

# CHINAMADE BRIEF



## Environing Infrastructure: A Project Outline

*Alessandro Rippa, March 2021*

This China Made Brief introduces a new project led by Alessandro Rippa, a former postdoctoral researcher at CU Boulder and member of China Made. Since September 2020, Alessandro works with a small team of researchers based at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich. The project—*Environing Infrastructure: Communities, Ecologies, and China’s “Green” Development in Contemporary Southeast Asia*—is funded by a 5-year “freigeist” fellowship from the Volkswagen Foundation.

More information on the project can be found at [www.environing.asia](http://www.environing.asia)



*Boten, Laos-China border, 2016.*

*In the stifling midday heat, few people venture outside. Broad, empty roads and hulking hotel buildings dominate the visual landscape. Not a single human is in sight. There is no sound emanating from a nearby construction site that, in a few weeks, is said to become a brand-new bus station. Scores of posters plastered around town brandish images of the Boten of the future: bustling shopping malls, a verdant golf course, a busy high-speed railway station and hordes of Chinese tourists.*

*Zhou Xinren, a young man originally from Kunming, the capital of nearby China's Yunnan province, is convinced that such a vision will materialize. Zhou has spent his last twelve years working in Laos, first as a truck driver and then as a broker for Chinese firms. Now he calls Boten his home. "You see," Zhou explains, "if you had come ten years ago, you would have seen nothing at all – just nature (ziran). Then we [Chinese] built roads, implemented agriculture, and started trading. This is all our doing," Zhou says, gesturing to all the concrete, the boulevards, and the promise of development and wealth. Driving a few miles outside of town, one finds more of the promise that Zhou is speaking about. The road itself, part of the so-called Northern Economic Corridor, is the result of co-financing between China, Thailand, and the Asian Development Bank. All around this two-lane highway is an endless horizon of Chinese-owned rubber and banana plantations.*

*But the contrasts between a grandiose future and an anxious present are striking. In a diminutive shack along this same highway, locally born Thongsing sells drinks and snacks to passing tradesmen and construction workers. His is a rather bleak view of the current state of his country. "Look around," he says bitterly, "this is not Laos, this is China. First the road and the plantation, now the railway. Many villages are being completely displaced by this new project. Where will people go? Where will they farm?" The project Thongsing is referring to is the new Kunming-Vientiane railway, part of a 3,900km network of railways that will eventually connect China to Singapore through Laos and Thailand.*

*Not far, a couple of bulldozers are busy flattening out some bushy hills. I ask one of the drivers what will be built here. "A new attraction for tourists," he says, "a nature park where people can ride elephants, and a shopping center with Lao traditional crafts."*

*Tradition to replace tradition.*

*Nature to replace nature.*

*The built environment.*

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At the official Beijing launch of the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, Xi Jinping announced that China would begin leveraging new energy technologies and global resource networks with the aim of promoting low-carbon development around the world. Often labelled as "Green Belt and Road" China's now pervasive use of the language of sustainable development chafes with the country's own numerous domestic environmental crises and environmentally calamitous infrastructure projects already being implemented by Chinese firms abroad. Scholarship on the environmental after-effects of Chinese building ambition has thus far looked at the ecological impacts of specific projects. What is missing, particularly given the types of infrastructure projects the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is said to deliver, is critical research on the social and political ecological considerations of Chinese investments abroad, as well as the multiple, conflicting environmental narratives and discourses that surround them.

*Environing Infrastructure* aims to set out a conceptual path linking empirical studies of infrastructure with research into socio-environmental phenomena and discourse. In order to do so, we take the vantage point of contemporary Chinese global infrastructure to introduce novel ways of understanding planetary environmental narratives, transnational political-economic systems and center-periphery relations, revealing a wider picture that supersedes individual construction projects and particular nation-states.

The project, in this sense, takes cue from the "infrastructure thinking" approach that China Made has been developing, pulling together two broad strands of inquiry. One involves an interest in rethinking the materiality of infrastructure not as an inert or relatively stable basis for dynamic social processes, but rather as unstable assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies. Another explores the oftentimes hidden techno-political "work" of infrastructural forms. Infrastructural thinking thus draws our attention to how social relations are bound up in the physical and

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technical materialities of our built and non-built environments, and to how those materialities constitute social relations in ways that produce unexpected and unintended political outcomes. Drawing on this, key questions emerge at the interface of infrastructure and the environment. How do different ecological discourses impact infrastructure spaces and, in turn, how the making of new infrastructure affects such discourse? How do dynamics of dispossession and displacement inform particular ecological sensibilities? Without attention to these important questions, anthropological inquiries into infrastructure development and environmental change fall short of addressing one of large-scale infrastructure's major outcome: its world-making capacities. Hence this project's main question: how do infrastructure and environment make each other, or: how do infrastructure environ the world?

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Methodologically, the project relies on ethnographic methods to reveal the often-staggering disjunctions between economic and policy-driven infrastructural imaginaries, and the grounded realities for those people subject to (and often passed by) such infrastructural interventions. Additionally, in order to produce a more holistic understanding of the various discourses embedded in and produced by global Chinese investments, this project takes a critical approach to the textual and representative constituents of infrastructure. To this end, an anthropological approach to infrastructure development is integrated with perspectives informed by the environmental humanities.

Ethnographically, we focus on specific Chinese infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia. Fieldsites include trans-national infrastructure at the China-Myanmar borderlands, where I have been working previously in the context of China Made, the Sihanoukville SEZ in Cambodia, tourism infrastructure in Bali, and Chinese agri-business projects in Thailand. To ensure consistency, foster comparison, and elicit collaborations, we plan a number of "field meetings" across the various fieldsites in the course of the project. We also plan to work with academic and non-academic institutions in the region to develop collaborative research and teaching projects.

Southeast Asia offers a precious vantage point from where such dynamics can be analyzed. The region has been at the forefront of Chinese investments outside China since long before the launch of the BRI and has come to represent a testing ground for the country's ambitions abroad. Here political leaders, activists, and much of the general public are familiar with Chinese investments and with the debates surrounding them. Furthermore, the relationship between environmental destruction and processes of capitalist modes of accumulation and production has become a major trope in much literature on the region.

This approach to research, as well as its regional foci, are other aspects in which *Environing Infrastructure* draws on the experience of China Made. Not only for its ethnographic scope, but also for the project's attentiveness to both the "visible" and "invisible" forms of infrastructure relations at play. If the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia – as much as in other parts of the world – is striking for its ubiquity in public discourse, such overwhelming presence risks hiding some of the key, on-the-ground dynamics of specific infrastructure projects. What gets lost, in the process, are the less visible "working" of infrastructure projects: questions of labor and maintenance, for instance, but also local ecological concerns surrounding infrastructural interventions. These are what – in the typical infrastructural manner of "inversion" – we aim to bring to the fore.