

Migrations and Mobilities along the Belt and Road

Emergent Geographies in Asia and Beyond

Workshop Report
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Singapore

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The Belt & Road in Global Perspective (BRGP) is a collaborative research initiative, led by Professors Edward Schatz and Rachel Silvey, involving the University of Toronto, Nazarbayev University, and the National University of Singapore. The project, based at Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, is supported by a \$300,000 grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

The BRGP aims to conceptualize and assess China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trillion-dollar infrastructure and development program introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 as 'One Belt, One Road'. While the BRI is a massive undertaking with far-reaching implications, our project seeks to understand the BRI in its local, "downstream" contexts.

Activities to date include:

- Publishing 25+ blog entries on our blog, Transformations: Downstream Effects of the BRI, on diverse topics related to the BRI
- Hosting three workshops at the University of Toronto (virtual) in 2021, Nazarbayev University (Astana, Kazakhstan) in 2023, and National University Singapore (Singapore) in 2024
- Hosting 10+ speaker events—online and in person— by scholars from countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland
- Offering an undergraduate course on the Belt and Road Initiative taught out of the University of Toronto and open to students from all three participating universities

To learn more about our project, please visit [our website](#) or send any inquiries to beltandroad.munkschool@utoronto.ca. We regularly share updates, new articles, and BRI-related news on our Twitter account, [@BeltandroadMunk](#), and [via our newsletter](#).

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The workshop, titled "Migrations and Mobilities along the Belt and Road: Emergent Geographies in Asia and Beyond", was held at National University Singapore in Singapore from January 11-12, 2024.

During the conference, the varied effects of the BRI on conditions of migration and mobility were explored through six thematic panels. Each panel included a 20 minute presentation by each author and a 30 minute collective question and answer period. The conference was conducted in a hybrid manner—both in-person and on Zoom—with invited attendees and registrants.

Workshop Conveners

Prof Brenda S. A. Yeoh
National University Singapore

Prof Rachel Silvey
University of Toronto

Prof Edward Schatz
University of Toronto

Assoc Prof Kong Chong Ho
National University of Singapore

Dr Yi'En Cheng
National University of Singapore

Dr Kris Hyesoo Lee
National University of Singapore





Registration was required, but this was a public event. Papers and recordings of conference proceedings were made available to conference participants for private use. Selected papers may be published in a special issue of *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Society*.

Participants included 17 paper authors and 6 chairpersons representing 17 different universities from 10 countries across Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Panels brought together early-career and senior scholars, facilitating important discussion that included a variety of perspectives, identities, and experiences.

The key themes explored by the workshop's discussion are presented in the next section, where the papers are briefly summarized.

SEMINAR KEY

01.
MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS
AND BORDER TRADE
02.
EDUCATION MOBILITIES
03.
GENDER AND MIGRATION
04.
NAVIGATING LABOUR RIGHTS
FOR MIGRANT WORKERS
05.
MIGRANT COMMUNITIES,
CONNECTIVITY, AND NETWORKS
06.
(IM)MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURES

01

MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS
AND BORDER TRADE

Panelists: Yingyi Luo (Swinburne University) and Shiyang Zhu (RMIT University); Thomas White (King's College London); Na Ren (Jinan University)

Chairperson: Yi'En Cheng (National University of Singapore)

Yingyi Luo and Shiyang Zhu's paper "**Chinese Entrepreneurs and the BRI Shift in Australia**", examines BRI's impacts on Chinese entrepreneurship within Australia, particularly in light of the federal government's 2021 decision to terminate the Victorian state's BRI engagements. Luo and Zhu find that this decision has provided both challenges and opportunities for Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Australia: while established economic pathways have been disrupted, entrepreneurs have also been forced to innovate and diversify their strategies.

Thomas White's paper "**Performative Commerce: Mobile Traders and the Staging of BRI Potential at the Sino-Mongolian Border**", develops the concept of performative commerce in relation to small-scale Sino-Mongolian cross-border trading, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in summer of 2019. This performative commerce in this case takes the form of an exhibition and trade show put on by Chinese local officials to persuade a visiting Mongolian delegation to support a new Sino-Mongolian border crossing. The performative and pedagogical qualities of this event attempted to obscure the extractivism behind BRI rhetoric in favour of the promise of small-scale, informal commercial opportunities exemplified in the event.

