

CROSSING THE RIVER BY FEELING THE STONES

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CROSSING THE RIVER BY FEELING THE STONES

Alternative Imaginaries of China's Presence in Southeast Asia in Contemporary Contexts

13-14 August 2020 | Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

China's rapid rise in the last few decades has (re)shaped its international relationships with many countries through trade and investment, especially in Southeast Asia where the Chinese engagement has arguably been the most intensified. In recent years, popular media and academic scholarship have largely focused on China's presence in Southeast Asia, especially the Chinese government's recent "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Such BRI connections matter for Southeast Asia in current and future contexts, but it is also issues beyond simply recent BRI associated developments that has seen Southeast Asia being pushed in uncertain and new directions with its engagement with China. Communities and states in SEA have to 'feel' their way forward in the midst of the Chinese 'currents' with alternative imaginaries (therefore "Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones").

This workshop focuses on how both recent intensification and various historical sources (post-World War II) contribute to producing "alternative imaginaries" that are different from and slightly outside BRI-related narratives in Southeast Asia. We will unpack these processes of producing these alternative imaginaries in times and spaces that are not directly associated with the BRI and their implications to contemporary and potentially future socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics in Southeast Asia.

The workshop will focus on alternative ways of interpreting and engaging various Chinese activities from individuals to institutions at the local, bilateral and regional (such as ASEAN with China) levels in both mainland and island Southeast Asia. The topics covered are in the following areas:

- Chinese foreign policies and diplomacy engagement (Tracks I and II) in Southeast Asia from the Cold War period till present
- Economic development in special economic zones (SEZs), cross-border trade, real estate development, infrastructural mega-projects
- Transnational religious networks, cultural heritage, and tourism development
- Migration between China and Southeast Asia and the impact of migrant communities on shaping local ethnic and cultural identities and vice versa.
- Ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups in Southeast Asia and their engagement of and resistance to Chinese development in their daily lives.

WORKSHOP CONVENORS

Dr Yang Yang

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Dr Shaun Lin

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ABOUT THE CONVENORS

Yang Yang received her PhD in Human Geography from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on transnational religious networks and the politics of ethno-religious identity in northwestern China. Her dissertation thus adopts an ethnographic approach to analysing the impacts of Hui Muslims' grass-roots connections to non-Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the Hui's everyday lives in Xi'an, China. Her current research examines how the Hui diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia contributes to grass-roots connections between China and Malaysia, and how Malaysia becomes Hui's new Muslim role model through serving as their preferred destination for halal tourism and their style references for Muslim fashion. Notably, this project analyses how ethno-religious identities and mobility intersect in the contexts of migration and the recentring of Islamic teachings in both cultural and political contexts on a global scale.

Shaun Lin is Max Weber Foundation-NUS Research Fellow in the Department of Geography at National University of Singapore. Prior to that, Shaun was Max Weber Foundation-NUS Postdoctoral Fellow, and a policy officer in the International Division at Maritime Port Authority of Singapore. He obtained his PhD from the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong. Shaun has published recent journal articles relating to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), environmental geography of the Mekong River Basin, and the geopolitics of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, and *The Professional Geographer*.

13 AUGUST 2020 (THURSDAY)

MORNING | 10:00 – 11:15

OPENING & WELCOME REMARKS

Yang Yang | *Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore*

Shaun Lin | *Department of Geography, National University of Singapore*

PANEL 1 – RELIGIOUS NETWORKS

The Politics of 'Fighting Radicalism/ Saving Uighur': China's Presence Meets Islamic Movements in Indonesia and Malaysia

Hew Wai Weng | *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia: Constructing Transnational Chinese Evangelicalism across China and Southeast Asia, 1930s to 1960s

Joshua Dao Wei Sim | *National University of Singapore*

The Contesting Perceptions towards China among Indonesian Muslim: Debates on the Uyghur Case

Wahyudi Akmaliah | *Indonesian Institute of Sciences (PMB-LIPI)*

Ibnu Nadzir | *Indonesian Institute of Sciences (PMB-LIPI)*

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

AFTERNOON | 14:00 – 15:30

PANEL 2 – CHINESE FOREIGN POLICIES AND DIPLOMACY ENGAGEMENT IN SEA

Affect and Memory in Philippines-China Relations: Perspectives from the Narrative of a Philippine Expert

