly attention.

China's proposal of the BRI in 2013 has provided new opportunities and impetus for their provinces' international participation. In order to promote the BRI, the central government has employed a more proactive opening strategy, fully utilizing the comparative advantages of different regions, and giving a clear strategic division of labor to the northwest, southwest, northeast, and coastal provinces. This naturally requires provinces to utilize their external affairs functions and promote foreign exchanges and cooperation.

Nevertheless, many provinces rely on their own geographical advantages to formulate local plans to serve the overall plan of the BRI. Therefore, Summers (2016) believes that the BRI is rooted at the subnational level of government, making it necessary to analyze it from a network perspective that takes into account the relationships between the national and provincial governments, the government and enterprises, and domestic and foreign countries.

Additionally, the continued promotion of the BRI has transformed the relationship between the central government and provinces to a certain extent, with the former placing greater expectations on the latter's international participation (Wang, 2017), resulting in more strategic and significant subnational diplomacy. This has also led to a boom in scholars focusing on the Chinese provinces' roles in the BRI (Li, 2019; Liu & Song, 2021; Mackerras, 2015; Mierzejewski, 2020, 2021; Summers, 2021; Tubilewicz, 2017; Wong, 2018).

Some scholars have also focused on the competition and cooperation among provinces as they actively promote the BRI for their local benefit. Mierzejewski (2021) argues that the BRI has brought provinces up to the international stage in terms of domestic competition. Chen et al. (2017) and Gong (2021) point out that cooperation among local provinces is essential for promoting the BRI, particularly in the development of cross-provincial infrastructure connectivity, which requires the collective coordination of multiple provinces, as demonstrated by the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC) (Li & Yang, 2024).

However, whether focusing on the role of provinces or the relationship among them, current research has mainly centered on coastal and border provinces that are strategically positioned under the BRI, as well as relatively developed inland provinces, such as Chengdu and Chongqing in western China. There is little research on the provinces unmentioned in the BRI blueprint, particularly how they cope with and respond to their marginalized position. This article aims to fill this gap by examining whether marginalized provinces respond negatively or positively to their exclusion from the BRI national plan, and if positively, what strategies they employ to pursue opportunities for local development.

3. Case Selection

In this article, Guizhou Province was selected as the case study because it is more representative of marginalized inland provinces lacking geographical

advantages under the BRI than Jiangsu, Hebei, and Shanxi. To clarify this choice, a brief comparison with the other three unmentioned provinces is necessary.

In 2015, Jiangsu was second only to Guangdong in the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranking of China's provinces, and its infrastructure, such as sea and land connectivity, is relatively complete. Additionally, as one of the eastern coastline provinces, its trade and economic cooperation with neighboring nations is rather developed. Although it was not given a strategic position, it has nevertheless become an important participant in the BRI development. On the other hand, with the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Development Outline proposed by the central government in 2015, Hebei was positioned to depend on this strategic plan to solve its development issues, rather than relying on the short coastline for development opportunities (Gov.cn, 2015). As for Shanxi, due to the fact that its leadership group has just undergone adjustments and changes in recent years, its development trend still needs to be further clarified.

Guizhou is the only western province unmentioned in the BRI plan. From a geographical viewpoint, Guizhou is not along the coast, the river, or the border. It is indeed not along the main routes of the BRI. After Chongqing, the New Silk Road travels northward through the five northwestern provinces into Central Asia, while the 21st Century MSR mainly involves the coastal provinces. Guizhou is consequently located neither close to the SREB nor the MSR (see [Figure 1](#)). However, in terms of economic development potential, although the total GDP of Guizhou in 2015 was far less than that of Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangxi, and Yunnan, it was higher than that of Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, and Tibet. This shows that its level of economic development is not the lowest among China's western provinces. Moreover, Guizhou has gradually formed its own advantageous industries, with a good momentum for development. The basic economic conditions are in place in favor of the BRI integration. Hence, the activism of the Guizhou provincial government could make all the difference, with the key being changing its disadvantaged geographical situation into a new positioning within the BRI.

