



Center for Global Asia
环球亚洲研究中心

From Silk Road to Superhighway: A Decade of the Belt and Road Initiative

Auditorium N107, New Bund Campus, NYU Shanghai

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28-29 May 2024

The conference titled "From Silk Road to Superhighway: A Decade of the Belt and Road Initiative" is dedicated to providing a comprehensive assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since its inception in 2013. Over the past decade, the BRI has asserted itself as a transformative global force, influencing both hard and soft power dynamics on an international scale. Its reach extends beyond infrastructure development and cultural exchange, encompassing China's extensive global engagements. This interdisciplinary conference will serve as a vital platform for scholars to engage in an exploration of the BRI's impact, transcending the conventional focus on infrastructure and development finance. By examining themes spanning from environmental repercussions to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and cross-cultural interactions, this conference will broaden our perspectives on how the BRI has not only contributed to but also reshaped the global landscape, influencing Global Asia and far-reaching regions. Through analysis and discussions, this conference is poised to foster a more nuanced understanding of the BRI's enduring global influence, shedding light on its impact on the evolving global order, underlining China's significant role in the emerging international arena.

Tuesday, 28 May, 2024

Opening Remarks by Tansen Sen (NYU Shanghai)

Tansen Sen

Bio

Tansen Sen is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai, and Associated Full Professor of History at NYU. He received his MA from Peking University and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. He specializes in Asian history and has done extensive research on China and other Asian countries.

Briefing on Mapping Global China by Jiayong Liang (NYU Shanghai)

Jiayong Liang (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

Jiayong Liang is an Assistant Professor Faculty Fellow of Environmental Studies. As a geographer and spatial data scientist, Jiayong applies remote sensing techniques to identify, quantify, and model the Earth's natural resources and environment for human well-being. Her work has resulted in new approaches to environmental investigations, especially flood analytics with multi-modal data (satellite images, storm simulations, land use and land cover, topographic data, and in situ measurements). After receiving her doctoral degree, Jiayong worked in environment-tech industries to translate her remote sensing and data science techniques into decision support for international and national government agencies and insurance companies, to help them effectively prepare for and respond to climate disasters. She has published mainly in the areas of geographic information science and remote sensing.

**Panel 1: China's Evolving Strategy on Environmental, Social,
and Governance (ESG) Risk Management**

Chair and Discussant: Tansen Sen (NYU Shanghai)

Ziwei Fan, David A. Palmer and Chun Kai Leung

Chinese ESG, Green Finance, and Community Engagement on the BRI

Ziwei Fan (The University of Hong Kong)

Bio

Ziwei Fan is currently an MPhil student in Anthropology at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong. She previously obtained an MSc in Environmental Technology at the Imperial College London, as well as a BSc in Mathematics at the University of Bristol. She has nine years of in-depth professional experience in ESG consultancy and Green Finance in PricewaterhouseCoopers, Chinese state-owned corporations, and investment banks in Beijing, Chengdu and Hong Kong.

David A. Palmer (The University of Hong Kong)

Bio

David A Palmer (Ph.D, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris) is a Professor of Anthropology jointly appointed by the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology of the University of Hong Kong. His award-winning books include *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (Columbia University Press), *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with V. Goossaert) and *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with E. Siegler). He is the convenor of the Asian Religious Connections research cluster at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and coordinates collaborative research projects on Daoism among the Yao ethnic minority in the China-Vietnam-Laos borderland (yaodaoproject.com), and on religious and cultural entanglements of the Belt and Road Initiative (brinfaith.com).

Chun Kai Leung (City University of Hong Kong)

Bio

Dr. Chun Kai Leung (CK) is an expert in China's energy security and hydrocarbon value chains, as well as a CFA-certified ESG analyst. He is currently a Research Assistant Professor at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), an Academic Consultant at City University of Hong Kong (CityU), and an Associate-in-Research at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Prior to these roles, Dr. Leung developed the CityU MBA ESG curriculum, managed the Hong Kong Chapter of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and advised Dr. Usen Suleimen, the Ambassador-at-large of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. He obtained a PhD in Human Geography from Durham University, and received postdoctoral training at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Additionally, he has held Visiting or Honorary Fellow roles at the China Centre of Oxford University, Beijing Institute of Technology, and King's College London.

