

# THIRD CHINA MADE WORKSHOP

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CHINESE  
INFRASTRUCTURES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



PHOTO BY ALESSANDRO RIPPA

THIS IS THE FINAL WORKSHOP OF A THREE-YEAR INITIATIVE, FUNDED BY THE HENRY LUCE FOUNDATION, TITLED "CHINA MADE: ASIAN INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE 'CHINA MODEL' OF DEVELOPMENT." IT IS CO-HOSTED BY THE CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER, THE ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, AND THE ASIAN INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO.

17-20 MAY 2021

[ARI.NUS.EDU.SG/EVENTS/3CMW](http://ARI.NUS.EDU.SG/EVENTS/3CMW)



*This is the final workshop of a three-year initiative, funded by The Henry Luce Foundation, titled “China Made: Asian Infrastructures and the ‘China Model’ of Development.” It will be co-hosted by the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, and the Asian Institute at the University of Toronto.*

The workshop will bring together scholars from different fields in the social sciences and humanities to discuss contemporary Chinese infrastructure development in Southeast Asia. By placing empirically grounded research projects in conversation with theoretical work on materiality and techno-politics, the workshop will center on the lived experience of infrastructure built through public and private Chinese development initiatives and investments. The workshop starts from the assumption that the domestic “China Model” of economic and political development centers on infrastructure: the construction of roads, dams, electric grids, pipelines, airports and cities. Over the past two decades this has been extended further into social life through digital infrastructures, surveillance and media systems, transportation platforms, logistics systems, and the commercial infrastructures of brands and franchises. Taken together these infrastructural systems extend particular logics and shape life experience in deeply felt ways. The goal of this workshop is thus to examine how Chinese infrastructures transform the social worlds and natural landscapes that they encounter as they move beyond China into Southeast Asia—often framed as the first segment of the Belt and Road Initiative—and how these infrastructures, are in turn, transformed by that transferal.

The workshop will focus on fine-grained investigations of Chinese infrastructures in Southeast Asia, including the political, social, cultural, spatial, and environmental dimensions of infrastructure planning, construction, and use. By way of such an approach, the workshop aims to provide rich ethnographic studies and empirically rigorous projects that problematize the China model of development as well as assumptions regarding its effects. In doing this the workshop will seek to show that Chinese infrastructure development is shaped by more than China’s geopolitical ambitions, desires for market expansion, and the need for a spatial fix for Chinese surplus capital. It may, for example, demonstrate that infrastructures, thought of as a complex assemblages with particular dispositions, can also produce their own logics, propulsions and power over life. The workshop strives to produce new synergies across disciplines and areas of research, while intervening in critical theoretical discussions of infrastructure in social science and humanities scholarship in and outside of China and Southeast Asian Studies.

### *Convenors*

#### **DARREN BYLER**

Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Asian Studies, University of Colorado Boulder

#### **TIM OAKES**

Professor of Geography, University of Colorado Boulder

#### **YANG YANG**

Postdoctoral Fellow, Asia Research Institute, National University Singapore

#### **TIM BUNNELL**

Professor of Geography, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

#### **RACHEL SILVEY**

Professor of Geography, University of Toronto

17 MAY 2021

Singapore 2100–2300 HRS  
Boulder 0700–0900 HRS  
Toronto 0900–1100 HRS  
Italy 1500–1700 HRS  
Sydney 2300–0100 HRS

15MINS

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## WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

**TIM BUNNELL** | National University of Singapore

**TIM OAKES** | University of Colorado Boulder

**RACHEL SILVEY** | University of Toronto

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CHAIRPERSON

**TIM OAKES**

University of Colorado Boulder

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## PANEL 1 | THE GLOBAL CHINA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

By utilizing a more explicitly comparative lens across time and space, this panel considers the broader implications of the “China Model” of development. The papers here are seeking to understand global China as a field of power. By looking at a range of industries and sites of development from Laos to Indonesia they consider the way Chinese state capital has flown into these locations and its effects on local political and economic systems.

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10MINS

The Cooperation-Infrastructure Nexus: Translating the “China Model” into Southeast Asia

**TYLER HARLAN** | Loyola Marymount University

**JULIET LU** | Cornell University

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10MINS

Negotiating Dispossession, Resistance, and Contestation in a Fractured Ethnopolitical Landscape: Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Investment in Myanmar's Extractive Infrastructure

**ANGELA MIN YI HOU** | Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **EDWARD SCHATZ** | University of Toronto

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10MINS

State-Facilitated Development of Industrial Parks through the Belt and Road Initiative: The Chinese Model of Development and Local Contestations

**ANGELA TRITTO** | The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

**ALVIN CAMBA** | John Hopkins University

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10MINS

‘Fixing’ the Jakarta-Bandung Corridor through the Lens of the Belt and Road Initiative: Policy Mobility, State, and Capital

**TRISSIA WIJAYA** | Murdoch University

**GATRA PRIYANDITA** | The Australian National University

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **CHONG JA IAN** | National University of Singapore

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45MINS

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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18 MAY 2021

Singapore 0900–1100 HRS  
London 0200–0400 HRS

17 MAY 2021

Boulder 1900–2100 HRS  
Toronto 2100–2300 HRS

CHAIRPERSON  
**RACHEL SILVEY**  
University of Toronto

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## PANEL 2 | INFRASTRUCTURING ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

This panel brings together considerations of environmental futures and Chinese infrastructure to understand the materiality of overdevelopment and underdevelopment. The cases, which move from Beijing to Yunnan to Laos and Cambodia, suggest new and more nuanced ways of understanding how built systems, technological standards, and bureaucratic forms of power produce “nature” and shape social life.

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10MINS

Hustle through Infrastructure: Hydro-Politics and Chinese Land Grab in Vientiane, Laos

**WANJING (KELLY) CHEN** | Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **CHANG JIAT HWEI** | National University of Singapore

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10MINS

Producing Irrigated Landscapes: A Political Ecology of Chinese Development Finance in Cambodia

**W. NATHAN GREEN** | National University of Singapore  
**ROSA YI** | National University of Singapore

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10MINS

Unnatural Disasters: Landslides, Collapsed Mines, and Flash Floods on the China-Myanmar Border

**LAU TING HUI** | Yale-NUS College

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **EMILY T. YEH** | University of Colorado Boulder

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45MINS

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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19 MAY 2021

Singapore 2000–2300 HRS  
Boulder 0600–0900 HRS  
Toronto 0800–1100 HRS  
London 1300–1600 HRS

45MINS

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## KEYNOTE ADDRESS | BETCHA NICKEL: MANIFOLD ROUTES TO THE METROPOLITAN IN INDONESIA

CHAIRPERSON

**DARREN BYLER**

University of Colorado Boulder

**ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE** | The University of Sheffield

While Indonesian state supported Chinese extraction and processing apparatuses continue to unsettle long-honed practices of living across the archipelago, forcefully shaping particular trajectories of urbanization, these are intersected with a wide range of emerging sentiments, provisional sediments, and circuits of movement coming from "all over the place" that also outline new forms of metropolitan operations and extend urbanization beyond conventional forms.

15MINS

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

CHAIRPERSON

**DARREN BYLER**

University of Colorado Boulder

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## PANEL 3 | INFRASTRUCTURES OF URBAN LIFE YET TO COME

Through discussions of hustle, speed, momentum and making these papers conjure urban life yet to come from Hanoi to Yangon. Drawing on ethnographic explorations of the way infrastructures assemble the city they develop tools for understanding the effects of material dispositions on differently positioned populations. Together they propose a complex reading of the way urban social life across Southeast Asia is increasingly mediated, though not determined, by Chinese made infrastructure.

10MINS

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From International Revolution to International Speculation: The Afterlife of Revolutionary China's Infrastructural Fever in Contemporary Southeast Asia

**ZIXIAN LIU** | University of Toronto

10MINS

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Living the Zone as City-In-The-Making: Vision of Modernity, Space of Exception, or Another Day at the Office?

**JESSICA DICARLO** | University of Colorado Boulder

10MINS

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COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE** | University of Sheffield

10MINS

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"As Fast as Possible": Speculation, Speed, and Mediation in Yangon's New City

**COURTNEY T. WITTEKIND** | Harvard University

10MINS

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A Train Reaction: The Infrastructure Violence and Mobility (In)Justices Accompanying Hanoi's New Urban Railway Line 2A

**SARAH TURNER** | McGill University

**BINH NGUYEN** | McGill University

**MADELEINE HYKES** | McGill University

10MINS

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COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **MARINA KANETI** | National University of Singapore

45MINS

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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20 MAY 2021

Singapore 0900–1100 HRS  
London 0200–0400 HRS

19 MAY 2021

Boulder 1900–2100 HRS  
Toronto 2100–2300 HRS

CHAIRPERSON

**TIM BUNNELL**

National University of Singapore

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#### **PANEL 4 | MATERIAL POWER AND COMMUNITY AGENCY**

By considering the way rural and peri-urban communities negotiate rapid infrastructural change in Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, this panel examines the way the discursive promise and built reality of Chinese-built projects are perceived, lived, and, at times, resisted. By considering the way power is distributed through material systems the papers seek to develop an analytic of adaptation which speak to broader framings of human agency and community sovereignty.

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10MINS

**Free Trade Corridors on the China/Myanmar Border: Infrastructures of Labor (Im)Mobility**

**ELENA SHIH** | Brown University

**YE YINT KHANT MAUNG** | Yangon Base Policy Institute: Urbanize

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10MINS

**The Relentless Resistance: A Community-Based Environmental Movement against Chinese Transnational Infrastructure Projects in a Border Town, Thailand**

**PANITDA SAIYAROD** | University of Cologne

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **YANG YANG** | National University of Singapore

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10MINS

**Dreaming the 'Chinese Dream': Local Engagements with Chinese Promises of Infrastructure and Development in Northern Laos**

**SIMON ROWEDDER** | National University of Singapore

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10MINS

COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **DOROTHY TANG** | Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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45MINS

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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20 MAY 2021

Singapore 2100–2300 HRS  
Boulder 0700–0900 HRS  
Toronto 0900–1100 HRS  
London 1400–1600 HRS  
Tallinn 1600–1800 HRS  
Ankara 1600–1800 HRS

CHAIRPERSON

**YANG YANG**

National University of Singapore

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## PANEL 5 | CORRIDORS, ROUTES AND INFRASTRUCTURE LOGISTICS

Moving between focused case studies to the middle ground of institutional travel across transnational corridors and particular routes this panel considers the forms of turbulence, immobility, disjunction and visibility that are created by divisions and connections across space. It seeks to demonstrate the limits and surpluses of design, freedom, and logistics that is created by Chinese infrastructure systems from Myanmar to Vietnam.

