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Reviewed by Enze Han*

China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia—A Dual-Volume Scholarly Intervention

1 Introduction

In an era defined by China's expanding global influence, understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become critical for scholars, policymakers, and communities across Asia. Yet much of the existing scholarship remains trapped in macro-level geopolitical analysis (Wang 2016; Rolland 2017; Li 2020), divorced from the lived realities of people most affected by infrastructure megaprojects. The two volumes under review represent an ambitious attempt to transform BRI studies through methodological innovation and empirical rigor. Together, the volumes constitute comprehensive scholarly interventions in understanding China's contemporary regional engagement with Southeast Asia (Han 2024).

Both volumes emerged from a multiyear collaborative research project involving scholars from across Southeast Asia. Edited by three of these scholars and including contributions from other researchers in the group, these two volumes should be read together. The first one, *Concepts and Methodologies*, asks the fundamental question: How should we study the BRI? The

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second, *Evaluating Risks and Benefits*, applies the methodological frameworks developed in the first volume to provide grounded empirical analysis of the BRI's actual impacts on local communities. This division of labor between methodological innovation and empirical application makes the volumes mutually reinforcing.

What distinguishes these two books from the proliferating literature on the BRI is their unwavering commitment to bottom-up ethnographic research. Rather than viewing Southeast Asia from Beijing's perspective or through the lens of great power competition, the editors and contributors center the voices and experiences of farmers, workers, traders, and communities whose lives have been transformed by Chinese infrastructure development. This methodological choice is not merely ethical but also generates analytical insights unavailable through other approaches.

2 Beyond Macroanalysis

Concepts and Methodologies serves as the theoretical foundation for both works, making a compelling case for why existing BRI scholarship has been insufficient. The editors criticize the predominance of top-down approaches that treat the BRI as a monolithic geopolitical strategy, arguing instead for methods that can capture its heterogeneous, context-specific manifestations. Their solution draws on anthropological traditions, particularly multi-sited ethnography, mobile infrastructure studies, and what they term a "voice approach," which has been adapted to the specific challenges of studying transnational development.

The opening chapter, by Yos Santasombat and Kian Cheng Lee—"Anthropology of Regionalization, Multi-sited Ethnography, and Voice Approach in BRI Research"—establishes the methodological framework that structures both volumes. The contributors argue that understanding the BRI requires tracking infrastructure, including its materials, financing, labor, and political negotiations, across multiple locations. Such methodological commitment produces the rich empirical materials for both volumes. By following these connections ethnographically, the contributors show how supposedly discrete projects are actually nodes in larger networks of capital, power, and transformation.

Several chapters introduce analytical frameworks that promise to reshape infrastructure studies more broadly. Kengkij Kitirianglarp's reconceptualization of "mobile infrastructures" through the transnational cattle trade exemplifies this innovation. Rather than treating infrastructure as fixed physical structures, Kitirianglarp contends the need to understand infrastructure as mobile assemblages that move across borders and through time. This conceptual shift has profound implications for how we understand the BRI's impacts, as it directs attention to flows and movements rather than static structures. Panitda Saiyarod asks the following ques-

tions: Where does a railway project begin and end? The physical route? The planning offices in capital cities? The financing negotiations? The displaced communities? She demonstrates that the field in transnational infrastructure research must be actively constructed through strategic decisions about what to follow and whose voices to privilege.

Perhaps the most striking conceptual contribution comes from Pinkaew Laungaramsri, in “Shadow Zones: Fraudulent Infrastructure, the Alchemy of Sovereignty, and Destructive Economies in Shwe Kokko SEZ/KK Park and Thailand’s EEC.” This chapter, grounded in extensive fieldwork along the Myanmar-Thailand border, examines the dark underbelly of BRI-associated development zones. Shwe Kokko and KK Park, ostensibly legitimate Special Economic Zones (SEZs), have become notorious hubs for cyber-scams, human trafficking, and organized crime. Tens of thousands of workers from across Asia and Africa have been trafficked to these compounds, promised high-paying jobs, only to find themselves imprisoned and forced to run elaborate investment scams under threat of torture.