Tina S. Clemente | *University of the Philippines-Diliman*

510 Not Found: Indonesian Communist Exiles in China from Revolution to Reform

Taomo Zhou | *Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

The Tail Wagging the Body and Head: Mainland Southeast Asia's Concerns of China's Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC)

Carl Grundy-Warr | *National University of Singapore*

Shaun Lin | *National University of Singapore*

Imagined Borderlands: Terrain, Technology and Trade in the Making and Managing of the China-Burma Border

Alessandro Rippa | *Tallinn University*

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

14 AUGUST 2020 (FRIDAY)

MORNING | 10:00 – 11:30

PANEL 3A – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CROSS-BORDER TRADE

Urban Utopia or Pipe Dreams? Examining Chinese-invested Smart City Development in Southeast Asia

Yujia He | *University of Kentucky, USA*

Angela Tritto | *Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*

China-Laos Connectivity: More than Meets the BRI

Kearrin Sims | *James Cook University, Australia*

PANEL 3B – TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

The Soft Infrastructure of Belt and Road: Imaginaries, Affinities, and Subjectivities in Chinese Transnational Education

Yi'En Cheng | *National University of Singapore*

Sin Yee Koh | *Monash University Malaysia*

Re-encountering the Familiar Other: Contesting "Re-Sinicization" in Thailand

Enze Han | *The University of Hong Kong*

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

AFTERNOON | 14:00 – 15:15

PANEL 4 – ETHNIC MINORITIES AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Social Construction of Backwardness and the Othering of Cham Muslim in Cambodia under China's Dominance

Steve K.L. Chan | *Keimyung University, South Korea*

Kevin S.Y. Tan | *Independent Researcher, Singapore*

Negotiating Indigenous Engagements of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia

Yunci Cai | *University of Leicester, UK*

Sino-Vietnamese Children of the Border: Why Do They Matter?

Gabriella Angelini | *Chinese University of Hong Kong*

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

CLOSING REMARKS

Yang Yang | *National University of Singapore*

Shaun Lin | *National University of Singapore*

**The Politics of 'Fighting Radicalism/ Saving Uighur':
China's Presence meets Islamic Movements in Indonesia and Malaysia**

Hew Wai Weng

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The allegedly China's prosecution of Uighur Muslim minority in the province of Xinjiang have gained attentions among Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia. The plight of Uighurs has been increasingly channelled through 'Islamic' lenses, as 'Muslim solidarity' is a way for Uighurs to gain international support, especially among Muslim-majority countries. While the Chinese government justifies the establishment of Uighur camps in the name of 'fighting radicalism/separatism', many Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia see it as a form of discrimination against the Muslim minority and some of them run campaigns to 'save Uighur'. This paper aims to examine 1) the possibilities and limitations of China's 'Islamic diplomacy' - how the Chinese government interacts with Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims over Uighur issue; 2) how Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims organizations/ leaders response over Uighur issue; 3) how perceptions on increasingly China's presence in the region are shaping as well as being shaped by ethnic politics and Islamic movements in both countries. Together with the perceived increase of China's presence and the alleged growing political power of ethnic Chinese, Uighur issue has also turned into a domestic issue. In Indonesia, some Islamic oppositions in Indonesia have been very vocal in supporting Uighurs - they accuse the ruling government and its affiliated Muslim organizations for being 'pro-China/Chinese' and for their inability in 'defending Muslim'. In Malaysia, the supports towards Uighurs come from Muslim organisations across political divides – although it is less divisive than in Indonesia, the perceptions towards China's presence has been influenced by racialised and Islamic politics.

Hew Wai Weng is fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, the National University of Malaysia (IKMAS, UKM). He has published on Chinese Muslim identities, Hui migration, and urban middle-class Muslim aspirations in Malaysia and Indonesia. He is the author of *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia* (NIAS Press, 2018).

**Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia:
Constructing Transnational Chinese Evangelicalism
across China and Southeast Asia, 1930s to 1960s**