Therefore, Guizhou was selected for study as a province that may not have geographical advantages but has development potential. This study examines

Guizhou's response to its marginalized position within the BRI, and the extent of its activism for development opportunities. This will not only provide insights for other Chinese inland provinces with no obvious comparative advantages to actively integrate into the BRI, but also expand understanding on the implementation of China's national strategies and foreign policies within its unitary political system.

Figure 1. Map of China's provinces
中国地图



Note: Official map released by the Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China

4. Guizhou's Strategies for BRI Integration

Before the BRI blueprint was officially issued in 2015, Guizhou had actively sought the opportunity to be integrated into the national plan. On March 5, 2015, at the National People's Congress, Guizhou's officials advocated building an economic channel and promote the construction of key development platforms (The proposal from a member, 2015). However, this failed to attract the central

government's attention. Then, on March 28, Guizhou ultimately became the only western Chinese province that was not included in the BRI blueprint.

The think tank scholar Zhu Keli points out that, based solely on the contents of the BRI plan, Guizhou seemed to be excluded, which was understandable as Guizhou is indeed not strategically located in relation to the BRI. However, from the perspective of national strategic spillover, Guizhou had potential because the provinces and economic zones around it were included in the BRI national planning. Therefore, the premise of Guizhou's turnaround is that it must demonstrate initiative in its own industrial development and in promoting regional economic cooperation (Li & Song, 2015).

Guizhou's provincial governor at that time, Miner Chen, also emphasized that Guizhou should cultivate new growth points in the opening-up, and actively take part in the implementation of national strategies such as the BRI and the construction of the Yangtze River Economic Belt (YREB). By accelerating the construction of external channels, open ports, and comprehensive bonded zones, Guizhou would aim to become a new highland for the open economy in the western inland region (Li & Song, 2015). This indicates that Guizhou did not passively accept its marginalization under the 2015 BRI blueprint, but instead actively sought opportunities and development space to integrate into the BRI (Shuanglong Airport Economic Zone Media Convergence Center, 2024).

4.1 Constructing Traffic Channels

Guizhou's focus on constructing comprehensive traffic channels represents a deliberate exercise of provincial agency to overcome its initial marginalization. Recognizing its latent geographical position as the closest hinterland corridor between the starting points of the SREB (Chongqing) and the 21st Century MSR (Beibu Gulf/Guangzhou), Guizhou proactively formulated the strategic concept of opening up towards the border, the

river, and the sea (Zhou, 2019). This was not merely an infrastructure plan but a conscious effort to redefine its spatial identity from a disadvantaged inland province to an indispensable land-sea logistics hub within the International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC). The subsequent developmental efforts were all directed towards materializing this strategic vision.

The concrete initiatives highlight this strategic alignment. By 2022, Guizhou had established 25 expressway corridors radiating toward all major national economic regions, and built a national high-speed rail hub connecting major regions. These projects systematically dismantled internal and external geographic barriers. Crucially, Guizhou complemented these arteries with innovative logistics nodes that demonstrated strategic entrepreneurship. The construction of China's first comprehensive bonded international dry port in Guiyang was a masterstroke, solving the lack of port functions by creating an inland hub that linked the ILSTC with the China-Europe Railway Express. Similarly, the pioneering "one bureau, four centers" aviation complex was designed to amplify the spillover effects of its international aviation hub, promoting integrated passenger and cargo development (Guizhou Provincial Development and Reform Commission, 2021). Each project simultaneously enhanced local connectivity and forged specific, tangible links between the SREB and MSR networks.

Consequently, Guizhou transformed from a passive, landlocked hinterland into an active connective node—a critical intersection for the China-Europe Railway Express and the China-Laos Railway within the BRI's western corridor. In short, Guizhou did not wait for its role to be assigned; it actively constructed the traffic channels that gave it a new and indispensable "spatial coordinate" within the BRI framework (Figure 2). This demonstrable initiative and strategic blueprint formed a critical foundation for garnering subsequent central recognition and support.