Abstract

This paper examines the implications of the evolution and transformation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013. Despite skepticism pointing towards its decline, the paper highlights the initiative's recent resurgence (BRI 2.0), which has marked

a shift towards sustainable and people-centered policies amidst mounting global pressure over environmental and human rights issues. The conventional model, dominated by large-scale investments by State-Owned Enterprises, was plagued by cost overruns, project delays, and withdrawals arising from inadequate due diligence and socio-environmental risk assessment. The transformed BRI 2.0 focuses on de-risking and future-proofing projects by prioritizing smaller, greener, and more “people-oriented” investments. This shift has necessitated a common platform based on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) parameters. The paper contextualizes ESG within the Chinese landscape and explores its potential to amplify China's soft power on an international level while emphasizing its adoption through an integrated systems approach. The study also underpins the vital role of humanities and social sciences concepts and tools, such as those from anthropology, sociology and geography, in formulating ESG-minded project management cultures that appreciate cultural diversity, community engagement, and society-nature harmony

David Landry and Yuan Wang

Iron fist or invisible hand? The drivers of ESG activities among Chinese mining companies

David Landry (Duke Kunshan and University College London)

Bio

David Landry is an Assistant Professor of Political Economy at Duke Kunshan University and an Honorary Fellow at University College London. He is also an associate faculty member at the Duke University Asia/Pacific Studies Institute and an affiliated researcher at the Johns Hopkins University China Africa Research Initiative. His research focuses on the determinants and impacts of Chinese infrastructure finance and extractive sector investments in the developing world, with a focus on the interplay between the two.

Yuan Wang (Duke Kunshan and University of Oxford)

Bio

Yuan Wang is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Duke Kunshan University. Wang's research interests cover global China, African politics and comparative political economy of development. She is especially interested in African state effectiveness and China's economic and political engagement with Africa. Her teaching interests at Duke Kunshan include China and the world, Sino-African relations, and African politics and development. Her book project investigates why Chinese-financed and Chinese-constructed projects follow starkly contrasting trajectories in different African countries. She has also undertaken research projects covering Chinese overseas engagement in Cambodia and Europe. Her papers have been published in leading academic journals such as Comparative Politics. She received a Bachelor of Law in International Relations from Shanghai International Studies University and a master of public policy from Harvard Kennedy

School. Oxford University awarded her both a Master of Science in Politics Research and a Doctor of Philosophy in Politics. She was the 2021-22 fellow at the Columbia-Harvard China and the world program and postdoctoral research scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University. She also taught Sino-African Relations in History and Present at the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University. Before returning to academia, she served in the China office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and at the Sino-Africa Centre of Excellence Foundation, Nairobi office.

Abstract

Overseas development finance plays a pivotal role in China's expanding global engagement. Existing scholarship often underestimates the commercial astuteness of Chinese capital, portraying it as "patient" due to its higher tolerance of risk compared to Western capital, which prioritizes short-term gains. However, we demonstrate that this narrative overlooks the calculated decisions behind much Chinese overseas lending. Our empirical analysis of Chinese overseas loans committed between 2000-2021 shows that far from being patient, Chinese capital employs hard-nosed risk-mitigation strategies. In risky countries, China routinely demands collateral in the form of future natural resources revenues for its loans, while also requiring loan insurance for projects, and charging higher interest rates on these loans. More specifically, our models demonstrate that loans to countries with higher credit risk levels are more likely to be resource-backed, as are loans that are insured. We also demonstrate that, surprisingly, resource-backed loans carry higher interest rates than their non-resource-backed counterparts, as do insured loans. To explain this surprising finding, we draw on qualitative case studies based on field interviews in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador and Ghana, and propose three potential mechanisms: political corruption and political business cycles in terms of political risks, and the security of the resource used as collateral in terms of financial risk. These findings suggest that Chinese state lending remains motivated by returns, even though it can also advance broader economic and political aims. This calculated finance, combined with the moral hazard posed by risk-seeking Chinese state-owned enterprises, can heighten sovereign default risk in the Global South. Recognizing the underlying pragmatism of Chinese global finance is critical for understanding the risk perceptions and priorities of emerging sovereign lenders.

Maria Adele Carrai, Ammar A. Malik, and Jiayong Liang

Is China greening the Belt and Road Initiative?

Maria Adele Carrai (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

Maria Adele Carrai is an Assistant Professor of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai. Her research explores the history of international law in East Asia and investigates how China's

rise as a global power shapes norms and redefines the international distribution of power. She co-leads the Research Initiative & Mapping Global China, and is the author of *Sovereignty in China: A Genealogy of a Concept since 1840* (CUP 2019) and co-editor of *The China Questions 2 - Critical Insights into US-China Relations* (HUP 2022). Before joining NYU Shanghai, she was a recipient of a three-year Marie-Curie fellowship at KU Leuven. She was also a Fellow at the Italian Academy of Columbia University, Princeton-Harvard China and the World Program, Max Weber Program of the European University Institute of Florence, and New York University Law School.