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10MINS **Logistical Turbulence? Notes on the Deadly Life of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor**

**GEOFFREY AUNG (SOE LIN AUNG)** | Columbia University

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10MINS **China's Belt and Road Initiative: Designs and Disjunctions in Northern Myanmar**

**KARIN DEAN** | Tallinn University

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10MINS COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **JOSHUA BARKER** | University of Toronto

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10MINS **Building a Connected World: Politics of Space and Visibility along the New Silk Roads**

**SOLÈNE GAUTRON** | Heidelberg University

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10MINS COMMENTS BY DISCUSSANT **MAX HIRSH** | Hong Kong University

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45MINS **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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15MINS **CLOSING REMARKS**

**TIM BUNNELL** | National University of Singapore

**TIM OAKES** | University of Colorado Boulder

**RACHEL SILVEY** | University of Toronto

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**END OF WORKSHOP**

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## The Cooperation-Infrastructure Nexus: Translating the “China Model” into Southeast Asia

### **Tyler Harlan**

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### **Juliet Lu**

Atkinson Center for a Sustainability Future, Cornell University  
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China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often described as a “hard” infrastructure program of roads, railways, ports, and power plants. Indeed, since the BRI was announced in 2013, Chinese firms have launched major infrastructure investments and construction projects across the Global South, from Africa, to South America, to Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, while hard infrastructure is the most visible aspect of the BRI, China’s leaders frame it more broadly, emphasizing “soft” values of “mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness and learning, and win-win cooperation.” These values provide the stated rationale for a slate of Chinese development aid and cooperation activities under the banner of the BRI—for example, training sessions for water managers, scholarships for university students, technology transfer activities, and agricultural extension. Yet, this cooperation is often delivered by—or adjacent to—the same Chinese firms engaged in hard infrastructure projects. How, then, are we to understand the purpose and role of cooperation on the BRI?

In this paper, we assert that these “soft” cooperation initiatives work hand-in-hand with “hard” infrastructure projects in what we call the cooperation-infrastructure nexus. This nexus works in two parallel ways. On one hand, cooperation establishes discursive frames of China’s development experience as an example—or model—to follow. These framings of the ‘China model’ are not generally made explicit, but rather implied by through emphasis on China’s own technological achievements, construction prowess, and poverty alleviation successes. On the other hand, cooperation creates channels of material exchange and support that directly facilitate Chinese infrastructure projects in host countries. Indeed, for many participants, attending cooperation activities is simply a means to secure contracts, financing, and infrastructure investments. Cooperation and infrastructure on the BRI are thus inextricably linked.

To investigate this nexus, we draw on empirical research conducted in China and Laos in two industries: rubber and hydropower. Both industries expanded rapidly in China over the past three decades and are held up as models to follow; both are also the subject and target of numerous cooperation and infrastructure interventions in Laos and Southeast Asia. Our research spans over seven years and includes: more than one hundred interviews with Chinese firm managers, on-site project operators, cooperation activity organizers, and relevant national and provincial government officials; a similar number of interviews with Laos project managers, cooperation participants, and national and local government officials; participant observation in five cooperation activities; and many months of ethnographic observation in both China and Laos.

Rubber and hydropower are very different industries—with their own structures, dominant firms, and regulatory government agencies—but reveal similar strong connections between cooperation and infrastructure. In China, large state-owned farms began cultivating rubber in the 1950s in response to a Western embargo on rubber imports during the Korean War; in the 1990s, smallholders also converted land into rubber, and some established private rubber agribusinesses. These farms are heavily concentrated in southern Yunnan province, on the border of northern Laos. With this proximity, and the encouragement of national and provincial officials, Chinese firms started investing in rubber plantations



over the border in Laos in the mid-late 2000s, as well as contracting with Lao smallholder raw rubber suppliers. Alongside these investments, Chinese agribusinesses hosted training and agricultural extension programs for Laos farmers, promoting China's successful experience harnessing rubber for rural development and showcasing modern techniques. A common refrain in these encounters—and of Chinese and Lao rubber actors more broadly—is that Laos resembles the Yunnan of two decades ago, and that Laos could thus follow a similar rubber-led development model. Yet, overall, this cooperation has done little to advance Laos' own rubber industry, and has instead (in some cases) facilitated large-scale plantation investments by Chinese agribusinesses. The rubber sector in Laos today is thus a far cry from China's model across the border.

China's hydropower industry, meanwhile, is also actively engaged in Laos. China currently leads the world in domestic installed hydropower capacity, driven by large state-owned hydropower and energy enterprises. In Laos, these firms are involved in more than 30 dam projects, including the controversial Nam Ou seven-plant cascade. Yet, starting in the 1980s—long before hydropower construction in Laos began in earnest—the Chinese government was delivering training sessions for Southeast Asian officials and hydropower engineers. These annual training sessions continue today, both in China and in host countries (including Laos), and focus mainly on the role of small- and medium-sized hydropower plants in rural electrification. Chinese organizers highlight China's successful hydropower policies, offer tours of local plants, and provide technological training. As with rubber cooperation, however, the underlying purpose of this cooperation is to elevate China's hydropower model and facilitate infrastructure investments by Chinese firms, even if—as in Laos—the dams that are constructed are different than the model of rural electrification on which they are ostensibly based.

Our case studies thus reveal that Chinese cooperation activities in Laos both frame and facilitate the establishment of rubber and hydropower investments. The infrastructure established on the ground, however, rarely resemble the domestic "China model" upon which it is discursively based. Instead, we find that important obstacles and contradictions arise in translating China's domestic achievements into other country contexts. Our findings show the need to consider cooperation initiatives as inseparable from infrastructure investments, while acknowledging the jarring disconnect between discourses of a China model and experiences on the ground.

**Tyler Harlan** is an environmental economic geographer interested in the interplay of energy and climate policy, natural resource management, and development in China, and the implications of China's low-carbon transition for other industrializing countries.

**Juliet Lu** is dedicated to driving global rubber supply chains to be more sustainable and inclusive. Specifically, her PhD dissertation documents how Chinese agribusiness firms adapt to new social and political challenges and affect trajectories of sustainable development as they move beyond China's borders. She has a keen interest in how Chinese rubber investments transform landscapes, livelihoods, and state control in the Sino-Lao borderlands.

## Negotiating Dispossession, Resistance, and Contestation in a Fractured Ethnopolitical Landscape: Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Investment in Myanmar's Extractive Infrastructure

**Angela Min Yi Hou**

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From the Letpadaung copper mine to the Kyaukphyu-Kunming pipelines, Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) investments in Myanmar are more than sites of resource extraction and infrastructure development. In Myanmar, China's resource-for-infrastructure model is brought to life through capital disbursement to SOEs, which implement projects in partnership with host institutions. However, the blurred boundaries of public and private domains—including the state affiliation of SOEs and disputed armed sovereignties challenging Naypyidaw in ethnic frontier regions—complicate the context of China's economic presence. Chinese capital often operates in navigation of inter-elite brokerage and illicit networks.

This paper examines Chinese SOE investment in Myanmar's extractive sectors as sites of dispossession, resistance, and political contestation. Communities surrounding investment sites have reported exploitative practices such as land expropriation and ecological degradation, mirroring China's domestic experiences with state capitalism. In Myanmar, the mobilization of resistance is further situated in efforts to define new rights discourses, as the country grapples with decentralization as a nascent democracy. In ethnic minority regions, Chinese investment is engaged in the contestation for political power, as transactions simultaneously occur with minority insurgencies and Tatmadaw-linked conglomerates.

This amalgamation of controversies reflects Chinese SOEs' deficient soft power and 'social license' in Myanmar, despite large-scale economic influence. In other words, SOEs are simultaneously hindered and helped by an opaque regulatory environment. The projection of power through capital alludes to an intricate and fractured assemblage of political actors, rendering Chinese state-owned investment in Myanmar a case study of rich analytical value to understand China's growing global significance.

**Angela Min Yi Hou** is a Masters of International Affairs candidate at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Switzerland. She specializes in environment, resources and sustainability, with a secondary focus in trade and finance. Angela is a recent graduate of the International Relations and Contemporary Asian Studies programs at the University of Toronto in Canada. Her academic interests include China's evolving role in global governance, plurilateral summitry, and international trade law and policy. Since November 2018—when Angela first participated in field research in Yangon, Myanmar, exploring the interlinkages between gender, democracy, and decentralization—she has pursued an academic interest in the ecological and political implications of Chinese state-owned enterprise investment in Myanmar's extractive industries and infrastructure networks. In her professional endeavors, Angela is currently serving as an intern under China's LDCs and Accessions Programme in the Accessions Division of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

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## State-Facilitated Development of Industrial Parks through the Belt and Road Initiative: The Chinese Model of Development and Local Contestations

### **Angela Tritto**

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### **Alvin Camba**

Department of Sociology, John Hopkins University  
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The expansion of Chinese-led industrial parks provides a clear example of what China's state-facilitated development looks like. Our paper discusses this type of Chinese infrastructure and analyses its model in relation to the Chinese experience domestically and overseas. By examining the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (Central Sulawesi, Indonesia) and the Malaysia China Kuantan Industrial Park (Pahang, Malaysia), we argue that Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly industrial parks, are localized by host country contestation. While the Chinese firms bring about intended efficiency of a vastly integrated industrial parks with the linkages with Chinese firms abroad, key aspects and the goals of the parks are also shaped by the contestation of host country actors. In other words, industrial parks are products of interacting Chinese and host country goals, norms, and mobilizations. As both parks were located in relatively undeveloped areas, Chinese firms brought in new technologies and expanded investment scale in both countries, attaining foreign investment benefits, cheap labor, and new competitive edge. The firms brought in a "developmental" model that prioritises economic development over environmental and social protection, leading to ecological degradation, limited labor mobility, and transformation of the local landscapes. However, this "Chinese" model is ultimately localized by the host country. In Malaysia, a market-oriented government spurred the MCKIP's investments in the underdeveloped state of Pahang, resulting in an export platform that imports ore, manufactures steel products, and exports to the West. This model's outcome is intended to simply generate employment and revenues, a product of Malaysia's market-oriented development model. In Indonesia, the country's long-held dreams to pursue industrialization resulted in a park that exchanges access to high-grade nickel for some technology transfer, upgraded smelting capacities, and expanded social amelioration programs. Indeed, this development model somewhat is reflected of import substitution industrialization. Overall, our paper shows how contestation combined local norms with the Chinese-designed parks.

**Angela Tritto** (PhD, City University of Hong Kong), is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Division of Public Policy and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Emerging Market Studies, HKUST. She is currently working on three interrelated research projects on the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia, while teaching her own course on China and the World. Her research interests include management of innovation, environmental policies and technologies, heritage management, and sustainable development. She recently published several works in collaboration with a team of international scholars on the sustainability of the Belt and Road Initiative. Her past publications examine environmental innovations and the role of institutions in the management of World Heritage Sites in China and Malaysia.

**Alvin Camba** is a Sociology PhD Candidate at Johns Hopkins University. He is also a non-resident fellow at the Stratbase ADR Institute in Metro Manila and Paramadina Institute for Public Policy in Jakarta. Alvin has been awarded multiple best graduate research paper awards by sections of the American Sociological Association (ASA), funded by foundations or research institutions (e.g. The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, The Smith Richardson Foundation, Southeast Asia Research Group), and contributed to policy reports (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Center for Integrated and Private Enterprises). His research on Chinese capital in Southeast Asia has been published in top development journals, such as *Development and Change*, *Environmental Policy and Governance*, and *Extractive Industries and Society*. He has been presented his work at the World Bank, AidData, the US Embassy in the Manila. He has been interviewed by *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg*, as well as consulted by Southeast Asian politicians and policy makers about China's growing role in Southeast Asia.

