

Negotiating Chinese Infrastructures of Modern Mobilities: Insights from Southeast Asia

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Since the launch of the BRI, particular modes of movement are integral to its vision of what it means to be a modern world citizen. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Southeast Asia, where China-backed infrastructure projects expand, and at great speed. Such infrastructure projects are carriers of particular versions of modernity, promising rapid mobility to populations better connected than ever before. Yet, until now, little attention has been paid to how mobility and promises of mobility intersect with local understandings of development. In the introduction to this special issue, we argue that it is essential to think about the role infrastructure plays in forms of development that place connectivity at the center. We suggest that considering development, mobility and modernity together is enlightening because it interrogates the connections between these interlocking themes. Through an introduction to five ethnographically grounded papers and two commentaries, all of which engage with infrastructures in different contexts throughout Southeast Asia, we demonstrate that there are significant gaps between official policy and lived experience. This makes the need to interrogate what infrastructure, mobilities, and global China really mean all the more pressing.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China-Backed Infrastructure; Development; Mobility; Southeast Asia



INTRODUCTION

As 2020 took hold, and the world began to grapple with the growing reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications for mobility became increasingly evident. The recent ASEAS special issue on “The COVID-19 Pandemic, (Im)Mobilities, and Migration in Southeast Asia” (Missbach & Stange, 2023) demonstrated how former options to move – more or less freely, flexibly, spontaneously and at speed – around the world were suddenly curtailed. Tourists, residents, traders,

transport operators, involuntary migrants and more experienced evacuation, rushing to embark on one-way journeys to extended periods of forced immobility. China-backed promises of high-speed mobility across the borders of Southeast Asia and China gave way to border closures and draconian restrictions on one's ability to move seemingly anywhere.

If the pandemic can be regarded now as a largely unforeseen rupture in an increasingly mobile world, we can also see it as a merely temporary halt to the 'normal' business of mobile people and goods. As the world gradually resumes pre-pandemic levels of physical movement, the integration of digital connections into daily routines has not only persisted but has become more entrenched than ever before. While there has been no rethinking or slowing down of mobility infrastructure schemes, including those backed by China, the pandemic has plainly made visible the "temporal fragility of infrastructures" (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021). This highlights the cyclical, and not linear, character of "infrastructural time" composed of specific periods or moments of rupture, remodeling, and intensification (Happel, 2018). As periods of suspension can be seen as integral to open-ended, cyclical infrastructure times (Gupta, 2018), mobilities have also often been suspended (not only) during the pandemic, leading to immobile moments of waiting and uncertainty (Missbach & Stange, 2023, pp. 9-10).¹

From transportation to urbanization, energy and digitalization, China-backed infrastructure projects have become increasingly common throughout Southeast Asia and the global South as both a means and outcome of development. This trend has accelerated since China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Southeast Asia and China can look back at a long history of transregional connectivity and mobility (Giersch, 2006, 2010; Walker, 1999; Yang, 2009). Hence, mobility, leading to various forms of voluntary and forced, intended and coincidental movements, is not a new phenomenon unique to and inalienable from modernity but is an essential feature of the region's history (Husa et al., 2014).

However, viewing China's recent push for mobility infrastructure and connectivity merely as a revival of ancient history, as China does so by referring to the legacy of the Silk Road (Freyman, 2021; Sidaway & Woon, 2017; Winter, 2019), would be too simple and dangerous – not least because it largely ignores the genealogy and associated imperial underpinnings of the term "Silk Road" itself (Sidaway & Woon, 2017). Additionally, the present official narrative of reviving ancient history also ignores China's modern history of restricting and tabooing mobility under Mao Zedong, which changed only in 1977, after his death, when the state officially endorsed mobility as a key element of producing modern citizens (Nyíri, 2010). We acknowledge that, regardless of historical continuities or ruptures, China's current and envisioned infrastructures of connectivity and mobility operate at a truly new scale and speed, fundamentally transforming Southeast Asia.

