

34. Taking Stock of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' - Empirical, Theoretical and Methodological Contributions from Current Anthropological Research (Workshop)

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In 2013, China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) set off with grand investment ambitions that should improve infrastructure networks, facilitate trade in goods and energy, and further intercultural exchange. In the meantime, however, critical voices have emerged that do not only question the BRI's economic and soft power impact, but point to its adverse consequences: from human rights violations to environmental degradation, from a 'debt-trap diplomacy' to neo-imperialist dependencies.

Macroeconomic and geopolitical takes on the BRI often emphasize the interplay between 'global' infrastructure and 'local' context, and thus indulge a determinism that is based on a rather diffuse, Eurocentric notion of 'the local'. To address this, our workshop wants to take stock – empirically, theoretically and methodologically – of the diverse anthropological research and knowledge production on the BRI that is currently well underway. Accordingly, we invite ethnographic contributions that attend to any economic, political, cultural, digital or other aspect associated with the BRI along its Eurasian land corridors. We ask in which ways the BRI is actually received and responded to ,on the ground'? Which actors and places are taken to represent ,the local'? Who is understood to govern the BRI, and which roles are assigned to national elites when- and wherever BRI projects are implemented and assessed 'locally'? Where exactly along the BRI does anyone or anything 'Chinese' come into what is perceived to be 'local'?

In answering these questions, we aspire to track the contested entanglement of narratives, exchanges, forms of knowledge and positionings in order to reach a more nuanced, multi-scalar reading of ,local dynamics'. More broadly speaking, we want to engage in a conversation about how anthropology can approach a large-scale phenomenon such as the BRI through lenses inspired by (new) materialism, translocality, political economy, social activism or decolonial approaches.

A tale of two bazaars

Susanne Fehlings, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

Since the early 1990s, Chinese have begun to migrate or sporadically come to the Caucasus for business. But it is only since the early 2000s that Chinese private traders and investors became a visible and recognizable group in Georgia. The largest Chinese foreign investor in the region is currently the Urumqui-based Hualing Group, which, since 2007, has invested more than 500 million USD in different economic branches ranging from wood processing to the construction of industrial zones. Much of Hualing Groups's activities have been framed under the BRI and are perceived as a symbol of Chinese aspirations in the Caucasus.

This presentation is based on fieldwork materials from 2022 and discusses Hualing's attempts to build and operate a new bazaar in Tbilisi. From the very beginning of its construction this bazaar called Hualing Tbilisi Sea Plaza was conceived as a Chinese counterpart of Tbilisi's Lilo Bazroba, which is the largest post-Soviet bazaar in Georgia. The presentation will look at the ups and downs of the Chinese project, its position within BRI, its standing within the local society and economic landscape, its relationship to Lilo Bazroba and the forms of interactions between Chinese and locals, which shape the success and failures of such projects on the ground.

Overperforming law and looking to the state: Chinese agribusinesses, Tajik bureaucrats and labourers in rural Tajikistan

Irna Hofman, University of Oxford

Tajikistan's state actively cultivates a discourse of the rule of law. Reference to law is omnipresent in the communication between the state and society, and in front of foreign audiences. At times, law appears performative. The nature of law shapes and, in turn, is being reshaped, by society's attitude towards law. However, not all laws are symbolic, and legal attitudes are not static. In this paper I analyse attitudes towards law and the role of the state in rural Tajikistan, in the context of the rising presence and diversification of Chinese actors in the country. The latter is a result of the BRI. I firstly examine Tajik bureaucrats' legal practices and shed light on "overperformance" as they implement the law. Whilst personifying the state, they subject Chinese actors to legal regulation. Second, I point to society's protests of labour conditions at Chinese companies, and a growing reference to labour rights. Engaging the scholarship on the anthropology of law and bureaucracy, I address changes in the attitude towards law and state consciousness in Tajikistan. Whilst public resistance is suppressed, and people

tend to distrust the state, vis-à-vis foreign actors, the law provides a means to protest and seek state support.

Women's empowerment: The BRI as a game-changer in south-eastern Kazakhstan?

Verena La Mela, Université de Fribourg

Proponents of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlight aspects of development, while opponents criticize China's hegemonic intentions, such as the debt trap diplomacy. This binary opposition, however, does not do justice to local actors' complex entanglements and the way they perceive the BRI. Zooming in to south-eastern Kazakhstan I show how women invest cash flowing in through the BRI into collective savings groups in order to enhance their economic status. Looking at small communities is crucial to provide a more nuanced picture of global BRI narratives. The often-ambiguous view of the BRI from below pushes us to think beyond good or bad and calls to take into account the setting, local actors and social aspects.

16 months of ethnographic field research in south-eastern Kazakhstan provide the basis for an analysis of women's empowerment generated through BRI induced cash flow. Paradoxically, actors barely mention the BRI in this context because competing local narratives of economic development accompanied by a deep-rooted Sinophobia prevail. This paper empirically examines the trickle down effects of the BRI in the Sino-Kazakh borderlands; methodologically, it contributes to qualitative studies of the BRI from below and as such contests dominant streams of knowledge production.

Whom the Roads Bypass. East-West Connections in a Disconnected Georgia

Beril Ocaklı, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Valentin Krüsmann, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

For seamless connectivity and economic development, multifarious infrastructures are assembled across the globe with China's involvement. In this paper, we situate China's transregional infrastructural engagement in the re/construction of the Rikoti Highway in Georgia, the South Caucasus. Built by four of the largest Chinese state-owned contractors, the infrastructure project gives the impression of a 'Chinese infrastructure'. Our ethnographic inquiry into the highway project allows us to move beyond realist geopolitical takes on the BRI, unearthing the elastic and

negotiated nature of 'hard' infrastructures. Beneath the label of Chinese/BRI infrastructure, we lay bare how a multiplicity of actors, agendas and actions, from the East and the West, enable, negotiate, and govern the execution and effects of this connectivity infrastructure. Chinese actors associate the construction with the BRI, while the Asian Development Bank supports the project for improved connectivity with Central Asia and the EU promotes the highway construction within the context of the country's deeper integration to European markets. The Georgian government, on the other hand, protects the project with a firm grip, leaving little room for meaningful participation and deliberation for people who live and work on the road and who are threatened to lose their existing connections.