

Negotiating China in Southeast Asia: (re)thinking development via infrastructure schemes

Single session

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China-backed infrastructure projects as a means of development are increasingly common throughout Southeast Asia and the global South, often constructed at great speed. From transport infrastructures to hydropower and urban spaces, these initiatives are promoted in official rhetoric as a means through which to raise living standards, provide economic opportunities, and contribute to mutual benefits via positive development. These sentiments are of new connectivities, coexistence, and prosperity in an inter-connected world orientating itself towards global China.

Scholarship on infrastructure recognises that such projects carry meaning beyond their physical structures (see amongst others: Gupta et al 2018, Elinoff 2016, High 2009). This is particularly important in projects that have a cross border dimension. Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012) note that transport infrastructure systems both negotiate and consolidate borders through promising new connectivity but also an awareness of boundaries through which they pass. In the case of China-backed infrastructure projects, these often serve as a proxy for how people regard China itself (Lampton et al 2020, Olivera et al 2020, Rowedder 2019).

Infrastructure projects have multiple qualities, often provoking senses of anxiety along with opportunity as different actors experience both aspiration and alienation in these changing landscapes. The rhetoric of mutual benefits around development through infrastructure is worthy of critical scrutiny. Bright futures sound positive, but we suggest that not everyone shares equally in the fruits of such projects. Shared prosperity does not mean sharing equally even if the negative consequences of infrastructure schemes are couched in terms of the overall benefits of development.

This inter-disciplinary panel aims to consider China-backed infrastructures in Southeast Asia critically, reflect on their implications and questions of who will benefit and lose out from such projects. We ask what they mean to those who live and work at the forefront of these new infrastructures. How do people understand the arrival of these new infrastructures – often quite literally – in their lives? How do local people co-produce or modify these new infrastructures? Do they see themselves represented in the official rhetoric, alienated by it, or both? In thinking about these questions throughout Southeast Asian case studies, what do these offer infrastructure scholarship? Panellists from any discipline wishing to speak to any of these themes are very welcome to join this panel, with a view to contributing to a subsequent publication.

Transnational Chinese Investor Networks and the Eastern Economic Corridor in Thailand

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This research examines Chinese investment in Eastern Economic Corridor project (EEC), a Special Economic Zone linking Thailand with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam and the Belt Road Initiative. It will analyze some of the negotiations between various actors in the Chinese investor network. Many Chinese investors have moved their production bases to avoid a possible trade war with the United States as well as to expand their markets in Southeast Asia. Thai state offers tax benefits for foreign investors, allowing them to import raw materials and machinery from China, making their production costs lower than that of Thai investors. It is difficult for Thai businesspeople to compete with Chinese investors and become the nominee for such allocations. A further objective of the research is to explore the impacts of Special Economic Zone on land relations, in particular farmers' livelihoods and the environment. The findings reveal that the neoliberal state will facilitate foreign investment through enacting city planning laws which permit the establishment of industrial estates in agricultural zones, thus dispossessing land from farmers. In addition, these factories can release toxic waste, thus impacting the local environment and livelihoods of surrounding farmers.

Between Urban Development, Fragmented Mobilities, and National Security – the Hanoi Metro as a case study of Chinese investment in Vietnam

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This paper discusses the Hanoi Metro as a case study of Chinese infrastructure investment in Vietnam. After nearly a decade of construction, the first urban metro line began commercial operation in November 2021. The main research question is how the Hanoi Metro impacts the urban mobility of different societal groups in Vietnam. Rooted in the state's vision of modernity, the metro is promoted as offering an alternative to individual motorized transport, improving mobility and reducing congestion and pollution. However, public perception has been critical, especially concerning Chinese involvement in the project. The Hanoi Metro is the only infrastructure project in Vietnam considered part of the BRI by both Vietnam and China.

The impact of the Hanoi Metro on urban mobility is discussed using the *mobilities* paradigm. Viewing urban transport systems from a mobility perspective means going beyond transport infrastructure to include local mobility patterns, experiences, and practices. It considers what shapes people's transport mode decisions and how this affects their everyday lives. (Cresswell 2010). Based on a literature review, the impacts of the Hanoi Metro on local residents and informal motorbike taxi drivers are analyzed. The findings are linked to broader discussions on Chinese investment and national security in the context of the long term development goals of municipal authorities and rising anti-Chinese sentiments in Vietnamese society.