Figure 2. Map of the new international land-sea trade corridor



Source: Li and Yang (2024)

4.2 Developing the Big Data Industry

Guizhou also made a strategic pivot to the big data industry, transforming latent natural advantages, such as stable geological structure, cool climate, and abundant energy, into a cornerstone for its integration into the BRI. This move represented a deliberate act of strategic positioning. By daring to pioneer breakthroughs in cross-field integration and multi-sector applications, Guizhou actively created an ecosystem that attracted societal and corporate participation. Its leadership in establishing foundational institutions, such as the first National Big Data Comprehensive Pilot Zone, the Guiyang Gui'an Big Data Industry Development Cluster, and the world's first big data exchange demonstrates a top-down, government-led model of industrial innovation designed to claim first-mover advantage in a nationally strategic field (Liu et al., 2017).

This concentrated effort to build a nationwide and globally serving big data industrial cluster has yielded transformative results (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Guizhou's digital economy growth, which has led the nation for eight consecutive years, is a direct outcome of this agency (Fei,

2024). More importantly, it has fundamentally reshaped Guizhou's developmental trajectory and external perception. The industry has made Guizhou a hotspot for investment, talent, and industrial development, enabling it to carve out a unique developmental path distinct from both eastern and other western provinces. This successful self-reinvention enhanced the province's profile and provided a tangible, high-value proposition to central planners.

Consequently, the big data industry evolved from a local initiative into Guizhou's pivotal gateway to the BRI. It provided the foundation for Guizhou to actively align with and contribute to the national Digital Silk Road (DSR) agenda. Initiatives such as exploring a DSR trade port, promoting the "Eastern Data and Western Computing" project, and building critical computing infrastructure are no longer passive responses but proactive bids to supply essential digital public goods for international cooperation.

The presence of global and national leaders, such as Huawei Cloud, China Power Guiyang Institute, and Guizhou Baishan Cloud, which have expanded their services worldwide from this base, validates Guizhou's success as a digital hub. By fostering these enterprises and committing to further digital transformation, Guizhou is no longer just participating in the DSR; it is actively shaping a segment of it, thereby securing an indispensable role within the broader BRI framework through demonstrated competence and strategic foresight.

4.3 Actively Integrating into Internal Regional Cooperation

As an international cooperation initiative, the BRI requires not only local provinces' international engagement, but also enhanced interprovincial connectivity and cooperation; Guizhou accomplished this with a deliberate strategy of multi-directional regional embeddedness. Recognizing that meaningful participation requires robust internal connectivity, Guizhou leveraged its position amidst the BRI key nodes to construct a multi-layered cooperative network with neighboring provinces, thereby expanding its developmental agency and strategic relevance.

To the south, Guizhou's activism is evident in its drive to become a functional extension of major economic engines. Its participation in the ILSTC and infrastructure projects like the Guinan High-Speed Railway with Guangxi were foundational steps. More strategically, its investigation of policy models commonly described as "Greater Bay Area Headquarters + Guizhou Base" and "Greater Bay Area Research + Guizhou Manufacturing", represents an agentive move to institutionalize a complementary relationship with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, actively crafting a role within a national growth pole (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

To the east, Guizhou's integration into the Yangtze River Economic Belt (YREB) transcends passive industrial transfer. By coupling ecological stewardship in the upper Yangtze with targeted industry attraction, securing over 2,000 projects worth 100 billion RMB since 2021, Guizhou practiced strategic selectivity. It attracted industries (e.g., advanced manufacturing, big data) that aligned with its own developmental goals, thereby sharing the YREB's dividends, while amplifying its own status in national regional strategies.

To the north, cooperation with the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle (CCEC) showcases how local initiative intersects with central endorsement. Guizhou's push for connectivity, materialized in projects like the Chengdu-Chongqing-Guizhou Circular High-speed Railway, created tangible linkages (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016). This groundwork was subsequently recognized and elevated by central policy, as seen in the 2022 State Council Opinions that explicitly encouraged Guizhou-CCEC collaboration (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022), illustrating how provincial action can shape and justify higher-level support.

