

## **CfP POLLEN 2022**

**“The political ecology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative:  
A grounded analysis of the uneven effects of the New Silk Road on place,  
socio-natures and livelihoods from the South, North and beyond”**

### **Organizers**

Elia Apostolopoulou, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge

Han Cheng, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing

Jonathan Silver, Urban Institute, University of Sheffield

Alan Wiig, Urban Planning and Community Development, University of Massachusetts Boston

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, is the single largest infrastructure project since the Marshall Plan with a scope and scale that has no precedent in modern history. It is estimated to cost up to US\$8 trillion, involve 130 countries and an impressive number of corporate and state actors, and impact more than 65% of the world’s population. The BRI brings about novel combinations of large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects<sup>i</sup> with major investments in the built environment: from railways, airports, ports, industrial parks, optical fiber networks, and special economic zones (SEZs), to smart cities, greenfield investments, real estate and commercial projects. China has already addressed a significant part of the global infrastructure gap<sup>ii</sup> creating hopes that the BRI may create essential life-supporting infrastructures and services contributing to poverty reduction<sup>iii</sup>. However, place-based communities across the globe are increasingly contesting the loss of livelihoods and housing due to the intensification of land grabbing, displacement, and dispossession processes, driving concerns that a new stage of BRI-driven socio-spatial and socio-environmental transformation is emerging which unevenly rescripts political ecologies across multiple scales from the urban to rural and beyond<sup>iv</sup>.

Emerging grounded research has offered important insights that point to the unequal geographies of BRI projects and the way places, natures and communities are profoundly affected. This includes empirical reflections on: land speculation and the uneven and gendered vulnerabilities for marginalized groups (e.g. women, migrant laborers) living and working in places where BRI projects are materialised<sup>v</sup>; the exclusion of vulnerable populations from mitigation programmes of infrastructure

construction<sup>vi</sup>; processes of accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation related to the privatization of strategic infrastructure<sup>vii</sup>; the intensification of labour precarity, worsening of working conditions, and violation of worker's rights; the creation of logistical spaces<sup>viii</sup>, infrastructural hubs, industrial zones, manufacturing areas and commercial projects that alter the geographies of everyday lives by, for instance, turning cities into industrial enclaves and BRI transit corridors. Despite the importance of these analyses for unraveling emerging inequalities, **political ecology and critical geographical analyses focused on a comprehensive analysis of the links between BRI-driven transformation and inequality, including how the latter is differentiated along lines of class, gender and race, and an exploration of how different injustices are linked, are still missing from the literature.** Further, the critical examination of the BRI's trans-continental impact itself pushes scholars of political ecology to think across and between these emergent geographies.

In this session, we invite interventions that offer grounded, real-world analyses of the effects of BRI projects on places, socionatures and livelihoods following political ecology and geographical approaches and drawing on grounded case studies from any location. Potential contributions may focus on, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Theorizations of the ways BRI-driven transformation reconfigures patterns of inequality that build on and advance (urban) political ecology debates.
- Theoretical and empirical investigation of the links between different forms of inequality (social, economic, environmental, spatial).
- Analysis of the (uneven) ways BRI-driven transformation impacts on places, socionatures, and urban livelihoods.
- How already occurring policies of gentrification, urban regeneration, and city beautification interact with BRI projects.
- The material impacts of BRI projects to socio-natural metabolisms and the geographies of everyday life.
- How local contestation and social conflicts are co-producing Silk Road urbanizations on the ground and how people's place-based struggles influence the outcomes of BRI projects.
- Methodologies of depicting spatial transformation (e.g. counter-mapping, storytelling, performance and arts, visualization techniques) and its effects on places, livelihoods and the geographies of everyday life.
- Postcolonial, feminist, Indigenous and antiracist approaches to analyses of BRI-driven transformation.
- Counter-mapping practices, community and grassroots activism.

- Comparative methodologies, including relational analysis and countertopographies, from South, North and beyond.
- How the BRI articulates with urban/rural development, contested landscapes, and animal geographies in domestic China, especially the borderland regions.

**If you are interested in contributing to the session, please send a title and an abstract (max. 250 words) to both Elia Apostolopoulou ([ea367@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ea367@cam.ac.uk)) and Alan Wiig ([Alan.Wiig@umb.edu](mailto:Alan.Wiig@umb.edu)) by Friday, November 26. Please note that organisers are limited to giving two organised sessions. This means that if more papers are received that can fit in two sessions, we will make decisions based on the broader coherence of the sessions. Participants will be notified by December 7, 2021.**

## References

- 
- <sup>i</sup>Blanchard, J-M.F., Flint, C. (2017) The geopolitics of China's maritime Silk Road initiative. *Geopolitics* 22, 223-245.
- <sup>ii</sup>Chen, X. (2018) Globalisation redux: Can China's inside-out strategy catalyze economic development and integration across its Asian borderlands and beyond? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11(1), 35-58.
- <sup>iii</sup>Liu, W., Dunford, M. (2016) Inclusive globalization: Unpacking China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Area Development and Policy* 1, 323–340; Chen, X. (2018) Globalisation redux: can China's inside-out strategy catalyze economic development and integration across its Asian borderlands and beyond? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11(1), 35-58.
- <sup>iv</sup> Apostolopoulou, E. (2021) Tracing the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Antipode* 53, 831-858.
- <sup>v</sup>Murton, G., Lord, A. (2020) Trans-Himalayan power corridors: Infrastructural politics and China's belt and road initiative in Nepal. *Political Geography* 77, 102100; Beazley, R., Lassoie, J. P. (2017) *Himalayan mobilities: An exploration of the impact of expanding rural road networks on social and ecological systems in the Nepalese Himalaya*. Springer, New York.
- <sup>vi</sup>Dwyer, M.B. (2020) "They will not automatically benefit": The politics of infrastructure development in Laos's Northern Economic Corridor. *Political Geography* 78, 102118.
- <sup>vii</sup>Neilson, B. (2019) Precarious in Piraeus: on the making of labour insecurity in a port concession. *Globalizations* 16, 559-574.
- <sup>viii</sup>Gambino, E. (2019) The Georgian logistics revolution: questioning seamlessness across the New Silk Road. *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 13(1), 190-206.