Against this backdrop, we suggest that it is essential to rethink the roles infrastructure plays in particular forms of development that place connectivity and concomitant mobility at the center of the BRI's vision and promise of mutually

1 For a more detailed conceptual discussion of suspension in the context of China's infrastructural development, see the commentary by Tim Oakes (2023) in this issue.

beneficial prosperity. New forms, scales, and speeds of movement are advertised as carriers of modernity, lived by newly transformed world citizens in an interconnected, always conveniently accessible world full of economic opportunities. These new forms of mobility are oriented towards, and ordered by, China. Infrastructures, as seemingly spatially fixed and immobile structures, are designed and engineered to facilitate modern mobilities. Yet, they are also themselves built on different forms of movement as they mobilize capital, land, resources, and labor, while displacing people who otherwise stand in the way of modern constructions of mobility and development. In this special issue, we explore how this dialectic of infrastructure and mobility manifests itself on the ground, what sort of lived realities emerge from, and in turn shape, infrastructures, and with which consequences.

Studying Chinese infrastructures of modern mobilities in Southeast Asia, it is impossible to ignore the BRI. Hence, there is an abundant and growing scholarship that deciphers the rationale, remit, wider geopolitical and economic implications, and concrete local impacts of the BRI (Freyman, 2021; Lampton et al., 2020; Liu & Dunford, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2020; Sidaway et al., 2020; Woodworth & Joniak-Lüthi, 2020). Such scholarship rightly tells us much about the rise of China's power, how, where and in what circumstances it intersects with the BRI. While such scholarship is vital for thinking through the BRI, going as far as to suggest the BRI as a method for thorough infrastructural thinking (Oakes, 2021), it has yet to grapple with the very notion of mobility itself.

Here, instead of asking large and abstract questions about what the BRI tells us about the rise of Chinese power in the world, we urged the contributors to this special issue to take an ethnographically grounded approach, considering concrete notions of mobility from the ground up, asking how mobility is understood and lived as part of these promises of a prosperous future. This ethnographic engagement helps in theorizing the multifarious role of mobilities in China's synonymous promises of infrastructural connectivity and development (see amongst others, Oakes, 2019, 2022; Rippa, 2020), both in official rhetoric and lived experience. With this special issue, we go beyond attempts to better understand ontologies, materialities, socialities, and politics of and in infrastructures. We thus complement "infrastructural thinking in China" – both as a research methodology to fully grasp infrastructural state power as a product of social, human-to-non-human, and material-technical relations, and as a key ideology of China's state and social reality of its citizens in and beyond China (Rippa & Oakes, 2023) – with mobility thinking, conceptually, ethnographically, and methodologically (Salazar et al., 2017). Hence, we argue that it is vital to consider the notion of mobility as a central avenue where development and modernity intersect both in political discourse and popular imagination of an interconnected and prosperous world in which everyone will flourish and in which people, goods, and capital will move.

The articles in this special issue scrutinize how this powerful discursive entanglement of infrastructure, mobility, development, and modernity is actually unfolding (or not) on the ground and what frictions exist between promises of seamless mobility and local interpretation and negotiations, acknowledging that "friction is required to keep global power in motion" (Tsing, 2005, p. 6). In doing so, we contribute to critical examinations of the mobilities paradigm across social sciences and among

policymakers. Our approach attends to the complex interrelations of mobilities, both produced as an object of knowledge and producing (or again produced by) subjects and subjectivities (Endres et al., 2016). From economic corridors, special economic zones, cross-border infrastructures, hydropower dams, and urban and rural transport systems to promises of how these developments produce modern citizens through sustainable, shared prosperous outcomes, the papers that follow attend to a series of important questions: What sort of subject is (supposed to be) produced here, and how does this embody (or not) the official rhetoric around mobility? Who is entitled to new forms of mobility? In other words, whose mobilities are envisioned after all? When asking what it means to be both modern and mobile in the age of the BRI, we must also consider the implications for older, allegedly unmodern forms of mobility. In addition, it is important to examine to what extent newly created mobilities produce new immobilities, or lead to hypermobility, resulting in a state of suspension, of never-ending movement, which in the case of ever-moving Chinese migrant workers is rather a manifestation of precarity than modernity (Xiang, 2021).