Na Ren's paper "**New Emigrant, Socio-Economic Network and Transnational Governance: A Case Study of a Post-2000's Qiaoxiang-Shaodong County in China**", explores the effects of transnational emigrants' involvement in qiaoxiangs' (Chinese diaspora hometowns) local governance. Applying theories of transnational network governance to this question, Ren argues that transnational emigrants' involvement in qiaoxiang governance does not only rely on ties related to locality, kinship, and ethnicity but is also shaped by the dynamic political, economic and social networks that the local governments establish with the transnational emigrants.

02 EDUCATION MOBILITIES

Panelists: Mengwei Tu (Swansea University); Yingjing Du (Waseda University); Brenda S.A. Yeoh (National University of Singapore)

Chairperson: Kris Hyesoo Lee (National University of Singapore)

Mengwei Tu's paper, "**Time and Precarity in 'South-South' Academic Mobility: A 2019-2023 Longitudinal Study of Pakistani PhD Students in China**", highlights the importance of temporality in understanding the limitations and strategies involved in "South-South" academic mobility. Using a longitudinal qualitative approach, Tu finds that Pakistani PhD graduates from China experience precarity as the result of overt ageism in Chinese academic job market, the worsening socioeconomic situation in Pakistan, and the semi-peripheral positioning of China in the global educational hierarchy.

Yingjing Du's paper, "**Springboard to the West: Studying in China for International Students from Countries along the Belt and Road**", charts the decision-making processes and post-graduation trajectories of students from countries along the Belt and Road who come to China for their studies. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 students of various disciplines from 15 BRI countries, Du finds that students are motivated to apply to Chinese universities because of the affordability of the education, the smooth application process, and the possibility that educational degrees from China may act as a springboard for mobility to Western countries.

Brenda S.A. Yeoh's paper, "**Navigating the Belt and Road, and Beyond: Internationally Mobile Chinese Students, Identity Formation, and the Capacity to Aspire**", positions international students as aspirational subjects who must reconcile personal motivations with geopolitical realities, rather than strategic accumulators of cultural capital competing for class mobility. Through biographical interviews with 49 Chinese international students, Yeoh examines how mobile Chinese students perceive the BRI, as well as their own national, regional and global identities and worldview.

03 GENDER AND MIGRATION

Panelists: Raja Rameez (Xiamen University) and Miaoyan Yang (Xiamen University); Hang (Ayo) Zhou (Chr. Michelsen Institute)

Chairperson: Lan Anh Hoang (University of Melbourne)

Raja Rameez and Miaoyan Yang’s paper, “**Cultural Hybridity as the Recipe of Stable Romance: A Qualitative Study of Transnational Marriages between Chinese and Foreigner**”, investigates why some marriages between international students in China and Chinese nationals are stable and others are not. Rameez and Yang argue that educational background and pre-marriage relationship length affect the tenability of transnational marriages. In particular, a highly educated background and long-term pre-marriage relationship produce more durable and stable marriages.

Hang (Ayo) Zhou’s paper, “**Chinese Distant-Water Fishers in Guinea-Bissau: (im)mobilities and Masculinities**”, explores the biographies of Chinese distant-water fishers in Guinea-Bissau, including company managers based on land and fishing crew members working in the sea. More specifically, the paper sets out to identify who these Chinese distant-water fishers are, how and why they are recruited to migrate abroad and work in this sector, how they experience their work, and how they imagine their future.

04 NAVIGATING LABOUR RIGHTS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

Panelists: Ding Fei (Cornell University), Jelena Gledić (University of Belgrade), Marina Kaneti (National University of Singapore), Yuxin Hou (National University of Singapore), Israruddin (Independent Researcher)

Discussant: Kris Hyesoo Lee (National University of Singapore)

Ding Fei's paper, "**Transregional Mobility and Cross-Border Dispute Resolution for Chinese Workers Returning from Africa**", questions how effectively domestic courts in China protect the rights and interests of Chinese migrant workers in Africa. Through the analysis of 210 lawsuits filed by workers who returned from assignments in five African countries, Fei finds that the agents involved in recruiting, dispatching, and managing Chinese workers in Africa frequently shirk the establishment of formal labor relationships. Because of this, migrant workers face significant difficulties in asserting their rights and navigating the legal landscape within China and during their overseas employment.

Jelena Gledić's paper, "**BRI Project Workers in the Western Balkans: Politics and Public Perception**", examines how narratives about BRI workers are connected with local and regional political interests. Gledić finds that BRI workers are instrumentalized to portray political parties and politicians in power in a positive or negative light. The oscillation between positive and negative discourses on mostly Chinese workers in Western Balkan BRI projects is connected with local national election cycles and the political leanings of specific media outlets.