## 'Fixing' the Jakarta-Bandung Corridor through the Lens of the Belt and Road Initiative: Policy Mobility, State, and Capital

### Trissia Wijaya

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This study is the first academic attempt to critically unpack the political imaginaries of the Jakarta-Bandung Corridor, hallmarked as the first major project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Indonesia. Since the early 2010s, the pursuit of foreign capital for Indonesia's infrastructure development has become a central political objective. Thus, when the BRI was first announced in 2013, there was much enthusiasm among members of the Indonesian political elite, who saw the BRI as an opportunity to tap into China's huge financial resources. Over the years, Chinese investment had been centrally incorporated to support infrastructure development and spatial planning, in the form of corridors that aim to help overcome Indonesia's serious infrastructure deficit. These corridors, which aim to integrate logistical and production networks, are widely seen as engines of economic growth and employment that help to address a wide range of urban and economic issues (Ougaard 2018; Schindler and Kanai 2019). The most prominent of these corridors is the Jakarta-Bandung Corridor, which connects Indonesia's largest and third largest urban centres. Promoted heavily by the Indonesian government, Indonesian elites had hoped that the creation of the corridor could help foster economic development by increasing Chinese investment and import Chinese knowledge of economic and infrastructure development to Indonesia. Meanwhile, China has been an enthusiastic provider of foreign capital in developing this corridor, which has been described by Chinese Ambassador Xiao Qian as the 'epitome of China's BRI cooperation' (Xiao 2019).

Despite the corridor's fanfare, its development has been uneven and contradictory. In this paper, we seek to address this puzzle by uncovering the politics of the corridor's development. Following Painter (2006), we interpret the policymaking process in the corridor's development as a set of prosaic relations that tie together the state and other non-state actors in a way that offers opportunities and empowerment for both. Our research framework bridges critical studies on policy mobility and Harvey's concept of "spatial fix." We highlight how state and societal actors intervene in the corridor's development by proposing specific solutions to finding "fixes" to address certain economic and social objectives, including green development, spurring job creation, and infrastructure building. Policy mobilities conceptualise urban planning strategies as social products that move across places and constantly evolve with diverse actors and their respective interests (Temenos and McCann 2010; McCann 2011). Our primary proposition is that the uneven development of the corridor is a manifestation of the competing interests of local and transnational actors, who do not only attempt to find spatial fixes, but also ecological and product fixes. The actors involved reproduce and reshape the political imaginary of the corridor, for their own purposes, and compete to influence elite regulators to determine the corridor's spatial fix.

In making the above argument, we pursue two lines of inquiry. First, we examine the range of actors involved in the creation of the corridor. We find that this corridor not only attracts the interests of local governments and the private sector, but also civil society organizations, such as those involved in brokerage. Second, we examine the practices employed by these actors to pursue their objectives in finding their fixes. We identify three sets of practices: convergence, disobedience, and display. By *convergence*, actors work with other like-minded actors to share expertise, share best-practices, and pursue other shared objectives. For example, the construction of the high-speed railway between Jakarta

and Bandung was driven by cooperation between Indonesian state-owned enterprises and their Chinese counterparts, which aim to import Chinese experiences of high-speed railway construction. By *divergence*, actors contravene laws and norms in their fixes-finding activities in which different fractions of capital—not only those from China—try to take advantage of the corridor project to suit their material interests, leading to the continuous expansion in the production of “fixes,” such as in microfinancing and property. For example, the limits of the regulatory framework over peer-to-peer (P2P) lending in Indonesia have constantly been pushed and violated by Chinese foreign investors and Indonesian businesses, who consider regulations too cumbersome. Finally, by *displaying*, actors make public specific issues. For example, local governments frequently reference export models from China, such as the park city-models associated with Shenzhen, as a means of integrating Indonesia with foreign firms.

Focusing on the Jakarta-Bandung corridor provides insight into the way that models of infrastructure are developed, narrated, and reproduced. Our paper draws on examples from a range of cases to convey the varied nature of actors and practices that constitute policy mobility. In particular, the examples used are drawn from research projects written by the authors, conducted within the past four years, both individually and in collaboration with other authors. Our methodology utilizes mixed qualitative methods, which includes interviews with key informants and analysis of secondary materials.

**Trissia Wijaya** is a PhD candidate at the Asia Research Center, Murdoch University, with a focus on political economy of infrastructure governance and green development in Indonesia. She has five years of experience conducting research in China, Japan, and Indonesia and her research interests revolve around Chinese and Japanese infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia. Her thesis compares the political economy of Chinese and Japanese infrastructure regime in Indonesia. Using mixed-methods approaches, her research specifically explores three interrelated themes: (1) infrastructure and regime of accumulation, (2) alliance and social forces, and (3) politics of scale. Her research has been published in academic journals and she also contributes to popular outlets and think tank reports. From Spring to Fall 2019, she was a Visiting Research Fellow at the IDE-JETRO, Tokyo. Prior to her PhD candidature, she was a research assistant at China Research Group, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto.

**Gatra Priyandita** is a PhD candidate at the Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU). His thesis examines the causes of Indonesian state behaviour in response to the rise of China since the end of the Cold War. A security studies scholar by training, he is also interested in studies of East Asian history, particularly the formation of state identities, and comparative politics. He has written opinion editorials and articles on Indonesian foreign policy and Chinese foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Prior to his PhD candidature, he was a research assistant at Jinan University. He received a Bachelor of Asia-Pacific Security (Honours) from the ANU in 2014.

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## Hustle through Infrastructure: Hydro-Politics and Chinese Land Grab in Vientiane, Laos

**Wanjing (Kelly) Chen**

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As a city situated on the easily inundated alluvial plain of the Mekong River, Vientiane was historically produced through a series of state efforts to tame water for permanent human settlement. The inconsistent and uncoordinated interventions during the colonial and socialist times left the city with a web of rudimentary water infrastructure that mix the functions of flood attenuation, swage drainage and irrigation together. Its structural problems have emerged to be a key challenge in contemporary urban governance as the city experienced rapid expansion and industrialization during Laos' neoliberal economic reform since the 1990s. The situation inspired an opportunistic Chinese real estate developer to leverage infrastructure for land grab at the turn of 2010s. It proposed to provide a wholesome infrastructural upgrade to That Luang Marsh, a peri-urban wetland that assumed the central role in the city's water governance, in exchange for 365 hectare's land in the surrounding area. As the project rolled into implementation, the developer Wanfeng primed extracting short-term profit through land speculation but delayed in delivering the infrastructure development it promised. Consequently, That Luang Marsh today is left with unfinished wastewater treatment plants and drainage canals.

This paper focuses on the materiality produced by Wanfeng's infrastructural hustle and its complicated social, economic, and ecological ramifications. Drawing on data collected through 14 months' ethnographic fieldwork in Vientiane and archival analysis, I trace the historiography of the city's waterscape and dissect how the techno-political interventions from the speculative Chinese capital further exacerbate its pre-existing structural problems. Additionally, zooming into the communities dwelled on the greater surrounding of That Luang Marsh, which have been most affected by the dynamics, I highlight its contingent and uneven implications for the local. While many fell victim to the severe flooding issues created by half-finished infrastructure development, some of the residents also manage to eke out fortune by venturing into small businesses related to land reclamation. Their improvised livelihood strategies continue to shape the infrastructure-mediated speculative urbanization in Vientiane Laos.

**Wanjing (Kelly) Chen** received her PhD in geography from University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2020. Her research focuses on the relation between state and capital in the ongoing globalization of Chinese political economy. Her current project examines how the Chinese government mobilizes the offshoring of capital from afar by invoking the imaginative geography of 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR). Following the footprint of Chinese investors who are lured by the vision into Laos, she demonstrates how their discrete and improvisational practices of investment making collectively work to bring OBOR into reality.

## Producing Irrigated Landscapes: A Political Ecology of Chinese Development Finance in Cambodia

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China has recently built irrigation systems in Southeast Asia with the aim of growing rural economies by intensifying agricultural production for export. Some scholars have argued that such infrastructure functions as a spatial-fix for over-accumulated Chinese capital following the 2007/2008 financial crisis (Harvey 2020; Zhan and Huang 2017). Geopolitical rivals of China—for example, the US State Department—maintain that this kind of investment is aimed to bolster Chinese control over countries as a form “debt-trap diplomacy” (Brautigam 2020). Combining these economic and geopolitical arguments, food regime scholars have proposed that fixed-capital investments in infrastructure investment are part of an emerging Chinese food regime. Chinese state-capital has supported its domestic agribusiness and construction firms to influence agro-food trade and production at the international scale (Belesky and Lawrence 2019; McMichael 2020). This latter argument is informed by the idea that there is a Chinese variety of capital based on logics of “encompassing accumulation” in which profit maximization is balanced with strategic geopolitical and resource access priorities (Lee 2014).

However, research in Southeast Asia has shown that such meta-narratives of Chinese state-capital fail to account for the conjunctural outcomes of fixed capital investments in infrastructure. Scholars have highlighted, in particular, how Chinese infrastructures are shaped by multi-scalar regulations, political economies, and resistance (Chen 2020; Dwyer 2020; Kenney-Lazar 2019). Our paper builds on this scholarship, not only by analyzing empirically how Chinese state-capital lands on the ground, but more importantly, by combining the “production of nature” concept from Marxian geography with theories of techno-politics (Swyngedouw 1999). The production of nature refers to the transformation of human-nature relations by investing in the built environment to enable capital accumulation (Smith 2008). In contrast, theories of techno-politics see capital circulation as but one actor in larger networks of landscape rationalization (Mitchell 2002). To draw a link between these approaches, Ekers and Loftus (2013) have argued for revitalizing the production of nature thesis by identifying concrete, rather than abstract, capital-labor relations by situating labor within specific technological, social, and ecological networks.

We use this theoretical framework to analyze the Kanhhot Irrigation Development Project in the northwestern Cambodian province of Battambang. This project was constructed in 2013 by China’s Guangdong Foreign Construction Company with a US\$49 million concessional loan from the Export-Import Bank of China. At the time, Kanhhot was the largest irrigation scheme in Cambodia, irrigating a planned 44,000 hectares in Battambang Province. Importantly, the Kanhhot project was part of a larger “coordinated credit space” of Chinese investments in Cambodia (Chin and Gallagher 2019). In the past decade, China has become the largest source of foreign direct investment and development aid in Cambodia. Chinese central government officials have negotiated with leaders in the ruling Cambodia People’s Party a package of investments in irrigation, road projects, agro-food processing, and agricultural extension. This foreign capital aims to boost agricultural productivity in the region to diversify Chinese grain imports (Zhang 2019), facilitate the “going out” of Chinese construction and agri-business firms (Grimsditch 2017), and bolster China’s geopolitical ties with Cambodia at a time when European and United States diplomatic influence is in decline (Blake 2019; Strangio 2020).



The Kanghot Irrigation Development Project is thus an appropriate case to study the logics and effects of Chinese infrastructures. We argue that Kanghot has transformed social-natural relations in ways that have contributed to an agrarian crisis of labor (Bernstein 2009). Specifically, Kanghot irrigation has enabled some farmers to practice double cropping as part of Cambodia's 2010 national policy to become a competitive rice commodity exporter. In doing so, however, Kanghot irrigation has reworked agro-ecological processes, alongside access to water, exposing small farmers to a greater risk of drought, pest damage, and household indebtedness. Unable to reproduce themselves despite gaining access to irrigation, many farm households now migrate for wage-labor, sell their land in distress, or both. By interpreting these changes in terms of a revitalized production of nature thesis, we bring in a wider network of actors, materialities, and circuits of capital accumulation to understand the outcomes of Chinese fixed capital investment in irrigation.