To the west, the partnership with Yunnan highlights Guizhou's agency in leveraging a neighbor's international gateway status. As early as September 2013, a framework agreement was signed by Guizhou and Yunnan to strengthen their collaboration in the areas of industry, transportation, environmental protection, and opening up to the outside world. And the opening of the Yunnan-Guizhou-Lancang-Mekong Line of the international freight train in December 2023 was an important breakthrough in deepening the cooperation between Guizhou

and Yunnan. This freight train was strategically utilized by Guizhou to directly access Southeast Asian markets, driving local industry and transforming its geographic position from an inland province to an international conduit (The inaugural international freight train, 2023).

In summary, Guizhou's regional engagement was a calculated exercise in network-building agency. By systematically integrating itself into the development frameworks of all surrounding key regions, Guizhou did not just seek connections, but also it made itself a connective node within China's domestic economic geography. This comprehensive internal integration strengthened its hand, providing a credible platform and enhanced standing from which to engage the broader BRI.

4.4 Building Platforms for Foreign Exchanges

Guizhou established and sustained flagship events such as the Guizhou China-ASEAN Education Exchange Week, the Guiyang International Forum on Ecological Civilization, and the China International Big Data Industry Expo, Guizhou did not merely create venues for dialogue, but it actively built dedicated stages to demonstrate its evolving identity as an ecological pioneer, a digital innovator, and an educational hub.

These platforms were not created in a vacuum, and each emerged from Guizhou's sustained local exploration and accumulation of expertise in corresponding fields. This conscious transformation of endogenous resource advantages into institutionalized platforms for opening-up reflects a sophisticated form of provincial activism. For instance, after four years of provincial-level forums, the elevation of the ecological forum to an international stature in 2013 signals how local practice, when demonstrably successful and aligned with national priorities, can garner central endorsement and be scaled into a nationally recognized instrument of soft power.

Similarly, the Big Data Expo grew from a local initiative into the world's first and foremost industry benchmark, illustrating how Guizhou leveraged its first-mover advantage in big data to claim leadership in a globally relevant field.

These platforms collectively served as strategic tools: they systematized cooperation with the BRI countries in ecology, education, and technology, while also raising Guizhou's profile to become a must-visit destination for international delegations. Ultimately, this portfolio of self-established platforms underscores a key argument: through deliberate institutional entrepreneurship, Guizhou has not only broadened its channels for openness but has fundamentally reshaped its own standing from a peripheral participant to an acknowledged convener and node within the BRI's international network.

5. Outcome of Guizhou's Positive BRI Integration

While this study highlights Guizhou's proactive agency as a critical driver of its integration into the BRI and subsequent development, it is important to contextualize this agency within a broader analytical framework. The observable outcomes, such as enhanced central support and improved economic performance, are likely the result of a confluence of factors, rather than stemming from provincial activism alone. This success was fundamentally enabled and amplified by a strategic convergence with overarching national priorities during the same period.

Specifically, Guizhou's push for infrastructure integration and inter-regional cooperation aligned closely with the national imperative for coordinated regional development. This was central to China's goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020, which required the uplift of underdeveloped regions. Simultaneously, its decisive pivot to the big data industry astutely capitalized on the national strategic push for *informatization* and digital transformation. Therefore, Guizhou's activism proved effective precisely because it skillfully aligned with these higher-level strategic priorities and structural shifts. This synergy transformed provincial initiatives from local appeals into compelling cases for central endorsement, thereby strengthening the positive central-local interaction, as observed in this case.

5.1 Recognition and Support from the Central Government

The series of recognitions and strategic endorsements Guizhou received from the central government constitutes a direct, iterative response to its demonstrated provincial agency, effectively formalizing a cycle of positive central-local interaction. This process began with high-level rhetorical validation. For instance, at the 2016 Guizhou Global Promotion Conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that Guizhou was becoming a new force in the national opening-up by relying on its BRI connective line (Hu, 2019). This statement did not inspire Guizhou's geographical strategy but legitimized and amplified the spatial identity the province had already been actively constructing through its infrastructure campaigns.