Joshua Dao Wei Sim

Department of History, National University of Singapore

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Scholars have made commendable advances in analysing the agency of Chinese Christians in translating and producing local versions of their faith in China. Yet, little work has been done on examining them as transnational agents of Christianity. Through the use of previously-neglected primary sources, this paper offers an interpretation of how a group of Chinese evangelical leaders initiated and constructed their visions and versions of transnational Christianity across China and Southeast Asia in the 1930s to 1960s. Two representative organisations are examined. The first concerns the transnational network of Chinese evangelistic bands that the prominent revivalist-evangelist John Sung established across China and Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. The bands' sources reveal how they played a key role in imbuing a transnational landscape and common-sense of spiritual revival into the imaginations of the Chinese churches, making them consumers and producers of revival. The second case evaluates the cross-border institutional-building work of the Evangelize China Fellowship, a major transnational Chinese evangelical denomination founded by Sung's colleague Andrew Gih after World War II. The analysis reveals how the Fellowship utilised a faith-based developmental agenda to promote Christianity among the overseas Chinese communities across Southeast Asia, Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1950s to 1960s. This agenda emphasised the building of an array of institutions that groomed Chinese Christians to serve their respective host countries. In all, paying attention to Chinese Christian imaginaries of Southeast Asia enables us to understand how they connected faith adherents living across Asia into transnational ethno-religious communities.

Joshua Dao Wei Sim is a historian of Christianity and Modern China. He is interested in questions pertaining to evangelicalism and fundamentalism, the relationship between Chinese and Christian intellectual history, Chinese religions, and transnational history. Currently, Joshua is a Doctorate Trainee at the Department of History in the National University of Singapore. His doctoral dissertation is on the transnational organisational and intellectual history of Chinese evangelicalism in the twentieth century, with a specific focus on the transnational careers of a number of prominent Chinese evangelicals from the 1920s to 1960s. He has published articles and book reviews in *Fides et Historia*, *Reading Religion* and the *Research Center for Chinese Christianity*.

The Contesting Perceptions towards China among Indonesian Muslims: Debates on the Uyghur Case

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The Islamic community in Indonesia has always been connected to international issues. A social or political event that is perceived to have a significant impact on the global Islamic community would draw much attention in Indonesian news outlets. Moreover, many Islamic organizations are also familiar with developing formal or informal ties to international Islamic institutions to create the program of local da'wa. Within this backdrop, it is no wonder when China's government is rumored to discriminate Uyghur minority groups, which mainly identified as Muslim; the news is reacted strongly by many Islamic organizations. Despite the lack of knowledge and nuances about the situation in China, many Islamic organizations projected strong positions regarding the issues. Islamic Conservative groups publicly stated that the Indonesian government should condemn China for its atrocities conducted toward the Uyghur community. On the other hand, NU and Muhammadiyah, two of the most established Islamic organizations in Indonesia, held the position that there is no human rights violation in China. A position that drew much criticism from the conservative groups, mainly because both NU and Muhammadiyah are accused of receiving many privileges from China government. In this regard, the paper will explore the dynamics of the issue in Indonesia based on contestation between Islamic organizations. The article then argues that the perception toward China on Uyghur's case is less about the actual event, rather more as an implication from the ongoing contestation between Islamic organizations as religious authorities in Indonesia.

Wahyudi Akmaliah is a researcher at the Research Centre of Society and Culture, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (PMB-LIPI). He received his bachelor degree in Islamic Education from Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University (2003), master degree in Cultural Studies, Sanata Dharma University (2008) and master degree in International Peace Studies, the University for Peace, Costa Rica (2010). His research interests focus on Islam, identity, and popular culture. Some of his works are published in *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities*, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, and *Studia Islamika*.

Ibnu Nadzir is a researcher of cultural and social anthropology at Research Center for Society and Culture, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) since 2011. He received his master degree from Anthropology department at University of Amsterdam with thesis about the use of Internet among Indonesian exiles in the Netherland. In the past few years, his research focuses on Internet mediation and Islamic social movements.

**Affect and Memory in Philippines-China Relations:
Perspectives from the Narrative of a Filipino Expert**

Tina S. Clemente

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I attempt to draw insight into Philippines-China relations by unpacking the oral history of esteemed Filipino specialist on China, Aileen San Pablo Baviera. The research employs an anthropology of knowledge framework and considers the individual's knowledge on China as shaped and enriched by her choices and lived experiences while interacting with attendant environments. The approach is anchored on two notions. "Affect" represents Baviera's motivational intensity in aid of improving Philippines-China relations. "Memory" pertains to the situatedness of Baviera's knowledge and expertise in historical, political, and socio-economic contexts.

The significance of interrogating narratives in shedding light into a field of study, which in this case is Philippines-China relations, specifically, and China Studies in the Philippines, broadly, is in the salience of personal agency in the growth of expert knowledge and fields of study. This challenges statist orientations especially in situations, like in the Philippines, where disconnects between foreign policy and expertise formation by academics abound. The work contributes to a contextual or grounded perspective on Philippines-China connections and emphasizes an organic turn in considering ideas, personal initiatives, processes, environments, institutional nuances that give greater understanding to the imaginary of China in the Philippines and the wider discourse of bilateral relations.