Ammar A. Malik (William & Mary)

Bio

Ammar A. Malik is a senior researcher at AidData, a research lab at William & Mary College. He is also a nonresident fellow at the Urban Institute and Director of Research at Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD), a research program at the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for International Development. At EPoD, Malik leads research policy engagements that derive actionable policy insights from rigorous research. He oversees EPoD's labor market and education research portfolios in the Middle East, identifying and supporting opportunities for data and economic analysis to inform local policies that empower underrepresented groups and support social and economic development. Malik's own research focuses on spatial urban forms and their economic implications, the political economy of public service delivery, and the distributional effects of urban public transport. From 2014 to 2018, Malik was a Research Associate and Senior Research Associate at Urban's Center on International Development and Governance, leading work on women's economic empowerment, the global refugee crisis, decentralization and local governance, and urban economic policy. He also previously worked at the World Bank, International Food Policy Research Institute, Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority, and Standard Chartered Bank. Malik holds a BA in Economics and Mathematics from the Lahore University of Management Sciences, an MA in Public Affairs from Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Sciences Po) Paris, an MA in Public Policy from the National University of Singapore, and a PhD in Public Policy from George Mason University.

Jiayong Liang (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

Jiayong Liang is an Assistant Professor Faculty Fellow of Environmental Studies. As a geographer and spatial data scientist, Jiayong applies remote sensing techniques to identify, quantify, and model the Earth's natural resources and environment for human well-being. Her work has resulted in new approaches to environmental investigations, especially flood analytics with multi-modal data (satellite images, storm simulations, land use and land cover, topographic data, and in situ measurements). After receiving her doctoral degree, Jiayong worked in environment-tech industries to translate her remote sensing and data

science techniques into decision support for international and national government agencies and insurance companies, to help them effectively prepare for and respond to climate disasters. She has published mainly in the areas of geographic information science and remote sensing.

Abstract

The urgency of the climate crisis has been emphasized post-COP26, particularly with catastrophic events such as the floods in Pakistan in 2022, propelling the global push towards achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. As the leading emitter of greenhouse gases, China's commitment to cease the development of new coal-fired power plants domestically but also along its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is crucial. This commitment is significant both domestically and internationally, given China's extensive involvement in financing and constructing coal power projects as part of BRI. This study scrutinizes China's progression towards a more environmentally responsible BRI, employing a tripartite analytical framework that considers intention, financing, and measures. We evaluate China's ecological intentions and the tangible results, investigating policy discourse, financial allocations, and the environmental consequences of these initiatives. The analysis aims to shed light on the efficacy of China's 'greening' endeavors within the BRI framework. Additionally, by focusing on Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as an illustrative example, we illustrate how some challenges in China's greening efforts are external and may fall beyond its direct influence.

Panel 2: The BRI and Infrastructure Development

Chair: David A. Palmer (The University of Hong Kong)

Discussant: Hong (Stella) Zhang (Harvard Kennedy School) (online)

Hong (Stella) Zhang (Harvard Kennedy School) (online)

Bio

Hong Zhang is a China Public Policy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Ash Center of Harvard Kennedy School. Hong's research is centered on China's engagements in global economic development, particularly focusing on Chinese companies' involvement in overseas infrastructure projects, and the role of the bureaucracy in coordinating international and domestic development agenda. Hong co-edits the *People's Map of Global China* and the *Global China Pulse Journal*. Prior to joining the Ash Center, Hong was a postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies' China-Africa Research Initiative, and a fellow at the Columbia-Harvard China and the World Program. Hong received her PhD in Public Policy from George Mason University in 2021. She has an

MSc in Sociology from London School of Economics and a Bachelor's degree in Economics from Renmin University of China. Previously, she had worked as an international reporter for China's Caixin Media.

Jingying Sun (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)

Financing Strategies for BRI Infrastructure: A Closer Examination of Mombasa-Nairobi Railway in Kenya

Bio

Dr. SUN Jingying is a Senior Researcher with the Institute of World Economics and Politics, Deputy Director of Economic Research Center, Deputy Chief of Staff of National Institute for Global Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She was a board member of the Think Tank Council of BRICS between 2012-2015, and is now a member of the United Nations Association of the People's Republic of China. Her main research areas are Chinese foreign aid, international development cooperation, and the UN sustainable development agenda.