Marina Kaneti, Yuxin Hou, and Israruddin's paper, "**A Belt and Rights Initiative? Labor and the Complexities of BRI Migration Diplomacy**", explores the evolution of a two-track migration labor system in which migrants enter the destination country on a "business" rather than "work" visa. Because the "business" visa does not allow migrants to be employed, their actual stay and work in the destination country is illegal. This system limits minimizes the need for resolving cross-border labor movement diplomatically, among other effects.

05 MIGRANT COMMUNITIES, CONNECTIVITY, AND NETWORKS

Panelists: Cheng Chow (University of Hong Kong), Pál Nyiri (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Beibei Yang (Shandong Women's University)

Discussant: Brenda S.A. Yeoh (National University of Singapore)

Cheng Chow's paper, "**International Middling Immigrants in China under the Belt and Road Initiative**", examines the factors influencing the integration of "middling" immigrants from the Global North relocating to China. These skilled and educated individuals from middle socio-economic tiers in their origin countries are enticed to come to China through infrastructural and policy developments conducive to foreign entrepreneurship and investment. Through 22 in-depth interviews and comprehensive ethnography in China's urban hubs, Chow discovers that these immigrants often find themselves ensconced in insular social enclaves, disconnected from local Chinese networks and increasingly estranged from their countries of origin.

Pál Nyiri's paper, "**A Tightening Belt, A Road to Escape: 'Runology' and the BRI**", explores the expanding middle-class lifestyle and student migration from China to Hungary. Nyiri suggests that the infrastructure, as well as the imaginary of a global China framed as the BRI, can catalyse migrations with motivations that are quite distant from the national project. In particular, the author argues that the BRI should be viewed as a discursive framework that shapes China's new global geography and, among other things, fuels middle-class fantasies of leisure, adventure and escape.

Beibei Yang's paper, "**Inequality through the Lens of Danwei: The Anti-malaria Healthcare among Chinese SOE Migrants in Zambia**", examines how Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) migrants' anti-malarial health seeking experiences are formed in the transnational social field of Chinese SOEs. Using Zambia as a case study, Yang finds that Chinese SOEs play a complex role in influencing the health of their Chinese employees by providing basic medical services to workers while also implementing a dual health care policy that unequally distributes healthcare resources according to staff and workers' hierarchy.

06 (IM)MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURES

Panelists: Han Cheng (National University of Singapore)

Discussant: Floramante SJ Ponce (Martin Luther University-Halle), David Fernando Bachrach (University of Colorado Boulder), Jiaqi Liu (Singapore Management University & Princeton University)

Floramante SJ Ponce's paper, "**(Im)Mobility Infrastructures: How a BRI Hydropower Project (Im)Mobilized People in Northern Laos**", explores how a BRI project can facilitate or hinder the geographical movements of the people it displaces. Using a BRI hydropower project's resettlement site in north-western Laos as a case study, Ponce proposes a typologies of "stayers" in development-induced resettlement communities as well as interrogating the various infrastructures that influence their aspirations and capabilities to be (im)mobile.

David Fernando Bachrach's paper, "**The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and The Production of Enclaved Mobility**", examines how changes to residents' economic and social lives are intertwined with the materiality of infrastructure. Using the case study of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, Bachrach argues that the developing Bandung Metropolitan Area has increased mobility for some residents while limiting mobility for others through their inability to access improved flows of capital.

Jiaqi Liu's paper, "**Performative Infrastructures: Chinese Diasporas and the Grassroots Manipulation of the Sino-European Railway**", investigates the role of grassroots actors who tap into national grand projects and reshape transnational infrastructures from below. Drawing on interviews and ethnography with Chinese diaspora entrepreneurs operating the Yiwu-Xinjiang-Europe (YXE) Railway, Liu finds that by performing state-imposed narratives and enacting transnational networks in their everyday rhetoric and business practices, diaspora entrepreneurs theatrically manipulate the political symbolism of the YXE Railway to amplify their economic interests and personal gains.



NEXT STEPS

By bringing together scholars from various career stages and countries, the workshop fostered impactful networking and collaboration opportunities. The organizers of the conference have proposed a special issue for the journal, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Society*, to publish selected papers from the conference. This special issue will bring the important discussion facilitated by the conference to a wider audience.

We will continue vital discussions about the "downstream effects" of the BRI on our blog, [Transformations](#). For more information about the project and its future events, you can [subscribe to our newsletter](#) or [check out our website](#).

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