Tina S. Clemente is Professor at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines-Diliman. She specializes in China studies and Philippine development studies. Her teaching and research interests include various aspects of development in China and the Philippines, the intellectual history and knowledge production of China Studies in the Philippines, economics-security nexus in Philippines-China relations, and economic history. She is a former President of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies (PACS). One of her latest works is the edited volume, *China Studies in the Philippines: Intellectual Paths and the Formation of a Field* (Clemente and Shih, eds., Routledge, 2018).

510 Not Found: Indonesian Communist Exiles in China from Revolution to Reform

Taomo Zhou

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This paper tells the story of a group of “intimate strangers” whose lives were tied together by a little-known “510 Office of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party.” Located in the suburban of Nanchang, the provincial capital of the landlocked Jiangxi in southeast China, 510 was a closed compound built in 1976 by the Chinese Government to shelter more than 300 Southeast Asian communist exiles, the majority of whom from Indonesia. Most of the Indonesians arrived in China in the early and mid-1960s and became accidental exiles as the political turmoil in the archipelago in 1965-1966 made it impossible for them to return home. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, they lived a comfortable material life and were exempt from the economic hardship and excruciating political campaigns that overshadowed the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese during the tempestuous Cultural Revolution. Yet this secluded community were also under constant surveillance and close control by their Chinese host.

With the 1972 Sino-US rapprochement and rural agricultural de-collectivization starting in the late 1970s, China embarked on a redirection of foreign policies, domestic politics and nation economy. As China sought normalization of diplomatic relations with the anti-communist Suharto government in Indonesia, the exiles' very existence became an embarrassment to Beijing. Meanwhile, the Chinese staff of 510—whose entire careers were built on taking care of the honorable “foreign guests”, but few spoke their languages—suffered a significant pay cut as financial support to international communist movement no longer enjoyed priority in the state's fiscal plans. How did the Indonesian and Chinese members of the 510-community adapt to the Reform and Opening? Based on fieldwork conducted in Jiangxi in 2013 and 2019, as well as written and oral history sources from the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, this paper shows that the 510-community responded in varied and creative ways. While the mass majority of the exiles left for Europe, those who stayed became neutralized Chinese citizens and some even transformed themselves into devoted advocates of “socialism of Chinese characteristic,” as epitomized in Deng Xiaoping's developmentalism. Some of their Chinese caretakers, on the other hand, were exceptionally entrepreneurial as they found business opportunities by utilizing the infrastructure of 510 in the early years of reform. Overall, this paper hopes to reveal how the reorientation of Chinese policy toward Southeast Asia, particularly its renouncement of revolutionary diplomacy, manifested in the day-to-day economic lives of people caught up in the changing dynamics of geopolitics.

Taomo Zhou is an Assistant Professor of History at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, specializing in modern Chinese and Southeast Asian history. Taomo received her B.A. from Peking University and Waseda University, M. Sc. with Distinction from the London School of Economics and Ph.D. from Cornell University. Her writings have appeared in publications such as *The China Quarterly*, *The Critical Asian Studies*, the journal *Indonesia*, and *The SAGE Handbook of Contemporary China*. Taomo's first book, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia and the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2019), examines how two of the world's most populous countries interacted between 1945 and 1967, when the concept of citizenship was contested, and the boundaries of political mobilization were blurred. Having grown up in a migrant family in Shenzhen, Taomo is starting a new project on the historical transformation of this first special economic zone of China.

The Tail Wagging the Body and Head: Mainland Southeast Asia's Concerns of China's Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC)

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Sub-regional developments in mainland Southeast Asia arising from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are potentially destabilising existing trans-border institutions, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), whilst fostering new ones, with China very much at the helm, namely the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). Such BRI political economic connections matter for each of the mainland Southeast Asian countries, however, the transboundary LMC could arguably push mainland Southeast Asia collectively in uncertain and new geopolitical directions, and the LMC has already realigned geo-power in favour the upstream "tail" of the Lancang Jiang (in China) over the rest of the Mekong Basin. Until recently, the MRC has been the key transboundary inter-state mechanism, established by the post-Cold War 1995 Mekong Agreement that is supposed to promote sustainable development of the Lower Mekong waterways and Basin. Crucially, the most populous, biodiverse, and ecologically connected parts of the Basin are the "body and head", namely the Lower Mekong Basin and Delta region, where millions of people still rely largely on the pulsing flood pulse ecosystem and freshwater fisheries of the Mekong. The creation of the recent mechanism, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework, which has a China Secretariat, already partially acts as an alternative to the MRC and to some extent, rival the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) for broader development in mainland Southeast Asia. Our paper critically examines the political economic, biophysical and geopolitical implications of the "tail wagging the body and head", and consider how China's bilateral and new regional riparian relations are transforming the geographies of the Mekong.