Abstract

The newly constructed standard gauge railway from Mombasa to Nairobi (hereinafter referred to as the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway) is Kenya's largest and most important railway transport channel since its independence. Concurrently, it is a monumental endeavor within Kenya's Vision 2030 plan. The construction of the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway has laid a foundation for Kenya's economic development and industrial upgrading and also resulted in a good return on investment for Chinese enterprises, realizing a win-win for both China and Kenya. To maintain the project's fiscal sustainability, multiple measures were adopted to augment the credit rating of the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway Project. First, the China Export & Credit Insurance Corporation (Sinosure) provided export credit insurance for the project, with premiums borne by the Kenyan government. Second, the Kenyan government established a Railway Development Fund, commencing from July 1, 2013, imposing an additional 1.5% railway development levy on Kenyan imported goods to bridge the funding shortfall for railway construction and loan repayments. Third, the Kenya Railways Corporation and the Kenyan Ports Authority signed a long-term service agreement, ensuring the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway to obtain a baseline volume of business from inland ports. Fourth, an independent escrow account was established to use for deposits, debt payment, or fulfill other commitments based on the contract. It is precisely because of the close financial cooperation between the Kenyan and China that the financing sources for the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway were significantly enhanced, ultimately leading to the completion of the project and providing substantial support for local social development.

David E. Kiwuwa (University of Nottingham Ningbo China)

“Brick and mortar” as peacebuilding: The impact of Chinese Infrastructure Investment in Africa

Bio

David E. Kiwuwa is an Associate Professor in the School of International Studies. Previously he was Acting Head of School, Deputy Head of School and currently the School Director of Research and Faculty Coordinator of the Distinguished Speakers’ Series. He earned his PhD at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham UK where he was later Faculty in both SPIIR and the School of History before his secondment to Ningbo. Most recently he was a visiting fellow, Sydney Democratic Network, School of Social Sciences at University of Sydney (Australia), a visiting research Fung Global Fellow, at Princeton Institute of International and Regional Studies, Princeton University (USA), and a previous winner of the Lord Bryce prize of the Political Science Association. His research mainly looks at democratic transition and democratization processes in deeply divided societies, ethnic and nationalism politics, conflict analysis, electoral studies and China-Africa contemporary political relations. He is a published author with a major academic press and a number of discipline Journals. He is a political commentator who has been often quoted in a number of leading presses around the world and his opinion pieces carried by CNN, the Guardian, The Conversation to mention but a few.

Abstract

There has been a growing body of scholarship examining the economic and trade relationship between China-Africa within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But in a continent disproportionately blighted by incessant conflicts, what impact is the BRI having on peace? This is an area seldom interrogated. With China’s Infrastructural development as a cornerstone of this relationship and from the premise of “development as peace”, this research interrogates how and why infrastructural investment by China has precipitated conflict de-escalation and the onset of peace in Africa. In particular, using Angola and South Sudan as our case studies, we answer the following question: Has increasing Chinese investment in infrastructural development in these post-conflict African countries addressed structural violence factors and brought about peace dividends? The evidence thus examined points to a mixed bag of fortunes. While in one case there is a positive trend towards the onset of peace dividends in the other, there has been an outbreak of open conflict pointing to the reality that while brick and mortar are crucial to peacebuilding they are insufficient by themselves to guarantee sustainable and durable peace.

Yang Wang and Ziqi Xuan (The University of Hong Kong)

Localizing Chinese Modernity on the BRI: The Baoshan - Mandalay Cross - Border Industrial Zones

Yang Wang (The University of Hong Kong)

Bio

Yang is a second year PhD student in the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at The University of Hong Kong. Yang's research interests include modern Buddhism(s), urban redevelopment, and local governance in southwestern China. His current research examines the construction of cross-border developments between Baoshan, Yunnan, and Mandalay, Myanmar.

Ziqi Xuan (City University of Hong Kong)

Bio

Ziqi Xuan is a full-time PhD student at HKU Sociology. She received her bachelor's degree in Sociology from Peking University and MPhil degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge, she has conducted fieldwork in Thailand, the United Kingdom and Southwest China. Her research interests include collective memory, nostalgia and religious issues in China. Now she is focusing on the contemporary religious practice at Mount Tai.