Our argument is based on data gathered through mixed methods research. In 2019, the first author worked with a local research team from the University of Battambang to carry out 240 household surveys about rice agriculture in Battambang. The survey collected detailed information about rice cultivation practices in 2000 and 2018 to compare change over time. Twenty households were selected randomly from 12 villages in four of the main rice-growing districts in Battambang, including the two districts served by the Kanghot irrigation system. During the survey, the first author also collected qualitative data through follow-up questions with 60 households as well as approximately 40 semi-structured interviews with a variety of informants, including state authorities, bank staff, merchants, millers, and agronomists. In November 2020, the second author conducted an additional 15 interviews with farmers and state authorities to clarify data from the survey and gain additional information related to Kanghot. We have also conducted an extensive literature review of secondary source documents about Kanghot and Chinese investments in Cambodia, particularly English language news media and government planning documents.

This paper advances scholarship on Chinese infrastructure in Southeast Asia. It offers a theoretical framework to explain how irrigation is a techno-political vehicle for circulating capital by reassembling social-natural relations in ways that often undermine the purported goals of Chinese development aid. Moreover, for scholars of global China studying recent foreign policies like the Belt and Road Initiative, this theoretical approach explains why the outcomes of Chinese fixed-capital infrastructure are both shaped by, and transform, pre-existing landscapes of production in ways not easily predicted by meta-narratives of a spatial-fix or debt-trap diplomacy.

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**Rosa Yi** is a PhD student in the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore where he is an awardee of the NUS-Harvard Yenching Institute Joint PhD scholarship. He holds an MA in International Relations from Waseda University in Japan. Previously, he lectured at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, where he taught about international development and policy studies. His PhD research examines agrarian change in Cambodia in the context of smallholder farming, migration, and late capitalist industrial precarity.

## Unnatural Disasters: Landslides, Collapsed Mines, and Flash Floods on the China-Myanmar Border

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Located on the borders of China, Myanmar, and Tibet in the Eastern Himalayas, the Nu River Valley is a critical site for China's infrastructure push into Southeast Asia and beyond. Since the early 2000s, Chinese state infrastructure projects, including hydropower stations, bridges, and roads, have transformed the valley's landscape. Most recently, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, a major road construction project is slated to link the valley to Tibet and India. The Lisu—a transnational, mostly Christian Indigenous group that forms the majority in the valley—have been grappling with the consequences of these initiatives. Since the inception of the infrastructure push, traffic accidents, landslides, and flooding have increased in frequency. As some Lisu say, “The bigger the roads, the more people die.”

While Chinese authorities pursue the grand dream of a China-centered imagined community through infrastructure development, minority and periphery communities face the on-the-ground reality of death and disasters brought about by these endeavors. Imagined communities are predicated on the active unimagining of communities deemed superfluous. Such unimagined communities include Indigenous and minority people like the Lisu, who are perceived in Chinese official discourses as backward, primitive, and uncivilized. In this paper, I examine how Lisu negotiate with the violence of development by reframing infrastructure development and associated accidents and disasters in Christian and Indigenous Lisu cosmological terms. I argue that Lisu reframing of disasters in cosmic terms constitutes a myth-making technique through which Lisu subsume Chinese state power within a wider reimagined cosmic community. Contemporary Chinese ideologies of development draw on Confucian universalisms that define civilization as progress from barbaric nature toward civilized culture. Countering these ideologies, Lisu relativize the Chinese civilizational narrative. In Lisu myths, nature, culture, spirits, and God are dynamically entwined. Landslides are not natural but God's punishments. Accidents are not random but spirit disturbances. According to these Indigenous reimaginings, the hubris of Chinese secular development that forcefully separates human from environment, spirits from their homes, and God from the world is the root cause of death and disaster. These narratives minimize Chinese secular and scientific development discourses by highlighting how Chinese science and development are merely one cultural understanding of how to live.

I have been working with Christian and non-Christian Lisu subsistence farmers in the Nu River Valley since 2009. Throughout my fieldwork, I lived and farmed alongside these subsistence farmers. Between 2015 and 2017, I conducted two years of continuous fieldwork in the valley, experiencing one of the most severe landslide seasons of the decade in 2016. In this paper, I draw on Lisu narratives, dreams, and lived experiences of surviving and witnessing landslides and accidents to examine how Lisu reorder their world in the face of developmental disruption.

In the Nu River Valley, accidents, landslides, and flash floods have been occurring with increasing frequency since the early 2000s. Chinese authorities hide the rise of accidental deaths associated with development behind the spectacle of modern high-rises, concrete bridges, and wide roads. Red banners, posters, and TV shows display the glories of development, but never do authorities discuss the death toll involved in these projects. Similarly, they dismiss landslides and flash floods as “natural disasters” resulting from “continuous heavy rain” (持续强降雨). Rather than symptoms of development, accidents and disasters are interpreted in official discourses as evidence of the backwardness of the Nu River Valley. The valley is portrayed as a harsh terrain desperately in need of development. These discourses reproduce the image of the Lisu as victims of natural conditions waiting to be rescued by benevolent

Chinese development apparatus. Lisu subsistence farmers tell a different story. For many Lisu, there is nothing accidental or natural about these disasters. Many Christian Lisu consider landslides, accidents, and floods to be calculated divine retributions against humans blinded by technological hubris. They suggest that God is angry because human-led development projects are upsetting the sublime beauty of the world. Landslides are God's wrath, cleansing the world of sin. Non-Christian Lisu similarly believe the accidents are a result of spirits whose resting places have been disturbed by development. New road construction has displaced their tombs. Unable to rest properly, spirits and ancestors cause chaos and trouble among the living. Christian and non-Christian mythic stories that causally link infrastructure development, accidents, and disaster constitute counternarratives that reframe Chinese development within a wider reimagined cosmic universe. These narratives articulate experiences and perspectives that lie otherwise hidden, silenced, and dismissed.

In Asia, development and the nation are coterminous postcolonial projects. Benedict Anderson (1983) analyzes the nation state as an imagined community. For Anderson, mass media outlets such as newspapers, TV, and radio were the cornerstone for the formation of imagined national communities. Social media has deepened the relevance of Anderson's argument. Yet the imagining of the nation extends not only through mass and social media but also materially, on the ground, through capital accumulation via infrastructure and development projects (Yeh 2013). Chinese infrastructure development projects penetrating through its peripheries and beyond is a material manifestation of the Chinese imagined community. These projects are often framed as forms of south-south co-operation that provide a non-Western alternative development model. But like any development, these projects also involve the active unimagining of communities (Nixon 2010). Communities whose existences are not in line with the agenda of the nation are displaced from their land, erased from historical consciousness, and assimilated into the nation-state imagining. The Lisu are actively grappling with these processes of eradication. But rather than simply being unimagined away, they agentively draw on cultural resources to re-imagine communities in the face of disruption and damage. Drawing on Ashis Nandy's (1983, 1995) notion of mythmaking, I analyze Lisu cosmic understandings of development as a way of re-ordering hierarchy and making sense of uncertainty.

Lisu narratives about landslides and disasters bring to light experiences silenced by the hegemony of Chinese development. Imbuing landslides and floods with supernatural powers, Lisu contain Chinese state authority within wider cosmological orders. The Lisu's spiritual and religious knowledge paradigms disturb the colonial binaries and racist hierarchies that form the backbone of Chinese imagined community. For many Lisu, the developmentalist discourse that insists on the strict distinction and gradation between nature and culture is causing havoc in human-spirit-environmental relations. Lisu myths belie and counteract the myth of Chinese universalisms. Highlighting the human causes of accidents and disasters, Lisu refuse to absolve the Chinese government from responsibility and point to development as the real disaster.

**Lau Ting Hui** hails from Limbang, Sarawak, East Malaysia. She received her BA in Land Economy from the University of Cambridge with specialization in customary land tenure and indigenous land rights. Lau received her PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology from Cornell University in 2020 and will be starting an appointment as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Yale-NUS College in January 2021. Her book in progress, *Wounds of Progress: Colonial Development and the Politics of Affliction on the China-Myanmar Border*, examines the rise of afflictions such as haunting and alcohol madness among the Lisu, a transnational indigenous community, in the context of Chinese state expansion. The book argues that such afflictions constitute political speech acts that protest colonial domination when other means for expressing dissent are not viable. Combining medical, psychological, and environmental anthropology with decolonial feminist theories, Lau's work seeks to rethink normative assumptions about what counts as the political, who economic development is for, and how to achieve well-being. Her continuing research agenda includes more-than-human anthropology, Asian colonialisms, and transnational indigenous social movements in Southeast Asia.

## From International Revolution to International Speculation: The Afterlife of Revolutionary China's Infrastructural Fever in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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With a large number of projects like Forest City, Yangon New City, and Kamchay Hydropower Dam, the expansion of Chinese infrastructure development across Southeast Asia has drawn wide scholarly and media attention (Blanchard, 2018; Bloomberg News, 2017; Callahan, 2016; FMT Reporters, 2017; Moser, 2018). Previous research raises questions about the neocolonial ambition hidden in the "China model of development" that centered on extensive infrastructure construction (and speculation) (Blanchard, 2018; Callahan, 2016; Moser, 2018). Certainly, as much as has been done, it is important to criticize that a nation-state usually is a driving force behind an expansionist infrastructure regime. However, one question that surfaces in this state-centric style of critique is that the infrastructure regime is detached from its historical trajectory and political economy. Unintendedly or intendedly in some cases, this state-centric approach produced a critique of neocolonialism without being critical of history and capital.

Focusing on some of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private property developers, this long-term study is based on historiographical and ethnographic research. My research traces the growth of the Chinese infrastructure regime in Southeast Asia to an unlikely origin: an infrastructural boom in Mao's China. Then, it situates the rise of such a regime in how the global neoliberal turn exerted its influence in a specific Asian context. I argue that in addition to a centrally planned state-driven expansion, the historical origin of the Chinese infrastructure regime can also be traced back to local initiatives of development and speculation across the Mao and the post-Mao eras.

Through archival research and oral history, my study reveals that even before the 1978 Reform, local party bureaucrats and SOE managers in China were quite familiar with using a series of speculative strategies common in nowadays Southeast Asia for their personal pursuits of capital. These strategies include leveraging with government investment, and getting access to cheaper labor and resources by inviting state agencies to participate in speculation. The patterns and practices of speculation already emerged in China's infrastructural fever in the 1960s and the 1970s. In this period, in addition to the Cultural Revolution, the communist leadership was equally concerned with a potential nuclear war and the lack of infrastructure in socialist construction. These anxieties led to a surge in military, industrial, and energy infrastructure construction until the end of Mao's reign (Contemporary China Series Editorial Board, 2009; Meyskens, 2020). With overwhelmed pressure coming from campaign-style industrialization and the inefficiency of the planned economy, local SOE managers and party bureaucrats turned to "creative" solutions. They relied on informally recruited cheap labor, construction materials from black markets, and the second economy, the socialist variation of the informal economy, for completing construction targets and pursuing personal gains.

The infrastructure regime's relentless pursuits of personal and corporate capital accumulation in the Southeast Asian market surfaced in the post-Mao era. On the one hand, after China moved away from a planned economy centered on the heavy industry in the post-socialist era, less competitive state-owned infrastructure builders found themselves in desperate need of foreign clients and markets. On the other hand, Chinese SOEs with cheap labor and construction expense became a lucrative leverage tool for overseas capital. During this period, through several "prototypes" of early Chinese infrastructure construction projects in Southeast Asia, local initiatives of SOEs and later private contractors played an important role in building the foundation of an infrastructural empire.

