

# CHINAMADE BRIEF



## The Third ChinaMade Workshop: The Social Lives of Chinese Infrastructures in Southeast Asia

*Darren Byler and Tim Oakes, June 2020*



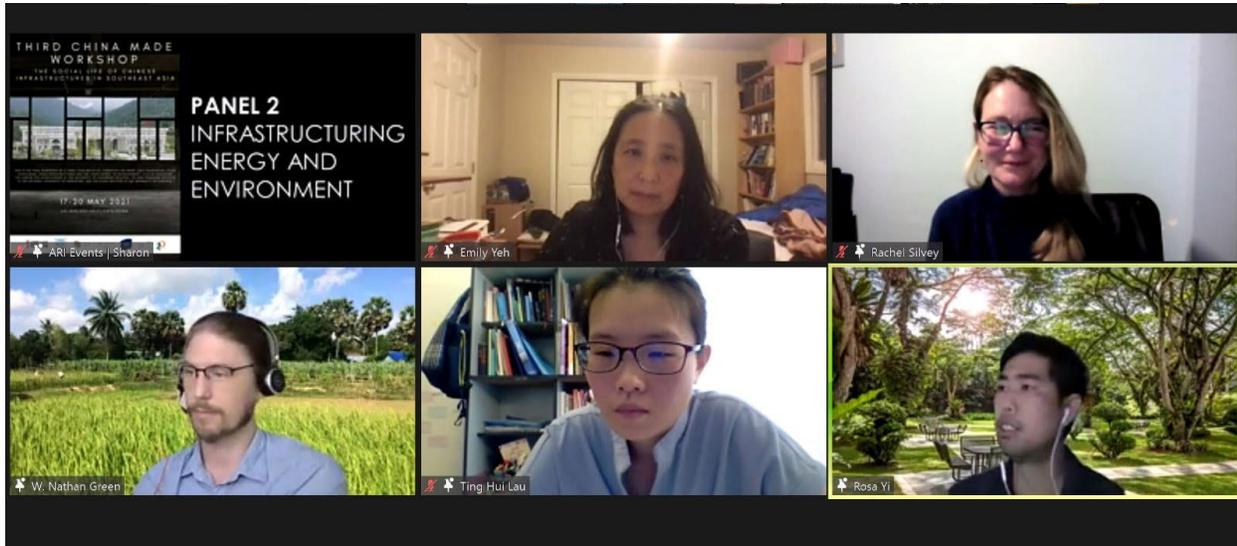
Infrastructures, the foundations underlying structures that shape and channel movement, are at the heart of the contemporary expansion of the Chinese economy into the world. China's overseas investments started with the construction of roads, dams, pipelines, airports and housing, but over the past decade have spilled over into other domains of social life. Chinese infrastructures are now not just concrete and steel, but also 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. They catalyze youth movements from villages to far away industrial parks and mines, spark political contestation in prefectural governments and armed insurgencies, and produce dispositions, or patterned tendencies, in material provisioning and life itself. Chinese infrastructures transform the social worlds and natural landscapes that they encounter as they move beyond China into Southeast Asia — a region often framed as the first segment of the Belt and Road Initiative. But the circuit moves in both directions. As these infrastructures encounter receiving communities and new material environments, they too are transformed.

In May 2021, scholars from around the world – Australia, Canada, Cambodia, Estonia, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the United Kingdom, and the United States – met in a four-day workshop hosted by the National University of Singapore, the University of Colorado Boulder and University of Toronto to consider how the Chinese experiment in infrastructure development in Southeast Asia is lived. The workshop papers which examined cases from West Papua to Yunnan

Province confirmed the centrality of infrastructure to the "China Model of Development," and that a key to understanding this drive is an analysis of its emergence from, and effects within, China's domestic economy. They also illustrated, however, that the local political and economic contexts of receiving communities matters a great deal in how Chinese international development is established and negotiated. Both points resonate with earlier workshops in the China Made project, funded by The Henry Luce Foundation (2018-2022), which examined Chinese domestic infrastructure and strove to conceptualize the material drivers of Chinese political economy (for summaries of these earlier workshops see [China Made Brief #1](#) and [China Made Brief #4](#)).