Abstract

As a nationwide call for global connectivity, the policymaking regarding BRI projects has been conventionally perceived as a force from above, penetrating layers of political institutions and sinking to the grassroots. This article turns to the agency of local leaders in Baoshan, Yunnan, who, facing difficulties in local development, seek policy favor by proactively engaging the BRI "from below" by establishing "One Line Two Zones" (yixian liangyuan 一线两园): two interconnected industrial parks in China and Myanmar. The Baoshan-led construction of industrial zones in Mandalay is more than a local manifestation of national-level diplomacy. Indeed, Baoshan's initiative for connectivity is intended to synergize with its local economy, ameliorating the border city's lack of cheap labor for industrial development. While branded under the BRI, the "One Line Two Zones" is different from other high-profile projects in Myanmar such as railway and pipeline construction for two reasons: 1) developers involved are primarily Baoshanese who emphasize their local identity more than their so-called "Chinese-ness"; and 2) the cross-border collaboration serves Baoshan's local interests in a more direct sense than any strategic significance at the national level. Such a Baoshanese identity in the collective effort to develop their hometown contributes to a particular "Baoshan way of doing business", which is sustained in the contrasts and comparisons that Baoshanese developers experience in their everyday life. Caught in between their perception of Mandalay's "backward-ness" and their own "backward-ness" compared with high-profile Chinese

developers, the Baoshanese vision of modernity is subjective and contextual, conditioned upon their own capacity as local actors embodying “Chinese modernity.” This article offers a case study of how “Chinese modernity” can be filtered through the local identity of Baoshanese developers, re-conceptualized and internalized by Baoshanese developers themselves as well as their counterpart agents in Mandalay, Myanmar.

Keynote Address by David A. Palmer

David A. Palmer (The University of Hong Kong)

The Religious Factor in the Belt and Road

Bio

David A Palmer (Ph.D, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris) is a Professor of anthropology jointly appointed by the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology of the University of Hong Kong. His award-winning books include *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (Columbia University Press), *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with V. Goossaert) and *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with E. Siegler). He is the convenor of the Asian Religious Connections research cluster at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and coordinates collaborative research projects on Daoism among the Yao ethnic minority in the China-Vietnam-Laos borderland (yaodaoproject.com), and on religious and cultural entanglements of the Belt and Road Initiative (brinfaith.com).

Abstract

The Belt and Road runs through or around countries in Asia, Africa and elsewhere that have strong religious identities, and sometimes incorporate religion into the ideology of the state or of ruling political parties. China, on the other hand, is an officially atheist state. To what extent is religion a factor in China’s deepening engagement with countries of the Global South? In this talk, I will outline a conceptual framework for answering this question, drawing on insights from an international field-based collaborative research project on the religious entanglements of the BRI. The religious factor presents different dimensions when considered at three different levels and scales: (1) the realm of nation-states and geo-politics; (2) the realm of transnational religious circulations; (3) the realm of localized community responses to Chinese infrastructure and investment projects. While each realm presents its own dynamic, it is at the local level that religious factors are most likely to have an impact on Chinese engagements.

Wednesday, 29 May 2024

Panel 3: Trade and Commercial Interactions

Chair: Bhagya Senaratne (NYU Shanghai)

Discussant: Jingying Sun (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)

Bhagya Senaratne (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

Bhagya Senaratne is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Global Asia at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai. Previously, she was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Strategic Studies, at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka for close to a decade. At Center for Global Asia, Senaratne leads the project on 'BRI and South Asia', and parallelly runs the CGA BRI Talk Series by conducting high-level interviews with government officials and diplomats. Her research is at the intersection of Foreign Policy Analysis, China Studies, Ocean Politics and Strategic Communications. She co-edited *Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations: A Story of Friendship* in 2017 and *Sri Lanka's Post-Independence Defence Policy: Past, Present and Future Projections in 2023*. She has podcasts with the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), USA and the Indo-Pacific Circle (IPC), New Delhi and writes to the Stimson Center's South Asian Voices on Sri Lanka's foreign policy.

Keren Zhu (The New School)(online)

The Rise and Fall of Economic Centered Coalitions in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Case Study of the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway

Bio

Keren Zhu an incoming Assistant Professor of East Asia Politics at Davidson College. She is a postdoctoral fellow at the India China Institute, The New School, and a former Global China Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Boston University Global Development Policy Center. She holds a Ph.D. in Policy Analysis from the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Her research focuses on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Global South relations, global infrastructure, and sustainable development. She worked on BRI policy advisory in China from 2015 to 2017. She is working on a book project on the impact of China-financed infrastructure megaprojects' impact on the Global South.