Carl Grundy-Warr is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore. He was on the International Editorial Board of *Geopolitics* from 1996–2008; the Editorial Board of the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* from 1995–present, where he is now reviews editor. He is the author of numerous international journal articles on transboundary resources, geopolitics, and border studies and co-author (with Mak Sithirith) of *Floating Lives of the Tonle Sap* (Chiang Mai University Press, 2013). He teaches courses on geography field studies, natural resources' politics, and geopolitics. His current interests are resource politics and environmental security in Southeast Asia.

Shaun Lin is Max Weber Foundation-NUS Research Fellow in the Department of Geography at National University of Singapore. Prior to that, Shaun was Max Weber Foundation-NUS Postdoctoral Fellow, and a policy officer in the International Division at Maritime Port Authority of Singapore. He obtained his PhD from the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong. Shaun has published recent journal articles relating to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), environmental geography of the Mekong River Basin, and the geopolitics of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, and *The Professional Geographer*.

Imagined Borderlands

Terrain, Technology and Trade in the Making and Managing of the China-Burma Border

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In 2020, Myanmar and China plan to conduct a third joint inspection of their 2,227-km-long border. According to recent reports, officials from the two countries will conduct aerial photographic surveys, erect new boundary pillars, repair and reconstruct damaged and missing pillars, and draw new maps. The two countries reached a boundary agreement already in 1961 and as part of it committed to conducting joint inspections every five years. Such inspections, however, occurred only twice: in 1984-1986 and in 1992-1995. To be sure, the China-Myanmar border has been riddled with territorial disputes both before *and* after the 1961 agreement, and the two countries' promises of frequent joint inspections seem to hint to its not-so-stable nature. From the perspective of border studies, this example echoes recent scholarship positing that borders are not fixed lines imposed upon a passive terrain, but should rather be addressed and understood through the social practices of demarcating, managing, crossing and policing them. Accordingly, borders are always a site of *encounter* as much as one of *containment*. What I ask in this paper is how this relation, between encounter and containment, takes concrete shape, and how it is contingent to particular economic, political, cultural and environmental entanglements. In particular, I employ a *long-durée* perspective on the China-Burma border, to show how the logics of encounter and containment have transformed throughout the last 150 years. I do so by engaging the three inter-connected tropes of terrain, technology, and trade. The paper is based on an original combination of archival research, interviews with former members of the Communist Party of Burma who were active along this border in the 1970s and 1980s, and an ethnography of contemporary cross-border practices.

Alessandro Rippa is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at Tallinn University, and "freigeist" fellow (2020-2025) at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich. He completed his doctorate at the University of Aberdeen and held postdoctoral positions at LMU Munich (www.highlandasia.net) and at the University of Colorado Boulder (www.chinamadeproject.net). Alessandro is a social anthropologist working on borders, infrastructure and the environment. His most recent research focuses on the social and environmental consequences of Chinese investments in Myanmar, and explores new theoretical approaches for the study of large-scale infrastructure. He is the author of *Borderland Infrastructure: Trade Development and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020) and one of the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* (2018).

Urban Utopia or Pipe Dreams? Examining Chinese-invested Smart City Development in Southeast Asia

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Smart cities, widely touted as solutions to the challenges of urbanization and sustainable development, are gaining traction in Southeast Asia, a fast-growing region with an expected increase of 100 million urban residents in 2017-2030. With experience in smart city development at home, and the call for smart city cooperation under China's Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese firms are poised to take advantage of the region's new market opportunities. However, few existing studies examine their roles. This paper fills the gap through an empirical case study of the Forest City, a Chinese-invested smart city in Iskandar Malaysia, the southern development corridor in Johor, Malaysia. It builds on the literature framing smart cities not as technical solutions, but urban megaprojects whose development process involves social and political contestations as well as impacts. It finds that Chinese-invested megaprojects are often the result of overlapping economic and development interests of both investors and local authorities. However, their visibility and considerable impacts could lead to opposition from local affected stakeholders, which in turn can expose them to targeting by political leaders. This process eventually prompts Chinese firms to enhance local engagement. The study employs both primary interview data gathered through fieldwork and secondary data from print and online documents. The study contributes to the literature on Chinese overseas investment by converging both bottom-up local perspectives and top-down processes of Chinese engagement with the host countries in the understudied area of smart city development and urban megaprojects.