This paper then turns to the specific case of Forest city to further prove the necessity of complicating common assumptions regarding the China model of development. One of the largest private property developers in China, Country Garden Holdings, cooperated with a state development company, Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor, to build Forest City, a private gated residential community (Moser, 2018). What may sound surprising is that many Chinese private property developers actually benefited from the socialist infrastructural legacy as well. Country Garden Holdings' founder was a construction worker in the Mao era and later began to climb the ladder in the business world as a subcontractor for SOEs' public infrastructure projects (Sohu News, 2018). News media and academic critiques point out that by targeting at Chinese buyers, Forest City creates a "permanent colony of Chinese nationals in another country" and "reflects China's growing influence and its expansionist goals" (Moser, 2018, p. 936). It should be noted that it would be misleading to overestimate the state support in the case of Forest City as the Chinese state later implemented strict controls on sending money overseas for property purchase (Ong, 2017). Currency controls led to a huge decrease in the sales and property value of Forest City. In many cases, an expansionist infrastructural regime does not need a strong central state to coordinate and plan everything. In a convenient speculative environment provided by the neoliberal turn, it is the capital-driven speculation that in many respects lead the development of such an expansionist regime, and provide lessons for an expansionist state to follow.

Finally, this article contends that the continuation of speculative practices in Southeast Asia reflects the convergence of two economic and political processes. First, it is the extension of established patterns and practices of infrastructural speculation in socialist China's second economy. Second, it is about how the neoliberal logic of infrastructure began to penetrate into Asia. With the decline of authoritarian/socialist developmental states in East and Southeast Asia, infrastructural investment and construction are no longer deemed as merely not-for-profit public projects for the wellbeing of the citizenry and society (Caldentey, 2008; Shin & Kim, 2016). What echoes with the neoliberal distrust in public sectors is how reformers have been advocating the introduction of more market practices, such as the invitation to tender (ITT) and the build-operate-transfer (BOT) method, to development initiatives across East and Southeast Asia for improving efficiency and transparency. Speculative practices like financial leverage and outsourcing became something that can be tolerated or even encouraged. Socialist legacies and the rise of neoliberalism entangled in a twisted way, producing a set of values and principles as "investment guides" for Chinese public and private investors in Southeast Asia.

This historical account of the genealogy of the afterlife of socialist China's infrastructural fever in Southeast Asia reveals the multifarious evolvement of the expansion of an infrastructural regime. By providing new observations of the socialist legacy, the role of capital, and the global neoliberal turn, this paper complicates the state-centric critique of China's growing global influence and the expansion of the China model of infrastructure development.

With training in history, anthropology, and data analytics, **Zixian Liu** is currently studying in the PhD in History program at the University of Toronto. His areas of research are labor, infrastructure, carbon energy, and revolution. His dissertation, tentatively entitled *(De)constructing a Revolution: Labor, Energy, and Infrastructure in South China's Coal Capital, 1964-1978*, reveals that the production and usage of coal under socialism were integral to the formation of Chinese socialism and neoliberalism. His research attempts to think outside the boundary of human high politics, reflecting upon both human and non-human conditions in the Cold War and after. His broader interests cover ethnic minorities under state socialism, Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asian revolutions, and discourses on programming languages (Python).

## Living the Zone as City-In-The-Making: Vision of Modernity, Space of Exception, or Another Day at the Office?

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This paper documents the lived experiences surrounding a ‘global city’ in the making, as social and political relations coalesce around material infrastructures at the Laos-China border. Through ethnographic accounts of local villagers, Lao officials, Chinese laborers, and potential investors, I examine the effects of the construction of Boten Special Economic Zone in light of anticipated connectivity from the Laos-China Railroad and Economic Corridor. Boten is viewed as the “first stop” on the Belt and Road to Southeast Asia and is Laos’s most expensive megaproject to date. From remote village (pre-2003) to casino scandal (2007-2011), it is again under construction, revived for real estate, tourism, and logistics by a private Yunnan-based developer. More than a space of exception, Boten, like other new cities/zones planned along the railway, becomes a node of connection in a wider network. In parallel with a BRI push for industrial parks and zones, Laos’ strategy to turn land into capital has shifted away from agricultural production toward city-making, resulting in a sort of “turning land into real estate capital”. This paper operates on two levels, addressing transformations in landscapes as well as social worlds. First, I unpack the role of Chinese infrastructure in urban/rural transformation in northern Laos and, second, I demonstrate how zone infrastructure, in particular, reshapes social and political relations at the border. I aim to connect visions of BRI infrastructure with the lived experiences and at times unanticipated outcomes of their construction. I conclude by suggesting that current experiences of inclusion/exclusion presage who will be able to interact—socially, politically, and economically—in and across the landscape.

**Jessica DiCarlo** is a doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Colorado Boulder. She situates her research in critical development studies, political ecology, and infrastructure studies. Her regional expertise is centered in China, where she has worked in Yunnan, Liaoning, Tibetan regions, as well as Beijing and Shanghai. Her interest in Chinese borderlands led her to research in Nepal, India, and Laos. Her dissertation draws on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Laos and examines the construction and planning of the Laos–China Railway and economic zones to ground ‘global China’ in complex host contexts and histories. She is interested in connecting the large-scale infrastructures and their politics with the environments and lives that sustain them.

## “As Fast as Possible”: Speculation, Speed, and Mediation in Yangon’s New City

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In January 2015, thousands of villagers marched along “Progress Road” outside Yangon, Myanmar, hoisting placards and shouting slogans. Their intended audience was developers of the “New Yangon City Project,” a state-led plan to convert over 20,000 acres of farmland into a “modern” metropolis. That this Chinese-backed project had sparked popular protests—like the Myitsone Dam and Letpadaung Mine before it—surprised few. Protestors’ demands, however, were unanticipated: despite fears of expropriation at the hands of Chinese developers, residents called not only for the completion of this “new city,” but that it be built “as fast as possible.” Intimately familiar with delay and deferral, they demanded to reach the street’s implied destination: “We want progress. We’ve been stopped for too long.”

Bound to barren farmland, the residents of southwest Yangon have pursued strategies that, like the aforementioned protest, aim to jump-start a transition into a promised future. This paper examines such efforts, asking about an emerging class of newly-moneyed residents—brokers, real estate agents, and politicians—who have aligned themselves with their Chinese “bosses,” in order to achieve desired ends. In doing so, this paper problematizes conventional narratives about popular reactions to large-scale development projects, such as those included in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, demonstrating that, in some cases, those thought of as most threatened by Chinese infrastructural development are, in fact, their biggest promoters. Furthermore, it suggests that the growth of unstable, speculative markets is precisely what allows for residents’ continued pursuit of secure urban futures.

**Courtney T. Wittekind** is PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology and a Harvard-Mellon Urban Initiative Fellow. Her doctoral research pursues two lines of inquiry linked to urban development and economic insecurity in contemporary Myanmar (Burma). The primary component is an ethnographic study of the politics of infrastructural planning amidst uncertainty in southwest Yangon, a region undergoing rapid transformation as a result of the China-backed New Yangon Development Project, which aims to extend the city’s limits by over 20,000 acres. A second avenue of inquiry probes Myanmar’s broader political transition, proposing that local responses to the delays and deferrals of a large-scale, state-led development project may reveal related stances toward nascent reforms, with the pursuit of a “new nation” and a “new city” experienced as intimately interlinked. This research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Harvard’s Committee on General Scholarships. Prior to beginning her PhD, Wittekind completed an MPhil at the University of Oxford as a 2014 Rhodes Scholar and member of St Antony’s Programme on Modern Burma Studies. She also serves as a founder and editor of *Tea Circle*, an academic forum for new perspectives on Burma/Myanmar.

## A Train Reaction: The Infrastructural Violence and Mobility (In)Justices Accompanying Hanoi's New Urban Railway Line 2A

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In 2008, the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam approved a major infrastructure project for Hanoi, the country's capital city, namely the construction of an urban rail network consisting of eight lines spanning 318km. Line 2A, the first line of this 'Hanoi Urban Railway System', has been under construction since 2011. While originally slated for completion in 2013, it remains non-operational as of January 2021, with full-scale trial runs having just started in December 2020. Spanning 13 kilometers across the city centre, Line 2A has encountered more than just construction setbacks, with its reputation tarnished by contractor choice, accidents, and public skepticism over accessibility and convenience. Further, two-thirds of the original financing has come from preferential loans from China, conditional on the consultants, construction, and materials being sourced from China, sowing further seeds of doubt in local residents' minds.

This paper focuses on how Hanoi residents are relating to, experiencing, and negotiating this Chinese-Vietnamese infrastructure project. Our conceptual framing draws from debates emerging from the 'new mobilities paradigm', including concerns over mobility (in)justices and mobility frictions. We also turn to discussions stemming from the recent 'infrastructure turn', including the concept of infrastructural violence. Since the early 2000s, the 'new mobilities paradigm' has begun to focus "not simply on movement *per se*, but on the power of discourses, practices, and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects of both movement and stasis, demobilization and remobilization, voluntary and involuntary movement" (Sheller 2018: 11). The mobilities literature thus allows us to question the social, cultural, and political production of specific mobility options and provides conceptual tools to help us understand the impacts of infrastructure projects—such as an urban railway—with regards to entanglements of movement with power (Sheller and Urry 2006). In turn, mobility justice highlights "the need to call into question the disciplining and policing of embodied movement that goes into legitimizing normative forms of movement" (Vukov 2015: 113). One possible way to highlight mobility injustices and inequalities is to look for sites of 'friction', which require us to analyse when specific groups of individuals have their mobility limited and why this occurs (Cresswell 2014).

The 'infrastructural turn' supports the view that urban infrastructures are "complex assemblages that bring all manner of human, nonhuman, and natural agents into a multitude of continuous liaisons across geographic space" (Graham 2009: 11). Such scholarship challenges understandings of infrastructure as neutral, natural, or apolitical (Lemanski 2018), and instead attempts to shed light on the ways by which infrastructure—visible or invisible—is "social in every aspect" (Amin 2014: 138). Moreover, scholars argue that infrastructural violence emerges as infrastructure creates and upholds "processes of marginalization, abjection and disconnection" either actively or passively (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 402). Consequently, calls have been made for scholars to give greater attention to banal and mundane infrastructures and their societal impacts (Datta and Ahmed 2020).

Fieldwork for this study was completed between 2017 and early 2021 and included 70 semi-structured interviews with Hanoi residents spanning age groups, occupations, and socio-economic status. Interviewees were asked their opinions regarding the construction and funding of the urban railway, the likelihood they would use it, and other related questions. Sixteen motorbike taxi drivers, either 'traditional informal drivers' or connected to mobile application-based companies (e.g. GrabBike), were also interviewed, given the direct impact that the urban railway could have on their livelihoods. We also



interviewed key stakeholders including urban planners and relevant academics for their opinions regarding the railway's implementation, accessibility, and broader impacts.

Our results initially focus on perceptions and critiques of Line 2A from both the broader Hanoi residents group and motorbike taxi-drivers. The Line's intimate ties with Chinese financing and construction, along with reports of construction accidents, resulted in numerous pointed negative commentaries, arguably cementing long-standing socio-political critiques. Despite China currently being Vietnam's top trading partner, recent protests have occurred in Vietnam over concerns of Chinese domination via special economic zones, as well as maritime territory tensions, both rooted in historical frictions. We find interviewees very wary of riding Line 2A and, despite the Vietnamese government's attempts to raise the credibility of the project, public confidence remains low.