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), now a decade into its implementation, has evolved into China's guiding foreign engagement and economic governance principle during the Xi Jinping era. In the implementation of the BRI, why do megaprojects elicit diverse responses, with some garnering local support while others lead to local grievances? This paper aims to address these questions by delving into sub-national level analysis in international relations and applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to trace the rise and fall of economically-centered coalitions in the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway project. This project is among the most controversial and influential China-financed megaprojects, sharing common features with other BRI initiatives. The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in China and Kenya between 2015 and 2023. It is based on over 300 original surveys and interviews with stakeholders involved in BRI project development and community-based project impact assessments. The findings suggest that the BRI's shape is influenced by China's domestic experience driven by economic interests, laying the foundation for economically-centered coalitions that contribute to progress during project construction. However, these coalitions fluctuate with interest redistribution, leading to changes in project outcomes and future uncertainties in project development and the success of the Initiative. This paper contributes to understanding the sub-national impact of Chinese overseas infrastructure engagement and offers a new pathway for assessing China's growing sphere of influence through infrastructure development.

Muhammed Tayyab Safdar (University of Virginia) (online)

Structural transformation within a neo-liberal state architecture: Evidence from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Bio

Tayyab Safdar is an Assistant Professor in Global Studies at the University of Virginia. He completed his MPhil and PhD in Development Studies from the University of Cambridge. His research explores the evolving dynamics of South-South Development Cooperation, with the rise of emerging powers in the developing world like China and India. His research also looks at the implications of increasing Chinese investment in developing countries that are a part of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), like Pakistan. Using evidence through in-depth fieldwork from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Tayyab is especially interested in understanding the rules and incentives that inform the interaction between Chinese stakeholders and elite actors in Pakistan. Tayyab's research has been published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Journal of Development Studies*, and *Energy for Sustainable Development*. In 2022, he gave testimony before the US-China Economic and Review Commission on China's response to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and China's engagement with Pakistan. Tayyab was the inaugural BRI Post-Doctoral researcher at the Department of Politics & East Asia Center UVA. Prior to joining UVA, Tayyab was a Newton

Trust Post-Doctoral researcher at the Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge.

Abstract

China has emerged as an important development partner for many developing countries, especially after the Belt & Road Initiative's (BRI) launch in 2013. The BRI's supporters argue that China aims to contribute to long-term structural transformation in host countries through a holistic development model which includes trade, aid, and investment. Through this model, informed by China's development experience, the Chinese seek to promote long-term structural transformation in partner countries in the global South. While China's motivations for promoting such a development model have received substantial attention in the literature, this paper addresses the issue of structural change and industrial policy from the perspective of host countries, especially those that have remained peripheral to the dynamic process of industrialisation in Asia. Using evidence from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI, the paper critically evaluates the host state's capability to affect structural change. Despite substantial Chinese investment in Pakistan's power sector under CPEC, industrial linkages remain limited. The country is not part of the dynamic value chains that link China with regions like Southeast Asia. The paper argues the lack of Chinese investment in Pakistan's manufacturing sector is a function of the country's political settlement, which promotes unproductive rent-seeking. It shows that decades of neoliberal reforms in Pakistan have hollowed out the state's ability to develop and implement an active industrial policy. The interaction of neoliberal reforms with the local political economy generates perverse incentives whereby policymakers promote investment in rent-thick areas like power generation and real estate. Without state capacity within the host countries, the paper questions Chinese policymakers' ability to contribute to long-term structural change in developing countries like Pakistan and looks at the long-term implications for the BRI's sustainability.

Yana Pak (The University of Hong Kong)

Crossing Central Asian steppes: Transport, Trade, and Cultural Connectivity between China and Kazakhstan

Bio

Yana Pak is a Sociologist, and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the "Asian Religious Connections" cluster, the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (HKIHSS), The University of Hong Kong. Trained in sociology and philosophy, she obtained her PhD at the EHESS (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences). Her thesis "A Spirit of Post-Soviet Muslim Capitalism? Sociology of an Economic and Religious Entrepreneurial

Network in Southern Kazakhstan since 1991” aimed to analyze the emergence and confessionalization of new forms of solidarity groups nourished by local values and subjectivities, specifically focusing on Islamic economy in the post-Soviet Central Asian context with both national and transnational implications. Her research interests and regional specialization are Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, where she conducted long-term sociological fieldwork from 2015 to 2023 on the local networks of entrepreneurs and modernity.

Abstract

The Silk Road, an extensive network of routes, has had a profound impact on the connectivity of Central Asia, specifically in terms of the exchange of people, ideas, and cultures. Today, the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) aims to enhance the China-Europe Railway Express and position Kazakhstan as a crucial trade hub connecting Asia and Europe, via Khorgos to the Caspian Sea. This paper focuses on the role of new infrastructures in facilitating the adoption of Chinese modernity by bringing together Chinese aesthetics, language, business practices, and administration with local socio-cultural subjectivities. It also explores how pre-existing ideas and organizational forms are adapted to new contexts. Using an actor-based sociological approach, the objective of our case study is to qualitatively understand the dynamics and emergence of new social and economic networks as well as cultural forms resulting from the interaction between different interpretations of modernity.