To answer these questions, the five *Current Research* papers of this special issue address various forms of mobility. The contributions by Saiyarod (2023, this issue) on cross-border mobility and trade in the Mekong region and by Nicolaisen (2023, this issue) on the partly finished, partly planned Hanoi Metro system examine mobility in its conventional sense of actual physical movement across rural and urban contexts. The three remaining papers explore mobilities as social, economic, and political practices behind, and effects of, Chinese infrastructures at large, and the BRI in particular, in different Southeast Asian contexts. Adopting the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Ayuttacorn (2023, this issue) analyzes Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) projects. She examines how emerging Chinese investor networks result in, and are shaped by, negotiations between various actors such as the Thai state, Chinese and Thai investors, and local Thai farmers. Similarly, Dean (2023, this issue) looks at the Myitkyina Economic Development Zone in northern Myanmar, an infrastructure megaproject combining logistics and transportation as part of China's BRI. Her key argument is that it is local authorities that centrally mediate and facilitate, as well as obstruct, Chinese, or any other external, infrastructure projects. In her paper on China-backed hydropower dams along and off the Mekong River in Cambodia, Käkönen (2023, this issue) outlines their simultaneous dynamics of both entanglements with and disentanglements from the recipient country's political power in shaping complex political-ecological relations, paradoxically as Chinese "entangled enclaves".

This special issue also features two critical commentaries in the *Research Workshop* publication category by Oakes (2023, this issue) and Brandtstädter (2023, this issue). Their discussions on the conceptual linkages between infrastructure and mobility enrich our understanding of China's BRI and the broader notions of global China. These complement the issue's focus on Southeast Asia with critical reflections from the Chinese context, China being the 'origin' of the infrastructures described in the five articles. Specifically, both commentaries show how visions and designs, or promises, of infrastructure can lead to a range of mobilities, both intended and unintended. This includes alternative or "deviated" mobilities as also discussed by Saiyarod (2023, this issue), as well as immobilities or forced displacements. Furthermore, these

infrastructure projects also mobilize, and are mobilized by, various actors with their potential interests, aspirations, skepticism, and resistance.

GLOBAL CHINA, THE BRI, AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

In their recent essay *China Beyond China*, Tyfield and Rodriguez (2022) argue that the defining question of our age is *how* China will use its influence and what this means for emergent world orders. They urge us to question what sort of world will be produced here and is in the process of unfolding. In this issue, we keep this in mind by asking what the rise of global China adds up to and consider this from above and below. Hence, we ask who is doing the unfolding and production of this new (Chinese) world order? What factors are at play here, and how do these manifest on the ground? In other words, what do these changes mean for ordinary people? How are they shaped by, and are in turn shaping, these changes? We suggest that in a world where China moves beyond China, and populations across Southeast Asia are more linked to the BRI hub itself, questions of just how people move, become (im)mobile, and how this features in changes that reshape world orders that impact us all, could not be more urgent. After all, to use the wording from Tyfield and Rodriguez, China is going beyond its own borders. It cannot do this without a physical movement of its people to other places. But then, it is worth asking what exactly is being exported here beyond the tangible. What about Chinese ideas? For recipient countries seeking development, as Kuik and Rosli (2023) argue, is there any real alternative, or in other words, is the BRI the only game in town? What does this look like on an everyday level and how does it vary?