Subsequently, this recognition was institutionalized through concrete policy designations that systematically codified Guizhou's local endeavors into nationally sanctioned frameworks. In 2017, the State Council listed the China-ASEAN Education Exchange Week as an important platform for people-to-people ties under the BRI (Luo, 2017). This was followed by the National Development and Reform Commission's Master Plan for the New Land-Sea Corridor in 2019, which enshrined Guiyang as an indispensable node of the national corridor connecting the SREB and MSR (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). This planning document formally ratified the very logistical role Guizhou had been striving to materialize, illustrating how local strategic vision can become embedded in national spatial policy.

Beyond recognition, the central government provided enabling frameworks that both rewarded past activism and empowered future agency. The 2016 approval to establish the Guizhou Inland Open Economic Pilot Zone was pivotal. Its guiding document explicitly tasked Guizhou with exploring new paths for inland provinces in the opening-up and ecological-economic integration (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016), thereby translating Guizhou's localized efforts into a state-endorsed experimental role.

Concurrent approvals as a national big data pilot zone and an ecological civilization pilot zone further provided the policy toolkit and legitimacy for Guizhou

to deepen its chosen niche specializations. Then, in January 2022, the State Council issued a document encouraging Guizhou to forge a new development path in the new era, and positioning Guizhou as a “new highland for the inland open economy” and a “digital economy development innovation zone” (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

This positive central-local interaction is even more pronounced in the arrangements of key cadres. The central government's deployment of leading cadres with specific backgrounds to Guizhou represents a form of targeted capacity building that is highly aligned with the province's autonomously chosen industrial development direction. Taking Chen Gang as an example, his work experience in Beijing's Zhongguancun science hub was a precise match for Guizhou's strategic choice to develop its big data industry. After assuming his post, he swiftly facilitated the establishment of the Zhongguancun Guiyang Science Park and organized industry promotion conferences in Beijing, directly accelerating the implementation of the local strategy (Zhou, 2017).

Such personnel deployments are not coincidental but considered strategic by the central government to support pivotal provincial agendas. Similarly, top officials such as Zhao Kezhi and Miner Chen, with their rich experience in eastern coastal provinces, leveraged their personal networks, such as their close ties with Alibaba, to bring crucial external resources and visibility to Guizhou's big data industry (Sohu, 2017). As a result, Alibaba's strategic cooperation with the Guizhou provincial government in big data has also led other globally renowned companies to settle in Guiyang and establish core data centers, promoting the continuous convergence of data resources from all over the world to Guiyang. Jack Ma has also repeatedly expressed his appreciation and recognition of Guizhou, further enhancing the visibility of Guizhou's big data development (Sohu, 2017).

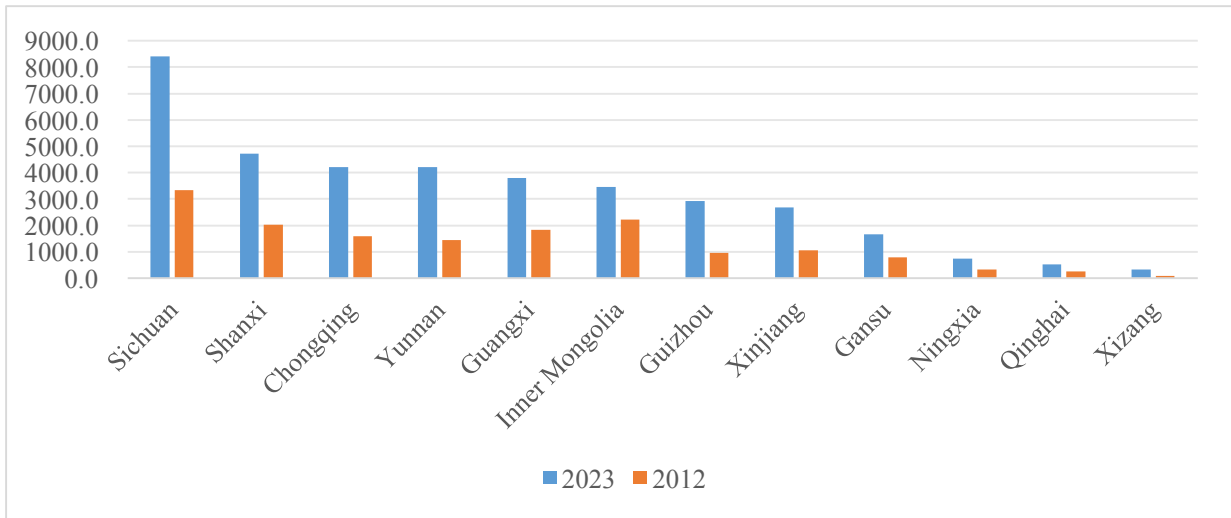
Therefore, from the strategic designation as the new highland for the inland open economy to the meticulous configuration of its leadership team, these measures collectively constitute a virtuous cycle of reinforcement: provincial agency-central recognition-resource feedback-capacity enhancement. Through its activism, Guizhou provided feasible local solutions and pilot