Nicola Casarini (Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome)

A decade of the Belt and Road in Europe: Assessing China’s connectivity project and how it is being reconfigured across the old continent

Bio

Nicola Casarini (PhD, LSE) is Associate Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome and Senior Research Fellow at the Asia Institute-University of Bologna. In 2021, he was a Fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington DC. From 2015 to 2020, he was Senior Fellow for Asia at IAI and from 2010 to 2014 Senior Analyst at the Paris-based EU Institute for Security Studies. He has held positions at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, Bocconi University in Milan, the European University Institute in Florence, and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His research interests focus on the politics and international relations of the Indo-Pacific; Europe’s relations with China and Asian countries; China’s foreign policy. He is the author of several books, articles, and policy papers. His works are listed on Research Gate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nicola-Casarini>. He regularly contributes to the

media and has appeared in (among the others): Foreign Affairs, Project Syndicate, The New York Times, Reuters, The Diplomat, Nikkei Asia, China Daily.

Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has entered the twilight zone in the old continent, following a deterioration of bilateral relations between the EU and its member states and China over the last years. Italy's official exit from the BRI at the end of 2023 was a further blow to Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy. Yet, China's connectivity project is not over in Europe. It is instead being reconfigured along two axes: (i) Infrastructure projects and greenfield investments under the banner of the Belt and Road are being reduced – if not stopped altogether – in Western and Northern Europe, giving content to calls by the EU's leadership to de-risk ties from Beijing. BRI projects and Chinese investments continue, however, in Eastern and Southeast Europe, indicating that there is a two-speed Europe when it comes to China's BRI; (ii) Western Europeans have opened doors to the financial and monetary aspects of China's connectivity project, mainly in the form of currency swap agreements and euro/renminbi clearing hubs, suggesting that the future of the BRI in Europe is more complex and articulated than what it meets the eyes. While in Eastern and Southeast Europe brick-and-mortar projects and acquisition of industrial assets under the banner of the BRI are likely to continue, the future of China-West Europe connectivity lies in the promotion of their currencies - the euro and the renminbi.

Panel 4: Discourse Dynamics of Belt and Road Initiative

Chair & Discussant: David E. Kiwuwa (University of Nottingham Ningbo China)

Joseba Estevez (The University of Hong Kong)

The Laos–China Railway (LCR) in 2023-2024: Local Perceptions and Impacts

Bio

Joseba Estévez is a Research Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the University of Hong Kong. His primary research focuses on cosmology, forms of social organization, social transformation, Daoism, Buddhism, animism, rituals and their associated exchange system, ritual texts, and oral (hi)stories of the Lanten (Yao Mun), a Mun-speaking society living in northwestern Laos. He is also working on mapping Global China, and studies the development and impact of the One Belt One Road in Northern Laos (Laos China Railway and the Special Economic Zones in Boten, Luang Namtha, and Ton Pheung, Bokeo) and South Thailand (Songkhla case - Smart City, Unesco Heritage Site, and infrastructural hub).

Abstract

In the 1860s, a concept known as the Yunnan Myth emerged in Europe, propagating the idea that Southwestern China, particularly Yunnan Province, held immense untapped potential as a market that could be unlocked through European trade. The British and French Empires vied for supremacy in realizing this notion. Fast forward one hundred and sixty years, the Laos - China Railway (LCR) is challenging this very idea by linking China to Southeast Asia and its markets and resources through Laos. This ambitious project, developed under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompasses a 422 km stretch in Laos, linking Kunming with Vientiane. It boasts an impressive feat of engineering, comprising 167 tunnels and 301 bridges that conquer a formidable geological terrain. Since its inaugural journey on December 2, 2021, the construction of this technological marvel and its subsequent utilization have profoundly impacted both the ecological and social fabric of the surrounding areas and communities encountered along the bullet train's path. Drawing from social anthropological fieldwork conducted by the author in Laos during November and December 2023, as well as February and April 2024, this article offers a fresh perspective on the local perception and impacts of the Laos - China Railway as voiced by members of the communities residing near the tracks almost two years after its commencement. Furthermore, by leveraging research conducted on comparable endeavors elsewhere, it envisions feasible impacts and outcomes in the foreseeable future.