Long before China's BRI, Southeast Asia had long been the focal point of diverse infrastructural connectivity schemes. These schemes, promoted by various actors, view connectivity as both a process and outcome of development with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as one of the most prominent actors and advocates. Furthermore, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) initiated in 1992 has played a crucial role in these developments. Underlining its unabated adherence to transport infrastructures as a key pillar for development and modernity, the ADB estimates that Southeast Asia will need an annual investment in infrastructure of USD 210 billion until 2030 (Asian Development Bank, 2017). Building on this largely externally induced infrastructural history, Southeast Asia is now connected increasingly to China, in metaphorical and literal terms. While we contend that mobility as integral to development continues a long-standing preoccupation in the region as to what development is and should be, it is for the BRI that this is articulated for the first time very explicitly. This makes Southeast Asia the ideal place to consider development, mobility, and modernity together. Here, China represents multiple things to different people: potential 'neo-colonizer', source of economic, social or educational opportunity, reason for concern, means to realize more prosperous futures and so on. These sentiments sometimes all come together in their contradictions within one statement, as one of the editors of this special issue demonstrates for local engagements with the 'Chinese dream' of infrastructural development in northern Laos (Rowedder, 2022; Rowedder, forthcoming). Therein, the often-heard statement that "soon, northern Laos will be part of southern China" could mean "a simple joke,

anger, uncertainty, fear, worry, fatalism, resilience, pragmatism, and aspiration at the same time” (Rowedder, 2022, p. 215). These entangled, and sometimes contradictory encounters with China in Southeast Asia as different people and goods negotiate new mobilities will be examined in the papers that follow.

In her work on understanding the global in global China, Lee (2022) argues for thinking of global China as policy, power, and method.² Here, we note that local engagements with China can be viewed as ground-level connections with Chinese policies – for example, the BRI and/or ‘Going Out’ policies – but also as engagements with different manifestations and practices of Chinese power. In this regard, the case studies presented in this special issue outline various encounters with the notion of China as something global, both in terms of the intangible, for example, policy and power, and the very tangible, for example, what these encounters produce. Finally, we do not lose sight of Lee’s (2022) insistence on keeping the global in sight in terms of method, and demonstrate how the local influences what is global about Chinese actions. The papers in this special issue by Käkönen (2023) and Dean (2023) underline this point. To Lee’s (2022) analysis, we also suggest that global China is all about movement, or mobility, to which we now turn.

MOBILITIES, AND WHY THEY MATTER

Following Sheller and Urry (2006), we regard mobility as a given in an increasingly mobile world and suggest that what sort of mobilities, by whom they are executed, and how these are imagined, as well as their discontents, are all fruitful areas of investigation. The question of whether people move or are impacted by mobility is fast becoming redundant in a world of increasing interconnections. Crucially, we do not only talk of people but also about movements of things: material goods and the intangible such as the movement and circulation of ideas (Trupp & Dolezal, 2013). This is particularly so with Naidu’s (2007) observation in mind that mobility is key to understanding, and (re)presentations of, what it is to be modern. The internet promises information from across the world at one’s fingertips, and a smartphone is an essential part of day-to-day life with an increasing number of practical matters. For example, accessing one’s bank account would be completely impossible without the use of mobile technology. Similarly, fast fashion and imported food are the cornerstones of modernity to many and would have been unthinkable just a few decades earlier. Mobilities connect people with people, and people with things, and places that are geographically far away are now increasingly connected via infrastructure schemes that bring the faraway near both in literal and metaphorical terms. Behind much of this seemingly limitless mobility lies China, the source country for workers toiling across the world and raising the influence of global China in parts of Southeast Asia and beyond (Driessen, 2019). We draw here on the work of Stolz and Tappe (2021) in their sentiments that pioneering as a form of mobility has a long history in Southeast Asia, as a means and an outcome of future building, a point reflected in the special issue, particularly in the papers by Ayuttacorn (2023), Dean (2023), and Saiyarod (2023).