The declared development goal of Vietnamese municipal authorities is to create a “green, cultured, civilized, modern city” (đô thị xanh, văn hiến, văn minh, hiện đại) (Dien dan doanh nghiep 2021). However, controversies regarding corruption, safety, and workers’ security clouded the construction of the Hanoi Metro. Chinese involvement in financing has been negatively impacting public perception of the project. The dealing with Chinese investment by the Vietnamese government has been inconsistent, oscillating between isolation and cooperation, which has led to public discontentment in the past. The limited effect of the Hanoi Metro on reducing congestion and the increasing weariness of the public towards China question the potential and success of future BRI projects in Vietnam. In the long-term, the Vietnamese state must carefully balance its ambitious development goals with its need for public cooperation.

"The macro and micro impacts of BRI projects in China's backyard - focusing on Laos and Myanmar"

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Small developing economies that participate in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are likely to incur an increasingly heavier fiscal burden as their debt service to China adds to their fiscal response to the covid-19 pandemic.

In this paper, we first highlight the macro impact of BRI projects on recipient economies in general in terms of debt sustainability and non-transparent nature of China-financed infrastructure projects that could lead to hidden fiscal burden.

Then we focus particularly on China’s backyard, specifically Laos and Myanmar. Both countries are likely to depend more on China for financing large infrastructure projects in the coming years: Laos is constrained by its geography as land-locked and adjacent to an asymmetrically large economy; Myanmar has once again gone into a path isolated from western economic partners after the coup in February 2021 and has a long land border with China to its northeast.

After looking at macro implications of the two countries’ dependence on China, we investigate micro-level impacts of specific BRI projects: i.e., China-Laos Railway which started operation in December 2021, and China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), subprojects of which have been in the pipeline since 2019.

While our macro assessments are mainly based on available secondary information, our micro assessments benefit from primary observations in Laos and Myanmar, as well as Thailand which is the key player of the Mekong region’s connectivity to China. Together, our

assessments contribute unique and nuanced perspectives to the current global discussions on BRI-related issues.

Entangled enclaves: Dams and the Chinese infrastructural engagement in Cambodia

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This paper analyses the intensifying Chinese infrastructural engagement in Southeast Asia through a case of large dams in Cambodia. The paper shows how the damming of rivers in Cambodia has evolved through a post-neoliberal concessionary governing mode that materialises in enclaves of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises' heightened corporate authority. By drawing from political ecology of hydrosocial relations, STS-oriented infrastructure studies and research on the political life of Chinese overseas infrastructure projects it develops the idea of ambiguously (dis)entangled enclaves. The focus is on three recently built large dams in the Cardamom Mountains and the kinds of (dis)connections, (in)visibilities, flows and possibilities they produce or (dis)enable. On the one hand, the dams form territorially fixed, bounded spaces of governing that are exempted from surrounding environmental and labor jurisdictions and shielded from external oversight in ways that provide the Chinese corporate concessionaires considerable autonomy and control over the conditions of construction workers and downstream hydrosocial relations. On the other hand, they form constitutive components of broader infrastructural corridors, and thus of spatially more diffuse circuits of capital and power. The paper analyses the patterns of (dis)entanglements that enable the dams to bleed out in locally harmful ways and to generate overflows that enmesh China's geo-economical and geopolitical pursuits with the pursuits of the Cambodian ruling regime to consolidate its powers. In this way it adds understanding on the role and ambiguous qualities of infrastructure in the shaping of new political-ecological relations and sociospatial formations. It also adds new insights to the multidimensional geography of enclavism in the Mekong Region by highlighting how the concessionary infrastructure projects may at the same time undermine as well as extend and exert state power.

The deviated route: Transportation Infrastructures, Border Trade and Volatility in the Greater Mekong sub-region

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In the past two decades, many transport infrastructures have been built to enhance connectivity and strengthen cross border trade between China and neighbouring countries. China-backed international highways, bridges, roads, and ports have significantly increased the circulation of commodities and people in the Greater Mekong Subregion. In response to China's lucrative plan, the Thai government invested in constructing river ports, road connections and branding the northern Mekong border towns, Chiang Sean and Chiang Khong, as a logistic hub to connect with the Southern part of China. This presentation argues that besides serving as a circulator, the borderland infrastructure becomes a connector,

divider, and controller for cross-border trading that strongly favour China. Particularly, they were embedded with the capacity to enhance and hinder mobility by compressing and enlarging transit time. Additionally, China and Thai governments exert dominance over pre-existing cross-border activities with their domestic rules and international customs regime. This research also captures an ethnographically grounded understanding of border trading practices, dealings and networks that enable commodities to flow across the border when encountering the state's "Logistical power". The stories of involved actors and their relationships in the border economy will be told and discussed.