experiences for major national strategies, such as coordinated regional development and the DSR. The central government, in turn, acknowledged, upgraded, and integrated these solutions into the national narrative through policy authorization and personnel support. This process profoundly demonstrates that, within China's developmental governance, sustained local activism that is aligned with national strategy serves as the core mechanism through which a region reshapes its position within the national framework and secures central support.

5.2 Economic Achievements of the BRI Integration

Through its proactive strategies to integrate into the BRI, Guizhou not only enhanced its openness but also translated its efforts into measurable and superior economic performance, thereby validating the efficacy of its approach and strengthening its case for continued central support. Among the western provinces, Guizhou's GDP ranking rose from 9th in 2012 to 7th in 2023, steadily closing the gap with provinces like Inner Mongolia and Guangxi.

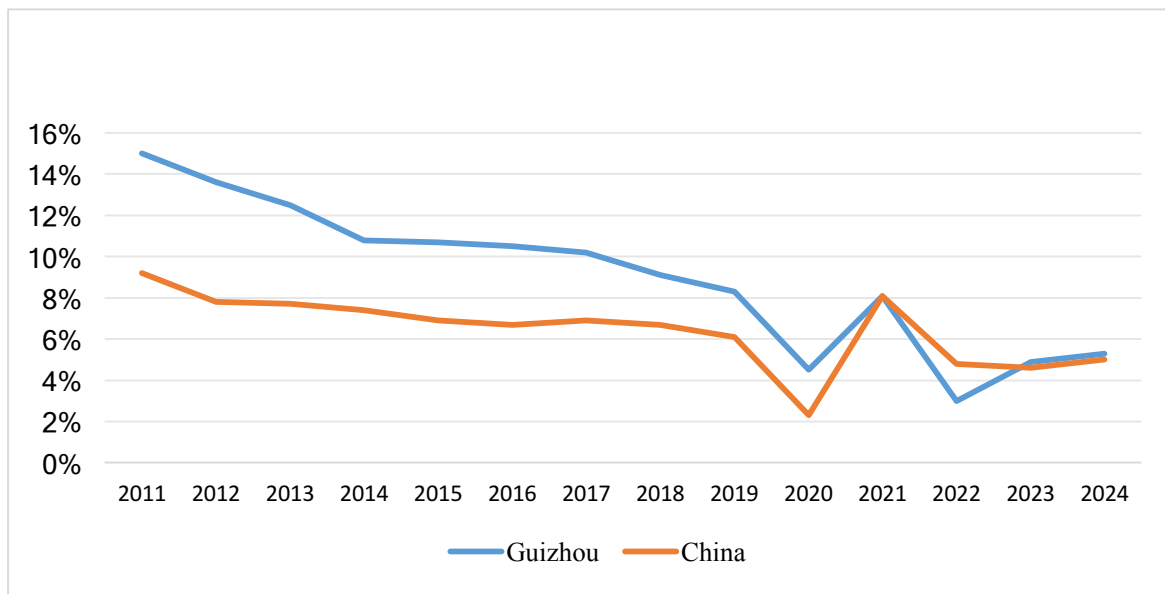
Figure 3. Comparison of GDP of Chinese western provinces and cities in 2012 and 2023 (US 100 million)