2 Regarding global China as a method, see also Franceschini & Loubere (2022).

Indeed, in considering how mobilities are understood and imagined, we suggest that movement also includes less tangible concepts including hopes and aspirations, a concept that Reeves (2017, p. 711) has termed “infrastructural hope”. Even if universal opportunities for movement are largely a myth (Horstmann et al., 2020, p. 2), the potency of such notions matters (Johnson, 2020). Significantly, China beyond its borders is not homogenous, and, as demonstrated in this special issue, it is subject to a multitude of local perceptions and negotiations. We suggest here that hope can and should be considered in multiple terms because, even if the BRI is about China protecting its labor force and seeking new markets (Lee, 2018), how China is marketed to local populations in Southeast Asia as they see a rise in Chinese influence, Chinese people, and Chinese ideas in their countries matters very much (Po & Sims, 2022). As we will see in this special issue, many local actors take a pragmatic approach to new infrastructures and the papers suggest both optimism and disillusionment with how these are experienced and negotiated on the ground, a point demonstrated by Käkönen (2023, this issue) and Nicolaisen (2023, this issue).

The notion of mobility, infrastructures and their intersection with development is also vital because there is a significant overlap between the two. Rippa (2020) has argued that development and infrastructure are synonymous in the Chinese context. To him, it is simply impossible to have one without the other. This logic is not difficult to follow concerning the BRI, which of course prioritizes infrastructural connections. This, in turn, allows for the flow of goods and people that will follow. These too, are a key part of what it is to be developed. But while that sounds positive, the case studies in this special issue sound an important note of caution. Showing networks of Chinese investor networks, Ayuttacorn (2023, this issue) notes how trade flows can appear seamless but that does not mean that they are without very real problems that weaker parties have little power to resist. Development is on the one hand positive, but the promises of movement for all do not mean only positive consequences. As Hirsh and Mostowlansky (2022) show, infrastructure literally (re)makes the landscapes around us, encouraging and engendering new dreams while discouraging and hindering others.

We suggest that arguing for movement as a key part of development only takes us so far. An important question is one of movement but *from where to where?* Central to BRI is that it creates links to and through participating countries that connect them to China. Movement then is not just about the actual movement of people, goods, capital, and ideas; more crucially, it evolves along, and creates, new networks that follow the BRI’s spatial logics of redefining linkages between the (Chinese) center and peripheries, all in line with China’s “peripheral diplomacy”, in which mobility infrastructures play a central role (Wang & Hoo, 2019). Nor is this a simple question of thinking of mobility in terms of logistics but to broaden the discussion by considering also how people take up infrastructures in their quotidian lives, by translating them (or not) into mobilities.

DIALECTICS OF INFRASTRUCTURES OF MOBILITIES

Infrastructures embody a sense of promise (Anand et al., 2018; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Hirsh & Mostowlansky, 2022) that speaks of a better tomorrow, a future that is within

sight or reach (Johnson, 2020; Oakes, 2022), thus embodying the “future perfect, an anticipatory state around which different subjects gather their promises and aspirations” (Hetherington, 2017, p. 14).

In Southeast Asia, movement happens in the Chinese register of mobility. Infrastructures can be pitched as part of national agendas of development, and such agendas are, overall, advertised as good for the nation, in which everyone is expected to benefit in some way or another, even if the shared nature of any benefits will not be felt equally, a point often not emphasized. As the papers in this special issue show, sharing benefits does not mean sharing equally. How far people believe these promises, especially when they lose out on them, is an important question and goes to the heart of how infrastructure schemes are negotiated on the ground.