Laungaramsri introduces the concept of “fraudulent infrastructure” to describe developments that perform the aesthetic and rhetorical functions of legitimate economic zones while serving fundamentally criminal purposes. These zones feature modern buildings, security infrastructure, and the trappings of economic development, but their actual function is to facilitate transnational organized crime. Laungaramsri’s analysis challenges the developmentalist assumptions underlying much BRI discourse and reveals how infrastructure can serve exploitation rather than development.

The voice approach advocated in the methodological volume and implemented throughout the empirical studies represents another crucial contribution. This is not simply about including quotations from affected communities. Rather, it involves foregrounding local perspectives as analytical resources that generate insights unavailable through elite interviews or document analysis. For example, the chapter on Vietnam’s narratives about Chinese infrastructure loans exemplifies this approach’s analytical power. By examining how ordinary Vietnamese citizens discuss Chinese financing through circulating stories and rumors, Nguyen Van Chinh and Dinh Thi Thanh Huyen reveal that the BRI’s impact extends far beyond measurable economic indicators. Narratives shape public opinion, influence political discourse, and affect how communities respond to proposed projects.

The ethnographic case studies in *Evaluating Risks and Benefits* demonstrate the voice approach in action. This volume presents extensive testimony from farmers displaced by SEZ development, workers in Chinese-owned plantations, traders navigating new cross-border regulations, and communities coping with environmental degradation from intensive agriculture. These voices complicate simplistic narratives about the BRI as either blessing or curse, revealing instead complex terrains of winners and losers, opportunities and risks, hope and fear. Some communities have benefited from improved connectivity and economic opportunities; others

have suffered land dispossession, environmental destruction, and social disruption. The voice approach allows such contradictions to emerge and be taken seriously as analytical problems.

3 Comparative Analysis

The two books demonstrate sophisticated attention to comparative analysis while respecting national and local particularities. Malaysia's experience with the BRI differs markedly from Thailand's, Myanmar's, or Laos's, all of which are shaped by distinct political systems, ethnic configurations, and development trajectories. Danny Wong Tze Ken's chapters on Malaysia in both volumes show how BRI projects became enmeshed in volatile domestic political struggles, serving as symbols in contests over Chinese influence, national sovereignty, and competing development visions. The 2018 Malaysian election, which saw the ruling coalition's defeat partly attributed to controversial Chinese infrastructure projects, illustrates how the BRI can generate political backlash even in countries that have historically welcomed Chinese investment.

Empirical case studies from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos reveal different patterns of BRI impact. Thailand, with its relatively strong state capacity and civil society, has negotiated BRI engagement differently from Myanmar, where state fragmentation and ongoing conflict create spaces for both legitimate infrastructure development and criminal operations like the scam compounds mentioned above. Laos's heavy debt burden from Chinese-financed railways presents different challenges from Cambodia's integration into Chinese supply chains through SEZ development. Thus, the comparative approach of the two volumes reveals that there is no singular BRI but rather multiple, context-dependent BRIs that must be understood within specific political, cultural, and historical settings.

Both volumes also pay sustained attention to the BRI's environmental and social costs across countries, dimensions that are often overlooked in celebratory accounts of infrastructure development (Lampton *et al.* 2020). For instance, intensive plantation agriculture causes environmental degradation in forms such as soil contamination from agrochemicals, water depletion, air pollution from burning agricultural residue, and biodiversity loss. These environmental impacts disproportionately affect the poorest and most marginalized communities, who lack resources to relocate or adapt.

Social costs include displacement from land without adequate compensation, disruption of traditional livelihoods, loss of access to common property resources, and transformation of social relations as communities become integrated into market-oriented production. The case studies reveal how BRI projects can exacerbate existing inequalities, concentrating benefits among elites while distributing costs across vulnerable populations. Women, ethnic minorities, and small-scale farmers emerge as particularly disadvantaged in many contexts.

4 Governance Challenges and Power Asymmetries

Both volumes emphasize governance challenges and power asymmetries as central to understanding BRI outcomes. They document how weak governance frameworks, limited public participation, and corruption enable projects that serve elite interests while imposing costs on communities. Chinese investors often operate in contexts where land rights are unclear, environmental regulations are weakly enforced, and affected communities have limited recourse for grievances. These governance gaps create conditions for exploitation and extraction.