Yujia He is Assistant Professor at the Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce, University of Kentucky. Her areas of expertise are international political economy and science and technology policy. Previously she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for Emerging Market Studies (IEMS). She also worked in Washington DC as a visiting fellow for the Atlantic Council and as a researcher for the Wilson Center. Her research has appeared in *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, *Resources Policy*, and several think tank reports. She obtained her PhD in International Affairs, Science and Technology (IAST) and MS in International Affairs from Georgia Tech, BS in Chemistry from Peking University and Stanford China Program certificate. She is a co-investigator of an IEMS-funded project "Green and Smart or Black and Clumsy? Examining the role of Chinese investors in ASEAN's sustainable development".

Angela Tritto (PhD, City University of Hong Kong) is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Institute for Emerging Market Studies, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and a research affiliate at the Southeast Asia Research Centre at City University of Hong Kong. Currently, she is working on three interrelated research projects on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia. She has completed a case study on the BRI in Indonesia and is conducting further research on Malaysia and Myanmar. Her areas of research interests include China and Southeast Asia, the BRI, environmental policies and technologies, sustainable development, and heritage management. She is currently leading a research project titled "*Green and Smart or Black and Clumsy? Examining the Role of Chinese Investors in ASEAN's Sustainable Development*," where she analyzes patterns of Chinese investments in Southeast Asia. Her past and upcoming publications include research articles on eco-innovations in heritage management, fintech, smart cities, and a series of case studies and articles on the Belt and Road Initiative.

China-Laos Connectivity: More than Meets the BRI

Kearrin Sims

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Traversing more than 130 countries and multiple economic sectors, the BRI is a world-transforming connectivity agenda that places China at the centre of new global political, economic and cultural geographies. In Laos, BRI is advanced foremost through the US\$7 billion Pan-Asia railway, which extends 414km from the China-Lao border in Luang Namtha province to the Thai-Lao border in Vientiane province. The largest and most expensive megaproject ever built in Laos, the railway will have profound social, economic and environmental effects. Once completed, it will connect Laos to a transnational network of planned railways linking China, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam. Through the railway, the BRI will almost certainly become one of the most influential forces shaping geographies of connectivity and development in Laos. Yet, while BRI's significance is difficult to overstate, this paper argues that analyses of China and Laos' shared development futures must look both through and beyond a BRI-centric lens. By drawing attention to some of the manifold entanglements between China and Laos that both precede and exceed BRI's effects, it argues that the reductivism of complex histories and futures into BRI narratives problematically advances Beijing's geopolitical ambitions while simultaneously erasing the diverse materialities and subjectivities of China-Lao connectivities. In making this argument, the paper uses Laos as a case study to demonstrate the need for broader nuance within academia regarding the normative adoption of BRI discourses as a new, encompassing, 'sense-making' tool for explaining China's 'presence' within BRI-partner countries. The analysis presented here draws on approximately 14 months fieldwork examining China-Lao development cooperation in Laos, undertaken between 2011 and 2018.

Kearrin Sims is a lecturer of Development Studies at James Cook University (JCU). He is the program convenor of JCU's Master of Global Development, a Research Fellow at JCU's Cairns Institute, and Chair of the University's Sustainable Development Working Group. Prior to coming to JCU, Kearrin lectured at the University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University. Kearrin is the author of scholarly and mainstream publication outputs on a wide range of development topics, including: "Teaching Development Studies in Times of Change", *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* (2018); "Casino Enclaves, Development and Poverty Alleviation in Laos", *Pacific Affairs* (2017), and; "Culture, community-oriented learning and the post-2015 development agenda: a view from Laos", *Third World Quarterly* (2015). He was a founding member of the Association of Mainland Southeast Asian Scholars (AMSEAS) and the Development Studies Association of Australia (DSAA). Kearrin is a critical development scholar with research training in Sociology and International Relations. He has a particular interest in China's contribution to development transformations within Mainland Southeast Asia.