Moreover, Hanoi residents have long relied on two-wheeled transport options to navigate the city's streets and narrow alleyways, with the city currently home to over five million motorbikes (and 7.8 million people). Raising a number of mobility injustice concerns, many interviewees complained that the urban railway is unlikely to improve their urban mobility options, instead creating longer commute times due to increased traffic as a result of new road layouts and the space the railway now commandeers. While the Hanoi municipal government plans to ban motorbikes from the city's downtown core by 2030, some interviewees remained skeptical that this would be feasible due to the lack of appropriate routes available via the railway or other public transport. Other interviewees were concerned that the government could use the urban railway as a justification to proceed with the proposed motorbike ban. Access for the elderly and others with impaired movement was also raised as concerns, pointing to further axes of marginalisation.

We then turn to the impacts Line 2A and the broader Hanoi Urban Railway System have had during construction, and will have when operational, on the livelihoods of informal motorbike taxi-drivers and their app-based competitors. While some of these drivers' unease regarding this infrastructure project mirrors that of the broader urban population, they also raised specific concerns that reflect their intimate knowledge of the city's streets, routes, and transportation options, including impacts on their daily mobility and ability to make a living. All told, while the Vietnamese state considers investing in urban infrastructure, such as Hanoi's new railway system, as an important symbol of modern mobility, we find that Line 2A is not only creating new privileges and inequalities as well as strengthening existing disparities, it is also raising broader concerns regarding public participation in urban transport planning and the city's future.

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## Free Trade Corridors on the China/Myanmar Border: Infrastructures of Labor (Im)Mobility

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The emergence of two “Free Trade Corridors,” one based in Honghe linking China to Vietnam, and the other in Ruili that will link China to Myanmar forecast new kinds of mobility in light of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork with Burmese migrant workers in Ruili City, China, and follow up interviews with return migrants in between Muse and Lasio, Myanmar between summer 2019 and the present. In 2018, the local Chinese Dehong prefecture government established a new administrative entity intended to regulate temporary labor migration. Residents of border areas in Myanmar, from Muse all the way to Lasio, can apply for border crossing permits and pay about 4,000 kyat (3 USD) to cross the border for work. By Chinese law, they are required to exit and re-enter the country once a week, or face fines. This helps ensure their residence near the border, as the border work permits forbid migrant workers from traveling further into Yunnan Province, hoping to stave off more permanent migration into China.

These new Free Trade corridors are built alongside several key infrastructural developments. One is a 2800 km-long railway between Kolkata and Kunming—which bisects Ruili city—to which China alone pledged \$40 billion. Another project is the building of a natural gas pipeline that brings natural gas from the Middle East to China through Myanmar. Formerly China received its natural gas and oil via ship transport through the Malacca Strait, but given the US relationship with Singapore, a government official shared that the new gas pipeline through Myanmar promises to give China freedom from dependence on the US--underscoring one of the BRI’s primary assertion of ascendancy and independence from the West by connecting China to Southeast Asia via its contiguous border with Myanmar.

This paper explores the enduring paradox of infrastructural development and increased “free trade” on the China-Myanmar border, which is that it promises to bring unprecedented labor migration to an area that has historically been troubled by the mobility of goods and disease. While informal migration has happened for decades due to a highly contiguous and porous border, it is beginning to be formalized with all of the migration intermediaries and industries that accompany it.

**Elena Shih** is the Manning Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University, where she directs a human trafficking research cluster through the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. Shih’s book project, “Manufacturing Freedom: Trafficking Rescue, Rehabilitation, and the Slave Free Good” (under contract with University of California Press), is a global ethnography of the transnational social movement to combat human trafficking in China, Thailand, and the United States. As a 2019 ACLS LUCE Fellow in China Studies, Shih completed research for her second book project, an ethnography of labor, migrant, and gender rights on the China/Myanmar border. Shih has worked in this area since 2006, as the co-founder of a community arts program that works with ethnic minority and migrant youth in Ruili City. Shih serves on the editorial boards for *The Anti-Trafficking Review*, a peer-reviewed journal of the Global Alliance to Combat Traffic in Women, and *openDemocracy’s Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* op-ed platform.

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**Ye Yint Khant Maung** is a researcher at the Yangon Base Policy Institute: Urbanize. He specializes in various labour issues in Myanmar centering an analysis of gender, labor organizing, unionization, and worker rights issues related to the China Myanmar Economic Corridor. His master dissertation, “The Role of Trade Unions in Labour Disputes Settlement,” offered a case study of All Burma Federation of Trade Unions (ABFTU), in which he discussed the experience of labour unions beyond a simply legal approach. He has published additional research articles regarding workers’ situation around Myanmar’s industrial zones; *Covid-19 weaponized against unionists in Myanmar (2020)*, *Advancing the rights of Women Workers through the 2020 Elections (2020)*. He holds a master degree in Development Studies from Yangon University of Economics, and while he was an undergraduate student, he worked several years in the leadership role of Yangon University of Economics Students’ Union. This past year, he has actively participated in the “Spring Revolution” of Myanmar together with workers, trade unions and student unions.

## The Relentless Resistance: A Community-Based Environmental Movement against Chinese Transnational Infrastructure Projects in a Border Town, Thailand

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A community-based environmental movement in a border town of Chiang Khong in Northern Thailand has emerged in response to Chinese infrastructure development in the Mekong River since the early 2000s. The rise of the movement led by the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group, a local organization that has vigorously opposed a China-led improved Mekong navigation project and hydropower dam development along the Mekong River. This paper aims to examine how Chinese infrastructure projects have reconfigured power relationships on multiple levels based on my fieldwork reflection in Chiang Khong town. The narrative of community—based environmental movement illustrates the local responses to the Chinese large-scale infrastructure investment. Ultimately, this paper discusses the shift of China's development model and the attempts to interact with NGOs in the Mekong sub-region recently.

Over 20 years, the Rak Chiang Khong group has played an active role in resisting the plan to blast rapids in the Mekong River for commercial shipping. The local activists striving to protect their hometown were their vital characteristic in domestic and international media. The Rak Chiang Khong group has a broad network in various sectors such as journalists, local NGOs, international non-profit organizations, academic professors, researchers, village chiefs, activist monks, fishers, boat operators, and the local Chamber of commerce. Their works involved engaging in active environment campaigns, setting public forums as well as conducting research.

In 2001, the Chiang Khong staff and a group of residents in Chiang Khong occupied exposed rocks in the middle of the Mekong River. They pulled out the sign to protest China's operated project, which aimed to clear islets in the river to facilitate China's trading ships moving toward the Mekong downstream. The Chiang Khong group made headlines again in 2016, a long-tail riverboat with banners "The Mekong is Not for Sale" approached Chinese survey vessels. They have insisted that the dredging scheme will destroy the river ecosystem, fish species' spawning, and other aquatic lives.

Another critical issue is the China dam on the Mekong River. The dam construction on the upper Mekong advanced China effectively to control the water downstream. Over the past decade, the dams have been strongly criticized for threatening local livelihood and ecosystem. In response to the Upper Mekong development, the Rak Chiang Khong group studied its impact by combining academic works and villagers' experiences; they invited researchers and villagers to conduct research together known as "Thai Baan research" in Thai or villager's research.

In the past ten years, they have continually raised public concern about the ecological changes and affected local livelihood due to the blasting Mekong project and dam construction initiated by China. One of the crucial strategies to get attention from the public is disseminating the Mekong issue through local and national media, published in Thai and English. At last, the navigation project was recently officially canceled. On February 5, 2020, The Thai cabinet formally withdrew the blasting Mekong Project. From the Rak Chiang Khong group's perspective, it was their first accomplishment, and it was the first official response from Beijing.

Indeed, China's recent change toward a more sustainable direction led to community engagement, such as the first dialogue between a dam-builder company with the Rak Chiang Khong conservation group in January 2018. Furthermore, in November 2017, the first Dialogue between ASEAN and Chinese NGOs organized by the Shao Yang Environmental Conservation Association was held in Shao Yang city, Hunan Province, China. The NGOs in Southeast Asia were invited to dialogue with the Chinese NGOs on social and environmental issues. They agreed on arranging an exchange knowledge activity between people from Shao yang and Chiang Khong.

In October 2018, the 2nd dialogue was held in Changsha, Hunan province. The Research Center for NGOs at Hunan University was the host of the conference under theme culture, environment, and sustainable development. They were promoting exchanges between China and ASEAN. The participants were from NGOs, private organizations, and academics. In November 2020, the 3rd dialogue was held again in Changsha, Hunan. The participants including NGOs, NPO from the U.S., Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. The discussion was focusing on investment and green development.

Obviously, the Rak Chiang Khong group employed various strategies to work on environmental issues and search for support. The circle of small NGOs performing tasks includes bidding projects, arranging workshops, engaging with the community, finding the broader network, and writing reports became their work routine throughout the year. At present, the Rak Chiang Khong NGOs successfully presented themselves as local activists who fight against China's infrastructure on behalf of local people in Chiang Khong. The construction of the local identity and relentless efforts to preserve the Mekong River have grabbed more public attention and invited broader international support. Furthermore, the Chinese—Thai NGOs dialogue can be seen as a concrete output of China's attempt to implement the Green Belt and Road strategy. It demonstrated an effort to reduce tension with the Mekong inhabitants and provided a better image of China's transnational projects in the Mekong sub-region.

**Panitda Saiyarod** is a PhD student in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Cologne University, Germany. The working title of her thesis is “The Clash of Connectedness: Local responses to China’s transnational infrastructure projects in a border town, Thailand.” Her research interests include Chinese infrastructure, mainly focuses on the social and environmental impact in the Greater Mekong sub-region. Her previous research projects are “Imagining the future of incoming China-Thai railway: the study of land use planning nearby the Nhonkhai railway station from the local and government’s perspective,” “Shifting Agricultural Plantation, Chinese Influence, and Its Impacts to Agriculture Security in Northern Thailand.” She works as a lecturer at Chiang Mai University since 2015. From 2012-2015, She worked as a plan and policy analyst in the office of the National Economic and Social Development Board Thailand (NESDB). She has an MSc in Development Anthropology with Merit from Durham University, UK, and holds a BA in Sociology from Fudan University, China.

