

## China's New Silk Roads: Exploring the Emerging Worlds of Chinese Globalization (Nov. 2017)



On Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2017, **Susanne Brandtstädter**, Department of Anthropology and Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne and **Nora Sausmikat**, Stiftung Asienhaus, Cologne invited academics and representatives of civil society organizations to take part in this one-day workshop. In this one-day workshop, participants jointly explored the contours of a new, China-centered globalization, by

- deconstructing BRI's narrative(s)
- exploring its human dimensions in cases from Africa and Asia
- focusing on the social life of infrastructural investments
- assessing the financial, political and institutional shifts connected to it.

Leading questions were: How do Chinese transnational investments in infrastructures and production facilities effect lives worldwide? How can and should the social sciences explore of the emergent worlds of Chinese globalization? Due to the fact that the magnitude of Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) is still unclear, the interdisciplinary workshop functioned as a platform to discuss first insights on the issue.

The morning session started with a paper given by **Korinna Horta**, a senior advisor to the German NGO *urgewald e.V.*. She focused on the role of the new China-led multilateral bank, the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Since Germany is the largest non-regional shareholder of this bank, she also highlighted Germany's role and responsibility in keeping the promise to uphold the highest social and environmental standards for loans provided by this bank. The AIIB's Environmental and Social Framework, which was adopted in January 2016, contains major loopholes and lacks specific mandatory rules. Important governance-related policies, such as a policy on public disclosure of information and accountability, are still being developed.

The second speaker, **Stephanie Fried** from Ulu Foundation, a foundation that works in partnership with resource-dependent communities, described the methodology for tracing and influencing financial flows with substantial environmental and social impacts and described a case study of a "National Slum Upgrading Project" jointly financed by the AIIB and the World Bank which have each invested US\$216 million in the project.

**Wolfram Schaffar** from the University of Vienna used China's high-speed rail policy and its impact on Thailand as a case study to highlight the influence of China's infrastructure investment project on local political shifts. He discussed the coup d'état in Thailand as part of a power struggle between elite fractions over the control of the BRI projects in Thailand - an upheaval connected to the transition from "Pax Americana" to "Pax Sinica".

During the second half of the workshop-day, questions of rule-of-law, international relations and Chinese migration in historical and African perspective were at the forefront. **Matthew Erie** (University of Oxford) gave a talk entitled "China's Law and Development Moment? Thought Experiments Among Participants In and Observers Of the BRI" in which he suggested that, contrary to the common assertion that the BRI is primarily constructed through political ties, law is increasingly important in mediating interests between diverse parties in the course of the BRI's massive infrastructural and investment projects. Specifically, Erie suggested that there is a particular type of "legal imagination" that operates in the Chinese BRI space. Although Chinese do not necessarily prefer to invest in countries with strong "rule of law" environments (unlike Western counterparts), nonetheless, the Chinese have participated in building a broadly legal framework through not only bilateral investment treaties that resolve state-to-state and investor-to-state disputes but also bespoke dispute resolution mechanisms and what Erie calls "legal hubs," enforceable jurisdictions. Erie used the case of Pakistan to demonstrate some of the promises and pitfalls of introducing law to the BRI via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor where there are a number of disputes ranging from anti-dumping and tax concessions to labor and environmental law violations. He explored if there is a particular Chinese notion of "Legalization (*fazhigua*) of BRI" or new "Asian" or "Chinese style of conflict mediation".

**Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi** from the University of Bern focused in her talk on southern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China which, if the vision of the Silk Road Economic Belt should materialize, is going to be a crucial junction on westward land and sea routes. While the discourse of the Economic Belt focuses on infrastructure construction and their transforming power, in her talk Agnieszka explored rather the practicalities and politics of infrastructure maintenance in regions like the Sino-Inner Asian borderlands which are characterized by political volatility, shifting topography of deserts and mountains and highly fragile ecosystems. By pushing maintenance into the centre of inquiry, her talk offered a new perspective on the current construction boom and its long-term sustainability. Moreover, in her talk Agnieszka offered insights into the practice of conducting research in politically

'sensitive' regions like Xinjiang and implications that this specific 'field' has on research methodology.

**Karen Smith Stegen** from Jacobs University Bremen offered insights on BRI from the (neo-)liberal and (neo-)realist theories of international relations. The neoliberal approach would highlight BRI's potential to enhance international cooperation, whereas neorealism would warn of increased geopolitical competition and tension. So long as other states are uncertain about China's intentions, the neorealist approach is likely to prevail. How China behaves regarding regional and global conflicts (Korea/South China Sea) and in Europe ("16+1") may shape international perceptions.

The final speaker **Solange Guo Chatelard**, a Ph.D candidate at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris and an associate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, focused on China-Africa relations. She presented her research on contemporary Chinese engagements in Zambia. Her main argument is that migration from mainland China today can be understood as a subset of a broader, historical and global dynamic of Chinese migration which she proposes to call the "Chinese industrial migration complex". The latter refers specifically to the historical confluence of state and private interests over long periods of time which played a critical role in shaping global power dynamics. The examples she presented was 16<sup>th</sup> century European maritime expansion into the Americas and South East Asia which was enabled by, Chinese merchants and commercial activity in the region; the abolition of slavery in the 19th century which led to the importation of cheap Chinese labour as a substitute to consolidate local industrial efforts in North, South and Central America as well as parts of southern Africa; and the interwar period in the first half of the 20th century where over 100 000 Chinese migrants came to work in European factories.

She highlighted that today's waves of mass migration from mainland China will also have a significant impact on global power dynamics. Chinese engagement in Africa has injected new dynamism into local and regional markets, built new critical connections and interfaces but also triggered a large set of new and complex challenges. While governments of developing countries tend to align with China's global development agenda, public perceptions on the ground tend to be more critical and complex. These mixed sentiments and reactions are new and powerful sources of fodder for political infighting. As the Zambian case makes clear, each host country deals with new waves of Chinese migration in its own particular way. This was the case with savvy politicians like the late Michael Sata, who pandered to populist sentiments for electoral purposes triggering xenophobic reactions against the Chinese, but reassured the Chinese once he was elected as the President, that their business and investments were welcome and crucial for Zambia's future development. Guo Chatelard made clear that capturing these different layers of nuance in the host country is crucial for a better understanding of China-Africa relations. The concluding discussion offered enough time to engage in a more profound discussion of the respective presentations.

Nora Sausmikat