The papers in the workshop demonstrated that effect and practice of Chinese infrastructure in Southeast Asia varies a great deal across sectors and locations. For instance, in some cases training programs that accompany infrastructure projects help to establish best practices that line up with Chinese domestic ambitions; in other cases such as fin-tech in Indonesia experimental deployment of quasi-legal smartphone apps is done in an ad-hoc manner with little concern for establishing standards and best practices even as they capture aspects of financial institutions. Likewise, in industrial parks in places like Malaysia and Indonesia, Chinese developers are forced to deviate from standard operating procedure in order to accommodate worker demands. Over and over again the papers demonstrated that grounded studies of these projects defy an easy schema for understanding the toolbox of global China. While, to follow CK Lee, thinking about infrastructure development, patron-client relations, institutional capture as parts of the same field of power is useful (see [China Made Brief #6](#)), it is clear on the ground in Southeast Asia that local economic and political conditions precipitate an improvisational response that stresses different tools at different times and places. Even more interestingly, the papers suggested that this field of power has certain propensities or dispositions that arrive through complex local and global dynamics rather than a top-down driven strategy.

The papers suggested a methodological approach to understanding these dispositions. They emphasized grounded, observational, and participatory methodologies to understanding Chinese infrastructure development in Southeast Asia. Entering the research from these angles served to problematize received theoretical frameworks, such as 'neoliberalism', 'neoliberal urbanism', and 'varieties of capitalism,' among others. Pushing back against methodological territorialism also helped to decenter conventional units and scales of analysis, such as the nation state, the city, or the province, to think across regions, spaces, and borders. Thinking from below, and through ground-level views of Chinese infrastructure in social practice also precipitated decolonial thinking from the standpoint of the margins. Papers thus explored the lived experience of ethnic and religious minority encounters with infrastructure development, of vulnerable laboring populations, of small-scale cross-border traders, of local activist networks, and of resettled agriculturalists, just to name a few. This in turn opened up questions about abstracted models of the Belt and Road and binaries of global power politics. Instead, the eventfulness and embeddedness—the historic moment and coming into being of place—of Southeast Asian communities in a new field of play rose to the fore.