**The Soft Infrastructure of Belt and Road:
Imaginaries, Affinities, and Subjectivities in Chinese Transnational Education**

Yi'En Cheng

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Drawing upon ongoing research using qualitative and ethnographic methods conducted at Xiamen University and its overseas campus, Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM), this paper provides a critical reading of transnational education as a component of the soft infrastructure of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We interrogate XMUM as an instance of broader Chinese efforts to internationalise higher education, to entrench Chinese transnational education as a form of soft infrastructure within wider geopolitical and cultural diplomacy in Asia, and as a transnational site in and through which new regional imaginaries, affinities and subjectivities are produced and contested.

We begin by discussing how XMUM is borne out of a particular co-construction of historical and cultural affinity centered around the revered figure of Tan Kah Kee between Chinese and Malaysia elites, and the ways in which this narrative is being disrupted and omitted by Chinese, international, and local students. We demonstrate the limited extent to which Chinese international students perform their role as cultural ambassadors in the host institution and city. We then show how students chart their imaginative geographies that center China in the new world economy and simultaneously decenter its place in their individual post-study aspirations and mobility desires.

In concluding, we argue that the imaginaries, affinities, and subjectivities that the BRI vision seeks to produce is unstable and provisional as they travel from state-led visions on paper to students' actually-existing realities. However, the students' grounded narratives and practices are not straightforward alternatives but rather they are also capable of reinforcing dominant Chinese scripts.

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**Re-encountering the Familiar Other:
Contesting “Re-Sinicization” in Thailand**

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China has now become the largest source of outbound tourism in the world, and Thailand is one of the most popular destinations. Currently numbered around 10 million per annum and constituting almost a quarter of the total tourists visiting Thailand (before Covid-19), Chinese tourists have started making a strong imprint on Thailand's tourist landscape. The influx of the Chinese tourists has created new challenges for the local Thai tourism industry as they bring with them distinct Chinese business practices and culturally specific consumption demands.

Sophisticated Chinese online tourism platforms and their local networks have created this service chain in Thailand whereby they set up shops, hotels, restaurants, car-hires, and package tours to serve the Chinese tourists. At the same time, there has been a new wave of Chinese migration to Thailand to look for business and working opportunities to service this large number of tourists. As a result, there are prevalent mainland Chinese language and cultural symbols in Thailand, but also there are increasing frictions between them and the local Thai businesses and community at large. This paper focuses on these new encounters between local Thais and the incoming mainland Chinese in terms of how cultural boundaries are created, contested and renegotiated, specifically within the context of Thailand's long history of Chinese migration a couple of generations prior. Using interviews and field observations, the paper investigates the phenomenon of “re-sinicization” in Thailand, and its contested nature within the broad Thai political and cultural milieu. The paper draws upon recent controversies regarding online battles between Thai and Chinese netizens and their divisive implications within the Thai political circles and the wider society. It argues that this is indicative of the unease of the increasing Chinese presence amidst Thai society and the increasing embroilment of Thailand within the political contestation of the wider Sinosphere.

Enze Han is Associate Professor at the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include ethnic politics in China, China's relations with Southeast Asia, especially with Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, and the politics of state formation in the borderland area between China, Myanmar and Thailand. Dr. Han received a PhD in Political Science from the George Washington University in the United States in 2010. Afterwards he was a postdoctoral research fellow in the China and the World Program at Princeton University. During 2015-2016, he was a Friends Founders' Circle Member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, USA. His research has been supported by the Leverhulme Research Fellowship, and British Council/Newton Fund. Prior to Hong Kong, Dr Han was Senior Lecturer in the International Security of East Asia at SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom.

**Social Construction of Backwardness and
the Othering of Cham Muslim in Cambodia under China's Dominance**

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The Mekong is one of the longest transboundary river running along the mainland of Southeast Asia. The headwater of Mekong River originates in Tibetan Plateau of China, making it the dominant upstream nation. The cascades of dams have been erected on the upstream in China. Some more are planned in the mid-reach of Mekong. These dams block rivers and redirect the water flow into reservoirs, storing up potential energy for hydroelectric power generation. Existing watershed communities, irrigation and fishery are usually sacrificed for this sort of unsustainable development. In Cambodia, many communities have resided near the major rivers. These people rely on the river for their subsistence of production. In the past two decades, China has been heavily investing in and industrialised Cambodia which determines the country's development. This empirical research is a study of a Muslim Cham riverside community in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. They are ethnic minorities living on fishing for generations along Tonlé Sap River. Their original settlement was resumed for urban development. These vulnerable people were relocated to the Mekong riverside which has less fishing yield after the river has been dammed. This paper argues that water hegemony, economic dependence and political patronage determined the development path of Cambodia. The ethnic Cham's riverside community at Phnom Penh and their subsistence way of production are socially constructed as backwardness as to pave the way for the economic benefit of China.