Source: China Statistical Yearbook (2013-2024)

This relative advancement is a direct outcome of leveraging its strategically crafted position as a BRI connective node and its dual focus on outward and inward connectivity. Consequently, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Guizhou's GDP growth rate consistently surpassed the national average, ranking among the highest nationwide (Guizhou's GDP growth rate, 2021). This is a clear indicator that its localized initiatives were generating competitive returns within the national framework.

Figure 4. Comparison of GDP growth rate between Guizhou and China (2011-2024)

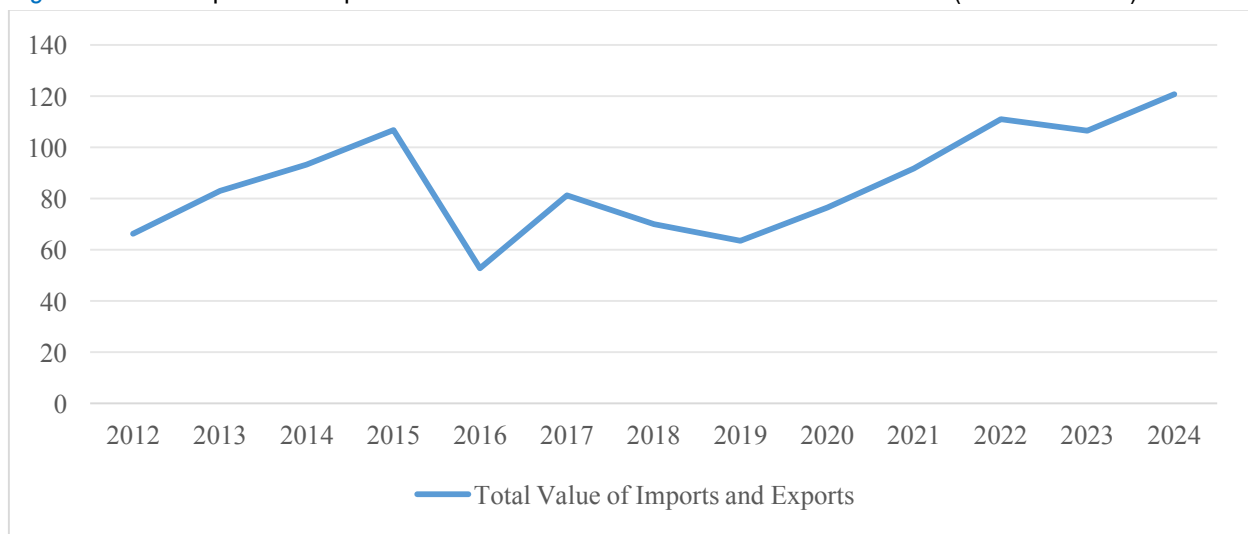


Source: Guizhou Provincial Bureau of Statistics, Guizhou Statistical Yearbook (2012-2024), and China Statistical Yearbook (2012-2024)

The materialization of its infrastructure vision, particularly in linking the SREB and the MSR, has directly catalyzed a structural shift in Guizhou's economy, evidenced by robust foreign trade growth. Since 2019, Guizhou's import and export trade has expanded rapidly, with a striking 13.5 percent year-on-year increase in 2024 (Figure 5), far exceeding the national growth rate of 5 percent (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2025;

Guizhou Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2025b). This performance is not merely quantitative but qualitative, marked by a continuous optimization of its trade structure. The 77.4 percent surge in exports of high-value products, such as lithium batteries, electric vehicles, and solar cells, demonstrates how Guizhou's earlier bet on big data and advanced manufacturing is now paying off in global markets, aligning with, and contributing to national industrial upgrading priorities ("Guizhou Province's exports", 2025).