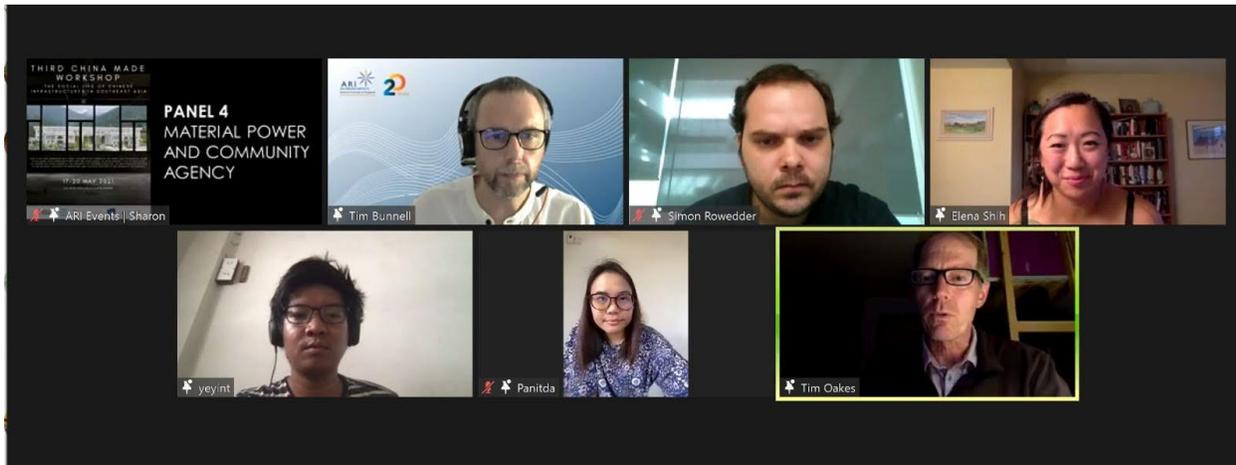
### *Four Themes and Two Implications*

The papers fell into four broad themes. The first of these, **materiality**, brought a focus on assemblages of the human and non-human, the material and immaterial, and the diffused, or distributed, quality of power within these assemblages of various materialities. The materialities of infrastructures are unruly, cannot be contained by any particular ideology, and carry power relations. Our focus on materiality thus tended to cast ‘the political’ within a techno-political framework by considering the political effects of material configurations and of technocratic fixes, and the different effects and relations of so-called ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructures. These political effects drew our attention to both intended and unintended outcomes, and the contradictions between these surpluses. And these effects also raise questions about connection and disruption, about who is able to connect and who is not, about who has access to new networks of connectivity, and who is refused access. The affordances of different materials—water, concrete and so on—and the infrastructures that carried them produces differential effects. Agency, then, is more than human.

A second theme, **spatiality**, centered on the importance of relational studies, of comparisons, of networks (in addition to places), connections, mobilities and other means of questioning the fixed spatialities of methodological territorialism. Chinese investment often occurs within, or produces, different kinds of zones and exceptional spaces. Yet our discussions sought to recognize the enclave spaces of Chinese development in relational terms, as ‘infrastructure spaces’ that are fluid, mobile, and connected. The workshop sought, in other words, to think with and through borders and boundaries, recognizing their active connecting, rather than simply their separating and disconnecting, powers. This border thinking was made most explicit in studies that questioned the conventional regional bordering that separates China from Southeast Asia. What would it mean to consider China’s southwestern provinces, particularly Yunnan, as becoming “Southeast Asia” while simultaneously viewing Northern Laos and Myanmar as becoming Southwest China?

A third theme, **temporality**, pushed us to think more about histories of the present, about the legacies, pathways and dependencies that condition contemporary projects. Chinese capital is structured in many ways by ongoing historical development processes which in turn shape the outcomes of projects in process. Using a genealogical approach to studying the histories of technologies and practices centered our attention on dynamics of evolution and change. This in turn brought to the fore moments of rupture, thresholds in which novel systems appeared. It also brought to mind the way three decades of analysis of rapid economic development in China could be brought to bear on current developments in Southeast Asia, parsing

differences and similarities across time and space. Participants also considered the way soft infrastructures, developed in the past decade, are being collapsed onto hard infrastructures, developed over three decades. This suggests that the chaos of the present is to some extent a product of rapid material development being further accelerated by the event of China's movement into the fourth industrial revolution of automated systems.



Finally, a fourth theme, **sociality**, turned our attention to the everyday lives of Chinese investment projects, and of the places in which they are being built. Studies that centered on this theme demonstrated both the promise and harms raised through rapid changes in social infrastructures. Lives put on hold, placed in circulation, produced knock on effects in social reproduction, gender relations, and, at a slightly larger scale, at the level of subnational or community sovereignty. They showed how projects could be hacked and appropriated in ways that were not intended. In fact, some projects appear to be built to accommodate transgressions and illicit activities among or within local communities. New mobilities are fashioned out of and among these projects, while simultaneously immobilities have been imposed. In a general sense then, what is most clearly elucidated is that surface level diagnoses of winners and losers, control and resistance, miss the important complexities of the stakes of these projects. Such studies miss the dynamism of infrastructures over time and across space. They miss the vitality of human ingenuity and resilience in the face of material change.

Taken together, two broad sets of **implications** emerged from the workshop. First, in relation to the emergent field of *global China* they shed new light on the type of capital that is in play in Chinese investment projects in Southeast Asia. They demonstrated how Chinese capital is embedded in local political and economic landscapes and the way it acts in relation to global capital. The workshop also demonstrated that the question “what kind of capital?” is keyed to the question “what kind of infrastructure?”, providing much needed nuance to abstract models of Chinese international development strategies. Second, the papers signaled something important about the role of infrastructure in the development of *state power* and the way flows of power within particular infrastructures change over time. They opened up questions regarding how and when projects enhance existing inequities and when and how they foster human flourishing. These open questions—right at the cutting edge of state power and capitalist frontier making—are key to understanding the contemporary writ large. They show us why theorizing Chinese infrastructure is a method for understanding not only Southeast Asia but also the global South as sites of the future.