The scam compound case studies by Laungaramsri provide examples of extreme governance failure, where nominal SEZs operate with impunity while engaging in massive human trafficking and fraud. But the problem extends beyond such extreme cases. Throughout the empirical chapters, contributors document how infrastructure projects proceed without meaningful community consultation, environmental impact assessments are perfunctory, displaced communities receive inadequate compensation, and grievance mechanisms are absent or ineffective.

The books' attention to power and sovereignty prove essential for analyzing these dynamics. Laungaramsri's analysis, for instance, describes how BRI projects operate in spaces where state sovereignty is fragmented, contested, or performed rather than exercised. In borderlands controlled by ethnic armed organizations, in SEZs with special legal status, and in areas where Chinese investors wield quasi-governmental powers, the question of who governs and in whose interests becomes fundamentally uncertain. Understanding the BRI requires attention to such sovereignty gaps and the forms of power that emerge within them.

5 Scholarly Significance and Future Directions

Together, the two volumes make three lasting contributions to scholarship. First, they demonstrate that studying transnational infrastructure requires methodological tools adequate for its complexity. The methodological frameworks developed in the first volume—such as multi-sited ethnography, attention to mobile infrastructures, the voice approach, and temporal analysis—provide resources not just for BRI studies but for understanding transnational phenomena more broadly.

Second, the volumes show that empirical depth need not come at the expense of theoretical sophistication. The constant dialogue between conceptual innovation and ethnographic finding produces analysis that is both empirically rich and theoretically generative. Concepts like fraudulent infrastructure, shifting plantations, and infrastructural temporality emerge from engagement with empirical material while also providing frameworks for analyzing new cases.

Third, the volumes model a form of collaborative, cross-national scholarship that respects regional expertise while pursuing comparative insights. The research team's composition—with scholars from across Southeast Asia—ensures intimate knowledge of local contexts, languages, and political dynamics. This regional expertise, combined with sophisticated theoretical frameworks, produces analysis that escapes both the parochialism of purely local studies and the abstraction of purely theoretical work.

6 Critical Reflections and Limitations

Despite their considerable strengths, the volumes have limitations worth acknowledging. The emphasis on ethnographic methods, while producing rich insights, means certain dimensions of the BRI receive less attention. Quantitative analysis of economic impacts, financial flows, and trade patterns would complement existing qualitative findings. The volumes could also benefit from more sustained engagement with Chinese perspectives, such as how do Chinese policymakers, investors, and workers understand the BRI and its impacts?

The focus on risks and challenges, while valuable and necessary, occasionally overshadows potential benefits. Some communities have genuinely benefited from improved connectivity, economic opportunities, and infrastructure development. A more balanced treatment might explore successful cases alongside failures, examining what conditions enable BRI projects to serve local development rather than extraction.

The temporal scope, while impressive in capturing a decade of BRI implementation, means the volumes represent a snapshot of an ongoing, evolving initiative. As the BRI adapts to changing geopolitical circumstances, economic conditions, and accumulated critiques, future research will need to trace these transformations and assess whether governance frameworks improve or exploitation patterns persist.

7 Conclusion

In asking fundamental questions about how to study and understand China's BRI in Southeast Asia, Santasombat, Lee, Tangseefa, and the volumes' contributors have produced a landmark scholarly intervention. For students of China's global engagement, they provide crucial insights into how the BRI operates on the ground, beyond policy pronouncements and geopolitical abstractions. For development studies scholars, they offer methodological innovations applicable far beyond the BRI. For policymakers in Southeast Asian countries, they provide evidence-based analysis of the BRI's actual impacts, revealing both opportunities to be seized and pitfalls

to be avoided.

Most important, by centering the voices and experiences of people directly affected by BRI projects, the two volumes remind us that infrastructure is not merely technical or economic but fundamentally social and political. Roads and railways, plantations and SEZs reshape lives, communities, and environments. Understanding these transformations requires the kind of methodologically sophisticated, empirically grounded, and ethically committed scholarship that these volumes exemplify. The works set a new standard for BRI studies and offer a model for how scholars can meaningfully engage with the complex, consequential transformations reshaping contemporary Asia.

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