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Negotiating Indigenous Engagements of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia

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Based on long-term ethnographic study of the indigenous Mah Meri communities at Pulau Carey and Orang Seletar communities at Danga Bay, both in Peninsular Malaysia, I examine the changing relationship between the Indigenous peoples and the Chinese communities over time. I examine how the Indigenous communities' engagements with the Chinese communities have changed in the last decade with the emergence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Once perceived as natural allies by the coastal Orang Seletar and Mah Meri communities to resist and contest the hegemonic Malay-Muslim dominance in Malaysia, the Chinese communities have come under scrutiny as mainland Chinese investments under the BRI at Danga Bay and Pulau Carey have encroached on their native customary territories, and destroyed the natural environments which the Indigenous communities depend on for their livelihoods. Drawing on their oral histories, languages and other cultural practices which feature their ancestors' friendly engagements and instances of inter-marriages and cultural assimilation with the Chinese communities over centuries, I show how largely positive engagements of the Indigenous communities with the Chinese communities have been complicated by the recent encroachment of their native customary territories by Chinese investments promoted under the BRI. I demonstrate how the concept of 'Chinese-ness' is a social construct intersected by nationality, history, wealth and social class. In negotiating these complexities, the Indigenous communities seem to orient their grievances over the encroachment of their native customary territories towards the Malay-Muslim government in Malaysia, rather than the Chinese investors that give rise to these encroachments.

Yunci Cai is Lecturer in Museum Studies. She is co-director of the MA/MSc/PG Diploma in Heritage and Interpretation (distance learning) programme and co-leader to develop a new MA in Heritage Studies (campus-based) programme at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. Yunci holds a PhD in Museum and Heritage Studies and a Master of Arts with Distinction in Museum Studies, both from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London and a First-Class Honours in Geography from the National University of Singapore. She has interests about the cultural politics and museologies in and of Asia. Her forthcoming sole-authored monograph *Staging Indigenous Heritage* explores the politics of heritage-making at four indigenous cultural villages in Malaysia. She has been conducting research with the indigenous Mah Meri communities at Pulau Carey and Orang Seletar communities at Danga Bay, both in Peninsular Malaysia since 2014.

Sino-Vietnamese Children of the Border: Why Do They Matter?

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While several studies have been conducted on cross-border Vietnamese marriage migrants, their children have often been ignored or relegated to the role of occasional side appearances. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that the difficulties and marginalization faced by their mothers will impact their children's lives as well, thus more research is needed to find out the extent to which Sino-Vietnamese children struggle with low self-esteem, identity problems, marginalization and other similar issues.

By looking at existing studies on Sino-Vietnamese children, it is evident that even though they are generally able to obtain the Chinese citizenship, they still face enormous challenges in daily life, due to their difficult familiar circumstances and to the discrimination they often face in virtually all areas of life, which can create an adverse situation that is hard to get out from.

However, there is a possibility to create mutual benefits for them and for the local development, if the government chooses to invest into developing their potential cultural and linguistic abilities. Their problematic situation also prompts a reflection upon the bigger problems of multiculturalism and defining *Chineseness* in today's China, and highlights the need for further research to gain a better understanding of these matters.

Gabriella Angelini is a waiting-to-be PhD student in Anthropology. She obtained her MA in International Relations of Asia and Africa at the University of Naples L'Orientale in 2017, after spending time in China and Vietnam to study the local language and culture. In 2016, Ms Angelini has presented the preliminary results of her research project on the impact of the Trans-Pacific Partnership on the economy of Vietnam at the 3rd ItaSEAS (Italian Association of Southeast Asian Studies) Conference. And she has collaborated with the Italian online magazine *Il Caffè Geopolitico* analyzing Vietnamese foreign policy and following the 2016 elections. Currently her work interests have shifted onto questions of gender, family, and identity, with a special focus on Sino-Vietnamese cross-border families, but she keeps a more holistic interdisciplinary perspective derived from her previous studies.