### *Participants*

The workshop was convened by **Darren Byler** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Tim Oakes** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Yang Yang** (National University of Singapore), **Tim Bunnell** (National University of Singapore) and **Rachel Silvey** (University of Toronto). **AbdouMaliq Simone** (University of Sheffield) delivered a keynote address titled “[Betcha Nickel: Manifold Routes to the Metropolitan in Indonesia.](#)”



A selection to the workshop papers will be included in a special journal issue in 2022. The papers presented included:

- “Logistical Turbulence? Notes on the Deadly Life of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor” (**Geoffrey Aung [Soe Lin Aung]**, Columbia University)
- “The Infrastructural Hustle: The Techno-Political Re-Assemblage of Waterscape and Speculative Urbanization in Vientiane, Laos” (**Wanjing Kelly Chen**, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)
- “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Designs and Disjunctions in Northern Myanmar” (**Karin Dean**, Tallinn University)
- “Living the Zone as City-In-The-Making: Vision of Modernity, Space of Exclusion, or Another Day at the Office?” (**Jessica DiCarlo**, University of Colorado Boulder)
- “‘Building a Connected World’: Politics of Space and Visibility along the New Silk Roads” (**Solène Gautron**, Heidelberg University)
- “Producing Irrigated Landscapes: Chinese Infrastructure in Cambodia” (**W. Nathan Green & Yi Rosa**, National University of Singapore)
- “The Cooperation-Infrastructure Nexus: Translating the “China Model” into Southeast Asia” (**Tyler Harlan & Juliet Lu**, Marymount University & Cornell University)
- “Negotiating Dispossession, Resistance, and Contestation in a Fractured Political Landscape: The Role of Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Investment in Myanmar’s Extractive Industries” (**Angela Min Yi Hou**, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies)

- “Unnatural Disasters: Landslides, Flash Floods, and Infrastructure Development on the China-Myanmar Border” (**Ting Hui Lau**, Yale-NUS College, Singapore)
- “From International Revolution to International Speculation: The Afterlife of Revolutionary China’s Infrastructural Fever in Contemporary Southeast Asia” (**Zixian Liu**, University of Toronto)
- “Dreaming the ‘Chinese Dream’: Local Engagements with Chinese Promises of Infrastructure and Development in Northern Laos” (**Simon Rowedder**, National University of Singapore)
- “The Relentless Resistance: A Community-Based Environmental Movement against Chinese Transnational Infrastructure Projects in a Border Town, Thailand” (**Panitda Saiyarod**, University of Cologne and Chiang Mai University)
- “Free Trade Corridors on the China/Myanmar Border: Infrastructures of Labor (Im)Mobility” (**Elena Shih** and **Ye Yint Khant Maung**, Brown University)
- “Exporting the Shekou Model of Development through China’s BRI: An Examination of the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park and the Malaysia China Kuantan Industrial Park” (**Angela Tritto & Alvin Camba**, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology & John Hopkins University)
- “A Train Reaction: The Logics, Power, and Momentum of Hanoi’s New Metro Infrastructure and Residents’ Responses” (**Sarah Turner, Binh Nguyen & Madeleine Hykes**, McGill University)
- “‘Fixing’ the Jakarta-Bandung Corridor: Policy Mobility, State, and Capital” (**Trissia Wijaya & Gatra Priyandita**, Murdoch University & Australian National University)
- “As Fast as Possible: Speculation, Speed, and Mediation in Yangon’s ‘New City’” (**Courtney Wittekind**, Harvard University)

Other workshop participants included: **Joshua Barker** (University of Toronto), **Chang Jiat Hwee** (National University of Singapore), **Chong Ja Ian** (National University of Singapore), **Max Hirsh** (University of Hong Kong), **Marina Kaneti** (National University of Singapore), Edward Schatz (University of Toronto), **Dorothy Tang** (Massachu