Ivan Willis Rasmussen (NYU Shanghai)

Strategic and Rhetoric Variation with Regards to BRI Ports: The Case of the Melaka Gateway

Bio

Ivan Willis Rasmussen is the Undergraduate Coordinator of Social Sciences and Associate Professor of Practice in Political Science at NYU Shanghai. Prior to joining NYU Shanghai, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College and a Research Fellow with the International Security Program at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center. His research has appeared in the Asian Journal of Public Affairs and the Chinese Yearbook of International Law and Affairs with a recent co-authored book, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* (RAND Report).

Abstract

Port cities serve as key nodes or transit points in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); however, the motivations behind the development of these ports vary. In fact, some ports, such as Gwardar in Pakistan, pre-date the BRI while others may be more strategically or rhetorically linked to the BRI. In the following study, I first examine this variation regarding port cities' connection to the BRI. Building upon existing scholarly work on both the strategic and rhetorical qualities of China's BRI, I challenge the idea that there is a single

grand strategy and I show inconsistency in the narrative. As evidence, I rely on a crucial case of the cancellation of a specific port city development, the Melaka Gateway in Malaysia. The Melaka Gateway, regarded as having gone from “fabled port to muddy lagoon” (Sarkissian), offers a test case regarding Chinese strategic goals and rhetoric around the BRI.

Rundong Ning (The University of Hong Kong)

Technology entrepreneurs as cultural mediators between China and Africa: A preliminary study from Kenya

Bio

Rundong Ning is RGC Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong. He holds a Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology from Yale University. His research interests include work and labor, entrepreneurship, volunteerism, and digital economy. He is currently doing research about entrepreneurship in Congo and the connections between China and Kenya in the digital economy.

Abstract

In recent years, contents showing such direct, regular, and deep connections between Chinese and Africans have been increasingly popular in Chinese social media, especially on short-video-based platforms. In this paper, I use digital ethnography to collect and analyze some of the Africa-related short videos, and address this question: how are Chinese content creators representing their deep knowledge of and connections with Africa in Chinese social media by short videos? I show that a key theme in the representations of China-Africa connections is marketing Africa by well-established Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa. These representations of Africa bring detailed and vivid information about Africa to many Chinese who are unfamiliar with the region. But at the same time, capitalist logic heavily shapes these representations in such a way that Africa appears only as a source of profit. By outlining the patterns of these short videos, I hope to discuss three issues around China’s connection with Africa: Chinese as a closed community in Africa, representations of China-Africa connections, and the role of digital media in shaping China-Africa connections.

Bhagya Senaratne (NYU Shanghai)

BRI Infrastructure in Sri Lanka: Examining the Vernacular

Bio

Bhagya Senaratne is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Global Asia at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai. Previously, she was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Strategic Studies, at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka for close to a decade. At Center for Global Asia, Senaratne leads the project on 'BRI and South Asia', and parallelly runs the CGA BRI Talk Series by conducting high-level interviews with government officials and diplomats. Her research is at the intersection of Foreign Policy Analysis, China Studies, Ocean Politics and Strategic Communications. She co-edited *Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations: A Story of Friendship* in 2017 and *Sri Lanka's Post-Independence Defence Policy: Past, Present and Future Projections* in 2023. She has podcasts with the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), USA and the Indo-Pacific Circle (IPC), New Delhi and writes to the Stimson Center's *South Asian Voices* on Sri Lanka's foreign policy.

Abstract

Sri Lanka was a founding member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2014. Its infrastructure projects are often cited when critiquing the BRI, with large-scale projects, Hambantota Port, and the Colombo Port City, considered as not being viable. This paper contributes to the ongoing global discourse surrounding infrastructure development projects linked to the BRI, focusing on Sri Lanka. Despite the significant impact of these projects, the voice of the Sri Lankan vernacular has remained conspicuously absent from scholarly investigations. Within this context, the study aims to address two central inquiries: Firstly, what narratives and perspectives emerge from the Sri Lankan vernacular regarding BRI-related infrastructure development initiatives? Secondly, how do these vernacular interpretations shape the discourse surrounding BRI projects within Sri Lanka? To address these questions, this paper relies on several primary sources of data, such as over 200 vernacular sources of literature: scholarly articles and media reports. The data was triangulated with interviews with bureaucrats and data from various ministries of the Government of Sri Lanka. Thematically analyzing the content, it provides perspectives from within Sri Lanka towards Chinese infrastructure development projects in their country. This contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on the BRI and its engagements in Sri Lanka from an economic, political and security perspective.