Figure 5. Total import and export volume of Guizhou Province from 2012 to 2024 (US 100 million)



Source: Guizhou Provincial Bureau of Statistics

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of Guizhou's foreign trade geography vividly illustrates the province's success in operationalizing its BRI connectivity. A range of "Made in Guizhou" products are reaching new international markets for the first time, directly utilizing the corridors it helped build. In 2024, Guizhou enterprises independently exported potatoes to Vietnam through Pingxiang Port in Guangxi, while cold-rolled aluminum products were exported to the Middle East. New energy buses were exported to Laos, while gastrodia wine from Bijie City in the province was exported to Russia. Furthermore, the energy and mineral

manufacturing products of Liupanshui City were exported to Laos through Mohan Port in Yunnan (Guizhou's foreign trade made solid progress, 2025a). These diverse, targeted exports are not random successes but the direct fruition of Guizhou's multi-directional logistical integration and platform diplomacy. In short, the vigorous development of Guizhou's trade with the BRI countries serves as tangible, empirical proof that its proactive agency has effectively redefined its economic trajectory and solidified its role within the broader BRI framework.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how initially marginalized provinces within the BRI can actively reshape their developmental trajectories, as demonstrated by the case of Guizhou. The findings reveal a dynamic and proactive form of local agency, whereby Guizhou articulated and implemented a multi-faceted strategy for integration.

This included constructing traffic channels to reposition itself as a logistical hub linking the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road; specializing in the big data industry to become a key node in the DSR; pursuing internal integration with major regional cooperation mechanisms such as the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the Greater Bay Area; and establishing practical international platforms for exchange. This concerted local activism triggered a positive central-local interaction, ultimately receiving recognition and policy support from the central government.

Consequently, Guizhou's experience demonstrates that initial exclusion from a grand national strategy can be overcome through deliberate local activism, transforming geographical disadvantages into connective advantages and fostering a distinctive development path. Thus, it offers a transferable strategic framework for other underdeveloped inland provinces in China, highlighting the potential of local agency to navigate and leverage national policy frameworks for local development.

The emphasis on infrastructure-led integration, especially prioritizing cross-regional traffic channels, is a universally relevant lesson for landlocked provinces

seeking to overcome geographical isolation. Similarly, the leapfrogging into a niche high-tech sector (big data) demonstrates how underdeveloped provinces can exploit latent advantages to cultivate new economic identities, a strategy that is applicable to provinces with resource potentials.

However, the replicability of Guizhou's success depends on several contextual factors. They include the level of aligned national policy support, the presence of unique local assets (like Guizhou's climate for data centers), and the province's capacity to integrate with existing economic hubs. Therefore, while the strategic framework provides a successful model, its effectiveness hinges on careful adaptation to local conditions and the capacity to leverage unique provincial assets within the national policy landscape.

This study is conducive to a deeper understanding of the implementation and practice of China's national strategy and foreign policy. It has shown that even provinces marginalized in blueprints like the BRI are not permanently excluded by the central government. Provinces possess and can exercise significant agency to actively strive for local development. As the Guizhou case illustrates, marginalized provinces can successfully carve out opportunities and space within grand national strategies, provided their local policies and initiatives demonstrably align with the central government's overarching developmental philosophy and strategic direction. Thus, it refines existing understanding of China's policy implementation, highlighting the co-constitutive role of proactive localities in defining the pathways of national strategies.

Moreover, this study contributes to the scholarly debates on Chinese political economy and subnational diplomacy. Within China's unitary political system, significant policy flexibility and space for local initiative can be actively carved out by subnational actors themselves. The findings challenge simplistic portrayals of passive local compliance, instead revealing a more dynamic process of central-local interaction. Guizhou's experience underscores that grand national strategies like the BRI are not merely implemented through top-down directives, but are substantively shaped and interpreted from below. The province's success in securing central recognition was predicated on its ability to

strategically align its local initiatives with broader national priorities, thereby presenting itself as a credible and valuable partner in achieving those goals.

Notes

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