## Dreaming the ‘Chinese Dream’: Local Engagements with Chinese Promises of Infrastructure and Development in Northern Laos

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At the crossroads of the ‘Kunming-Bangkok Highway’ and ‘Kunming-Vientiane Railway’, or ‘China-Laos Railway’ (opening in late 2021), the northern Lao border province of Luang Namtha is developing into a regional hub linking China with Thailand, directly contributing to Laos’ national vision of moving from a land-locked towards a land-linked country. Apparently, this vision has been most recently taken up by China’s ambition to develop Laos into a central Southeast Asian node of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Building on Chinese President Xi Jinping’s frequently used language of “dream” (*zhongguo meng*, “Chinese dream”, and *yatai meng*, “Asia-Pacific dream”), this paper examines how Chinese promises and “dreams” of infrastructural development—in its concrete materiality as well as rhetorical and symbolic spectacle—intersect with local “dreams”, experiences, aspirations, fears and practices on the ground in Luang Namtha.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research on small-scale traders moving across the borderlands of Yunnan, Laos and Thailand (Rowedder, forthcoming), this paper foregrounds the role of local marketplaces as central venues where these local “Chinese dreams”—or dreams of China—are articulated and exchanged among and between vendors and customers. Stories, rumours and gossip from “above” or “up in China” are rooted in increasingly China-focused life plans and livelihoods, in terms of education, entrepreneurial experiments and urban aspiration, leading to a growing number of direct experiences in and encounters with neighbouring China. At the same time, most of these marketplaces are themselves Chinese infrastructures, following large Chinese investment in building new and extending or refurbishing old markets across northern Laos, especially in Luang Namtha and Oudomxai provinces (see Tan 2014). Displaying increasingly Chinese everyday commodities and accommodating growing numbers of Chinese vendors, they are part of a larger, rapidly emerging Chinese urban infrastructure of regional bus stations, hospitals, clinics, supermarkets, hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and diverse entertainment venues, initially mainly catering to new inflows of Chinese entrepreneurial migrants since the early 1990s, but now also increasingly frequented by local residents. Apart from the resulting symbolic omnipresence of Chinese-language signs and advertisements, numerous Chinese terms have been integrated into everyday Lao vocabulary. In a sense, these marketplaces assemble and negotiate, materially and discursively, both local manifestations and cross-border experiences of Chinese infrastructures and ideologies of urban modernity and consumption.

This careful ethnographic attention to the diversity of quotidian accounts of and concrete engagements with neighbouring China reveals a wide and intricate spectrum of inspiration, admiration, aspiration, pragmatic choices, disillusion, envy, resentment and contempt. These ambivalent and seemingly contradictory repertoires of emotions and perceptions of both opportunities and perils of Chinese development on both sides of the border, displaying “agonistic intimacies” (Singh 2011; Zhang and Saxer 2017), often revolve around infrastructure. The ‘China-Laos Railway’, for instance, is emblematic of this awkward coexistence of euphoria and scepticism. Despite the Covid-19 crisis still on schedule to be operational by the end of 2021, this BRI flagship project openly displays Chinese state-of-art engineering skills, mastering difficult mountainous terrain with 72 tunnels and 170 bridges. Although Laos has not seen any substantive railway infrastructure before, many residents of Luang Namtha are already familiar with China’s rapid railway development, especially the growing number of vocational students who study in China (not only in adjacent Yunnan province, but also further away in Guizhou, Guangxi or Sichuan).

The often-heard joke that “here in Laos, we are building winding and zigzagging roads, while the Chinese simply draw a straight line, no matter what obstacle is to be overcome” reflects well to what extent increasing contact with Chinese progress and modernity informs perceptions and (re-)evaluations of local living conditions and the current economic state and performance in Laos in general. Seeing Laos in serious need for catching up with China’s economic development, no small number of my informants embraced the ‘China-Laos Railway’ as a logical, timely and necessary project.

While fully espousing, and indeed demonstrating knowledge of, the rhetorical entanglement of both China’s and Laos’s governmental visions of regional connectivity and underlying “infrastructural fetishism” (e.g. Namba 2017) of economic belts or corridors, roads and railways, many pointed to the responsibility and duty of central and local state authorities to properly execute and administer these development policies and infrastructure projects. Thus, the foundational narrative and overall political system of state-delivered development at large is not much challenged; instead of asking for *less* state intervention, many called for a *better, more efficient* state with *stronger* leadership. In this regard, not a few expressed their admiration of China’s strong, resolute leadership under Xi Jinping. Interestingly, while praising his alleged fight against corruption (hoping for the same to happen in Laos), they often juxtaposed their perception of an efficiently led, stable China with political instability and turmoil in their other large neighbour, Thailand. Instead of political power struggles and intrigues, repeating coup after coup, Xi Jinping came up with a clear vision, with his “China dream”, so their common mantra was. Consequently, the other large, often simultaneous, component of perceiving the ‘China-Laos Railway’—scepticism, mistrust, pessimism, fear—was not merely directed at “China” and “the Chinese”, but was also an expression of concern about the Lao state’s inability to fully comprehend and handle Chinese infrastructural projects. Notably, sensitive issues such as imminent resettlement and pending compensation associated with the railway were usually not mentioned when praising, and calling for, the China model of development as directly observed in China or heard about in the news and at the marketplace.

Besides investigating these local discursive engagements with and translations of Chinese visions of infrastructural development, this paper further pays attention to how these “agonistic intimacies” are reflected in concrete social relations and practices between Lao and Chinese actors both in Luang Namtha and adjacent Yunnan province. Infrastructural cross-border connectivity also brings along newly emerging social infrastructures of conviviality (see Marsden and Reeves 2019). Going beyond established scholarship focusing on Chinese “enclaves” or “instant cities” in “exceptional spaces” in northern Laos such as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone or the Mohan-Boten Economic Cooperation Zone on the China-Laos border (e.g. Laungaramsri 2015, 2019; Nyíri 2012, 2017; Rippa 2019; Tan 2017)—implying minimized Sino-Lao social interaction—, this study sheds light on everyday encounters, with a diverse range of Chinese and Lao actors in more ‘ordinary’ localities and social and economic settings.

This fine-grained ethnographic account of the multifarious and ambivalent local engagements of Chinese dreams and promises of infrastructure and development in northern Laos importantly complicates otherwise rather sensational and one-dimensional narratives of Chinese dragon-style expansion and encroachment in Southeast Asia (e.g. Strangio 2020; Emmerson 2020).

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## Logistical Turbulence? Notes on the Deadly Life of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

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This paper explores a pivotal Belt and Road project: the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Cutting across western Myanmar, the CMEC is a set of port, economic zone, pipeline, and transport projects linking the Bay of Bengal to southern China. It aims to secure oil and gas flows to China by suturing petrochemical markets from the Middle East across the Indian Ocean to East Asia. Drawing on initial research conducted around the main CMEC port project and along the pipeline route, I will address an area of ongoing debate: the CMEC's relation to armed conflict in its vicinity, from atrocities against Myanmar Rohingyas to a newer, bitter conflict involving the Arakan Army. Are the actions of Myanmar's security forces geared towards securing the CMEC, as civil society groups allege? How might deeper questions of colonial and postcolonial belonging be at stake, as well? What might the CMEC reveal about the turbulent relations between war, trade, and China's expansive regional ambitions? This paper brings recent CMEC research on these questions—from geographers, anthropologists, and civil society groups, among others—into dialogue with a growing critical logistics scholarship. This scholarship frames logistics not as an apolitical science of trade integration, but as a deadly locus of armed conflict and supply chain securitization that aggravates patterns of uneven development. Thematizing logistical turbulence, I ask how the CMEC illuminates these vexed relations between trade, conflict, and logistics within—and in some ways beyond—Belt and Road, arguably the world's most important contemporary infrastructure initiative.

**Geoffrey Aung (Soe Lin Aung)** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, where his research interests include political subjectivity, postcolonial critique, and the politics of infrastructure in the borderlands of Burma/Myanmar.



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## China's Belt and Road Initiative: Designs and Disjunctions in Northern Myanmar

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Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ) in Kachin State, Myanmar, currently in a planning stage, is an enormously ambitious infrastructure project under China's transnational Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Located in China's immediate neighbourhood (just about 100 km from its border), 25 km from Kachin State capital Myitkyina and auspiciously alongside the historical Ledo Road connecting India and China, the 4,700-acre MEDZ is planned on greenfield land, parts of which have jointly been cultivated by local farmers. While the Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar has referred to the project as a "crucial part" of the BRI, the local people, including the landowners, got their first clues on the project from sights of drones above their fields and strangers measuring their land—and allegedly from Kachin State government's scheme to out-manoeuvre them from their right to apply for official land ownership permit under the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Lands Management Law. Kachin State government established a public-private joint venture to sign the Memorandum of Agreement with the Chinese investor.

Zooming in on the MEDZ development at this initial stage, the paper will discuss the disjunctions and frictions between economic/policy-driven infrastructural imaginaries, geopolitical strategies and the grounded realities shaped by business and political interests, power relations and various struggles. It will investigate whether the Chinese investments and infrastructure development are introducing any new political cultures or instead adopting to and benefitting from the local ones. It will unveil the crucial role of the recipient country—its form and culture of governance—in the political cultures and futures that may emerge from the BRI infrastructural assemblages.

**Karin Dean** is a senior researcher at the School of Humanities, Tallinn University. She is a political geographer interested in boundaries, borderlands and issues of power, state, sovereignty, ethnicity, armed conflict, nationalism and stateless nations, with extensive field experience at several borderlands in Southeast Asia. Most of her publications focus on the spatial politics in Kachin State and at the Sino-Myanmar border, based on extensive ethnographic studies in the area. She holds a PhD in Geography from the National University of Singapore.

## ‘Building a Connected World’: Politics of Space and Visibility along the New Silk Roads

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‘We are building a connected world’, proclaim the banners of the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC, 中国路桥) across its construction sites. As a leading state-owned contractor for the building and maintenance of transportation infrastructures overseas, it draws this strapline from the central claim of China’s signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that infrastructure construction makes for a more connected and better world.

Building bridges along the New Silk Roads, CRBC not only sets in motion capital, standards, and materials, but also carries out the daunting design and management challenge that entails the deployment of a temporary workforce, and a massive paraphernalia of short-term construction, production, and housing facilities to support them. This standardized, portable layer of infrastructure for the making of more permanent structures—a kind of *infra*-infrastructure—constitutes the adaptation of a dormitory labor regime that has long been identified within post-socialist China (Smith and Pun 2006). This labor regime not only shapes the everyday life of both local actors and Chinese posted workers, but has also become an important representation of China abroad. Drawing from Brian Larkin’s definition of infrastructures as ‘things, and also the relation between things’ (2013, 329), this temporary infrastructural layer can be productively regarded as both a built network and an ‘active form’ (Easterling 2014, 118), i.e., an operational protocol which determines patterns of growth and adaptation according to each project. In line with recent scholarship examining ‘the diverse effects and lived experiences that accompany Chinese-led or Chinese-facilitated development’ (Murton and Lord 2020, 2), this paper shifts focus from the promise of future built environments to the present conditions of their making. It not only enables an examination of how CRBC’s *infra*-infrastructure creates the conditions for labor exploitation, but also highlights a political logic that simultaneously fuels and mirrors the way China, the BRI, and migrant workers are stereotyped in different host regions.

In 2017, the Asian Development Bank estimated that Southeast Asian countries would have to invest 5.7% of their annual GDP in infrastructure until 2030 to sustain their demographic boom through economic growth (2017, 1). While these figures frame the BRI as an opportunity for the region, state responses to the initiative vary dramatically, reflecting the full spectrum of diplomatic stances towards China. CRBC’s presence in Southeast Asia therefore offers an ideal context for understanding the adaptation of post-reform China’s dormitory labor regime in an array of host countries which pursue different agendas through their engagement—or disengagement—with China (Liu and Lim 2019, 2). Eschewing the methodologically-nationalist tropes of a ‘new world order’ (Maçães 2018) or a diffusion of China’s ostensibly ‘unique model of development’ (Fukuyama 2016), this research uses the tools of digital humanities to follow the deployment of CRBC’s *infra*-infrastructure and workers segregation in the context of three projects led by the CRBC in Vietnam (Cao Lanh Bridge 2013-2018), Indonesia (Tayan Bridge 2012-2016), and Cambodia (Expressway Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville 2019-ongoing).



Altogether, the three projects comprise eleven working and living stations, designed as ‘structures for the “management” rather than the “enabling of life”’ (Mehrotra in Lepik et al. 2017, 18) and integrated within processes of performance optimization and corporate control. They share standardized spatial units while still adapting their size and layout to topographic, technical, contractual, and sociopolitical constraints. The first part of this paper explores the combination of modularity, zoning, *clôture*, and remoteness that articulates the daily life of workers on-site and the serial reproduction of a ‘live-in’ requirement. Life in the compounds dissolves the realm of private time into work, where employees remain on on-call shifts. Second, the paper considers the restrictive policies imposed on posted workers as part of a politics of visualization and discretion. It reflects on compounding not only as a monitoring strategy for greater productivity, but also as a way to manage a polished discourse on ‘connectivity’ which merges infrastructure building and development via metonymies of ‘connect-heart bridge’ and ‘to wealth road’, and casts Chinese workers as ‘benevolent experts’, ‘brotherly neighbors’ (CRBC n.d.; CCC 2018) whose short-term presence overseas only aims to bring prosperity and know-how as a gift to their local colleagues. In this context, banners and walls operate together in the name of good relations, and testify to the adaptability of CRBC’s labor management. Finally, this research looks into the fate of infrastructures after their intended utility have run their courses, and suggests that characterizing them as ephemeral or temporary would be insufficient. In her fieldwork with Chinese companies in Zambia and Tanzania, Ching Kwan Lee approaches short-term corporate enclaves, and refers to their Chinese name *feidi* (飞地), or flying (fei, 飞) land, place (di, 地) to evoke their intrinsic transience (Lee 2009, 653). But the density, scale and complexity of CRBC’s provisional spaces, with their overlapping temporalities and functions, make their dismantling into a heavy, challenging, and uneven process. In Vietnam, on both sides of the Mekong River, now connected by the Cao Lanh Bridge, a cluster of barracks is still standing (see Fig. 2)—and a report published by the country’s Ministry of Transport for the Asian Development Bank describes how ‘local people [use] the pavement of the platform ... to dry rice and aquatic plants’ (ADB 2019, 72).



CAO LANH (NORTH BANK), VIETNAM // CAO LANH BRIDGE  
SOURCE: MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES / CHES AIRBUS

Fig 2 \_  
On both sides of the Mekong,  
the facilities that supported the  
construction of the Cao Lanh Bridge  
(achieved in May 2018), are still partially standing.

The social biography of CRBC's distributed system for construction work not only reveals infra-infrastructures as a new object of study, but challenges exclusionary processes in prevalent models of development, as well as stereotypical views of migrant workers in local and global mediascapes as villains or victims. Indeed, the global construction supply chain moves capital, debts, building materials, techniques, and labor in very unequal ways, and a close attention to the daily life of workers and their intimate surroundings on-site shows how development projects that promise social inclusion, economic growth, sustainability, and territorial integration are often contradicted by the present conditions and impact of their *making*.

After graduating with a master's degree in Architecture and Urban Studies from France in 2017, **Solène Gautron** is completing an MA in Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany. As a Baden-Württemberg Fellow at Yale University, she has initiated her MA-thesis on corporate spatial politics and transnational labor along the New Silk Roads (submitted on July 16th, 2020). The present paper was inspired by seminars she took with Nadine Plachta on the anthropology of infrastructure; Keller Easterling on 'infrastructure spaces'; and Jing Tsu on China's 'Belt and Road Initiative'. These encounters have solidified her interest in research-based and interdisciplinary projects, and her desire to pursue a doctoral project at the intersection of Infrastructure, Urban, and Chinese Studies. She is currently also a research assistant at the Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law.

## About the Organisers and Discussants

**AbdouMaliq Simone** is Senior Professorial Fellow at the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield. He works on issues of spatial composition in extended urban regions, the production of everyday life for urban majorities in the Global South, infrastructural imaginaries, collective affect, global blackness, and histories of the present for Muslim working classes. He is also a research associate at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, visiting professor at the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, research associate with the Rujak Center for Urban Studies in Jakarta, and research fellow at the University of Tarumanagara. For three decades he has worked with practices of social interchange, technical arrangements, local economy, and the constitution of power relations that affect how heterogeneous African and Southeast Asian cities are lived. He has worked on remaking municipal systems, training local government personnel, designing collaborative partnerships among technicians, residents, artists, and politicians.

**Joshua Barker** is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Dean of School of Graduate Studies, and Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education at the University of Toronto. His research has focused on developing an analysis of power relations that recognizes the complex but systematic ways in which violence, institutional structures, discourses, and technologies combine into more or less stable apparatuses. He is interested in how these apparatuses serve to structure human action and expression, while allowing for the capture of value. In Indonesia, where he conducts his research, such apparatuses often straddle the formal/informal divide, so understanding this divide has been central to his approach. He has conducted ethnographic field research among a range of groups: the police and civilian guards, engineers and entrepreneurs, old and new media journalists. In this work he has often been drawn to the people and practices that escape or reconfigure structures of power in unexpected and novel ways, whether through literature, technology, everyday interactions, or self-conscious political practice.

**Tim Bunnell** is Professor in the Department of Geography and Director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI), where he is also leader of the Inter-Asia Engagements cluster. His primary research interest concerns urbanisation in Southeast Asia, examining both the transformation of cities in that region and urban connections with other parts of the world. His books include *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool through Malay Lives* (Wiley, 2016) and *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Jovis, 2018; co-edited with Daniel P.S. Goh).

**Darren Byler** is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. He researches the dispossession of ethno-racial Muslim minorities through forms of surveillance and digital capitalism in China and the global South. His first book project, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculine Violence in a Chinese City*, examines emerging forms of media, infrastructure, economics and politics in the Uyghur homeland in Chinese Central Asia. His current project considers how biotechnical surveillance systems can be tied to new forms of control both in China and in sites across the world where these technologies are exported. Prior to joining the University of Colorado he was Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

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**Max Hirsh** is Assistant Professor at the University of Hong Kong and a leading expert on airports and urban infrastructure. He is the author *Airport Urbanism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), an unprecedented study of airports and air travel that incorporates the perspective of passengers, airport operators, architects, urban planners, developers, and aviation professionals. Based on 10 years of research conducted at more than 50 airports around the world, the book sheds light on the exponential increase in global air travel and its implications for the planning, design, and operation of airports. Fluent in six languages and with a professional career spanning three continents, Max inflects his analyses with unique insights into the practicalities of international air travel and the mindset of people on the move. Max has taught courses on transportation, infrastructure, and urban studies at Harvard, ETH Zurich, and the University of Hong Kong. He holds a BA, MA, and PhD from Harvard and a Magister from the Technical University of Berlin. His research has been supported by the Social Science Research Council, Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Hang Seng Bank, Henry Luce Foundation, German Research Foundation, and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. Max is a Sin Wai-Kin Fellow at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, an associated researcher at the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore, and a lead author of the International Panel on Social Progress.

**Marina Kaneti** is an Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. She specializes in questions of global development, including the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, migration, environmental governance, human rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Dr Kaneti has published extensively on questions of migration, activism, and rights and is currently completing a book manuscript on migrants' political agency. With research funding from the Ford Foundation and the National University of Singapore, she is also exploring the geopolitical, environmental, and cultural significance of the Belt and Road initiative. Dr Kaneti completed her BA and MSW at Columbia University, and her PhD at the New School for Social Research, New York, USA. Prior to her academic career, Dr Kaneti worked with the United Nations and as an equity trader on Wall Street.

**Tim Oakes** is Professor of Geography and Director of Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. His work focuses on social and cultural transformation in contemporary China and, in particular, the uses and reinventions of local culture as a resource for economic development and governance objectives. I have explored this theme in the contexts of ethnic tourism and craft commodity production, cultural heritage development, and urban redevelopment and planning. My most recent research explores the development and use of leisure and consumption spaces in China's urban areas, as well as in urbanizing areas of rural China. I am currently working on urban planning and infrastructural urbanism in China's 'New Area' urban zones. He is also the project director for "China Made: Asian Infrastructures and the 'China Model' of Development", funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information on this project, see [China Made Project](#). A brief article about the project is in [A&S Magazine](#).

**Edward Schatz** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He is interested primarily in identity politics, social transformations, social movements, anti-Americanism and authoritarianism with a focus on the ex-USSR, particularly Central Asia. His publications include an edited volume, *Political Ethnography* (U. Chicago Press, 2009), and *Modern Clan Politics* (U. Washington Press, 2004), as well as articles in *Comparative Politics*, *Slavic Review*, *International Political Science Review*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, and other academic journals. His current projects include a book on the United States as a symbol and actor in Central Asia and a study of authoritarianism in Central Asia. The American Political Science Association selected Professor Ed Schatz as the co-recipient of the Giovanni Sartori Book Award for his work, *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. The book, a collection of original essays edited by Professor Schatz, demonstrates how ethnography is uniquely suited for illuminating political science.

**Rachel Silvey** is Richard Charles Lee Director of the Asian Institute and Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning. She is a Faculty Affiliate in CDTS, WGSi, and the Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies Program. She received her PhD in Geography from the University of Washington, Seattle, and a dual BA from the University of California at Santa Cruz in Environmental Studies and Southeast Asian Studies. Professor Silvey is best known for her research on women's labour and migration in Indonesia. She has published widely in the fields of migration studies, cultural and political geography, gender studies, and critical development. Her major funded research projects have focused on migration, gender, social networks, and economic development in Indonesia; immigration and employment among Southeast Asian-Americans; migration and marginalization in Bangladesh and Indonesia; and religion, rights and Indonesian migrant women workers in Saudi Arabia. Her current work, funded by the US National Science Foundation, with collaborator Professor Rhacel Parreñas examines Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers' employment in Singapore and the UAE, and she leads the project on migrant workers' labour conditions for the SSHRC Partnership Project, "Gender, Migration and the Work of Care: Comparative Perspectives," led by Professor Ito Peng.

**Dorothy Tang**, RLA, is currently a doctoral student at MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning and an adjunct assistant professor at the Division of Landscape Architecture at the University of Hong Kong. She is a landscape architect interested in the intersections of infrastructure and everyday life. Her work engages with urban and rural communities situated in landscapes confronting large-scale environmental change. Current research projects are concerned with the role of eco-imaginaries in shaping green infrastructure in Chinese Cities, and Chinese engagement with Zambian urban development. She holds a Master of Landscape Architecture with Distinction from Harvard University, and is a registered landscape architect in the State of New York.

**Yang Yang** is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She 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 analyzing 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 recentering of Islamic teachings in both cultural and political contexts on a global scale.

**Emily T. Yeh** is Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado Boulder. She has conducted extensive research on development and nature-society relations in Tibetan parts of the PRC, including the political ecology of pastoralism, vulnerability to climate change, ideologies of nature and nation, and emerging environmental subjectivities. Her book *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* explored the intersection of political economy and cultural politics of development as a project of state territorialization. She also co-edited *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* with Chris Coggins, and *Rural Politics in Contemporary China* with Kevin O'Brien and Ye Jinzhong. She has also explored the relationship between China's development in its own western regions with its investment and development abroad. She has a long-term interest in the Chinese state's infrastructure development in Tibetan areas, such as the Chengdu-Lhasa railway. She has also conducted research on post-Sichuan earthquake reconstruction of houses and roads, and is currently exploring the ways in which nature is being made into a type of infrastructure under Xi Jinping's campaign for 'ecological civilization.'