It is therefore vital to consider what infrastructures mean for local conditions and local politics, as shown by Dean (2023, this issue), Saiyarod (2023, this issue), Käkönen (2023, this issue) and Brandstädter (2023, this issue). Paying serious attention to infrastructures through the lens of mobilities helps in establishing a relational, processual, and dynamic understanding of local political, social, and economic realities of promises of infrastructural development – negotiated, contested, and co-produced by complex social and power relations among a wide range of actors. Conceptually ‘moving’ infrastructures out of their spatial fixity and discursive determinateness reveals various forms of fragmentary, fragile, intended or unintended, expected and unexpected mobilities (see also Heslop & Murton, 2021). Therefore, officially proclaimed new infrastructures and new mobilities are far from abstract and can concretely shape local politics in their intersections with agendas for national development with those of China in its BRI strategy (Rowedder, 2020; Suhardiman et al., 2021; Wilcox, 2022). However, too close an association with China can also be controversial and costly. This is a point made by Nicolaisen (2023, this issue) in her arguments that the Hanoi Metro system represents an example of people growing weary of China. ‘China fatigue’ therefore appears as a tangible and potent force, and one with tangible effects, such as passengers actively seeking out alternative forms of transport. But even here, in cases where China might be rejected, mobility and the need for it is not. This speaks to the importance of considering mobility, modernity, local understandings, and development, together.

MODERNITY, AND ITS DISCONTENTS

As a development strategy, the BRI presents a particular vision of the future and as scholars have been quick to point out, with these visions of what the future will look like we also see the power of the non-tangible (Harms, 2012). In a similar vein, efficient transportation features prominently in the popular imagination of what it is to be modern. The fusion of transport with development/modernity was demonstrated aptly when interlocutors of Phill Wilcox (2021) were told that, for Lao students studying in China, China is modern because it has public transport in the form of public buses. This awe at public transport extended further upon the discovery of the city’s metro system, which consolidated both joy at being able to move at speed with the novelty of being able to do it in new ways. The paper by Nicolaisen (2023, this issue) demonstrates with the case of the Hanoi Metro system how, in addition

to modernity, notions of being civilized are invoked for new efficient ways of urban transport mobility. Simon Rowedder (2022) had similar encounters with interlocutors in northern Laos who frequently travel to neighboring China for various purposes. Not a few of them were making fun of the backwardness of Laos' adventurous, zigzagging, rollercoaster-like roads, while they would simply draw straight lines in China, no matter what obstacle was to be overcome (Rowedder 2022, pp. 206-207).

These observations are an apt illustration of arguments made by High (2014) in connecting particular kinds of aesthetics and bodies that do certain things with understandings of modernity. What does it really mean to be modern? Where is a modern citizen supposed to travel, and through what means? We suggest here that a modern citizen not only travels, but has the economic and practical means to do so, and places that were previously inaccessible are now prominent in their imaginations, and accessible via shiny new buses and trains in whatever class of travel one avails oneself. The means to move something, or someone, at speed quickly and efficiently between one point and another therefore really matters, unless one has the freedom to choose to travel slowly, as Phill Wilcox (forthcoming) shows in a recent article on the appeal of cycling to middle-class youth in Laos. Many middle-class urban residents across Southeast Asia may experience embarrassment at rural, elderly relatives having little comprehension of how to navigate complex transport systems. As Oakes (2023) notes in his commentary in this special issue, infrastructure is not neutral, and new mobilities often render older mobilities obsolete, less modern, and less civilized. Depending on who is asked, this can be positive, negative, or both simultaneously. But at the same time, as Harms (2016) reminds us for the case of constructing a new urban zone in Ho Chi Minh City, the image of modernity is not the whole picture. Just because something might be said to symbolize the future does not mean that it is universally accepted as positive, and the papers by Dean (2023, this issue) and Käkönen (2023, this issue) point to the contested nature of engagements with infrastructure. As Brandtstädter (2023, this issue) recognizes, infrastructures can be said to be fragile, and subject to a range of different understandings that can change over time. This means that at the same time as optimism about the future, beneath there is often a world of discontent, contradiction, and negotiation as people see landscapes around them changing and often at bewildering speed.

At the same time, modernity and the performance of modernity is not as simple a matter as the construction of transport infrastructures. If developing a metro system in Hanoi is supposed to give travelers opportunities for access to utilize modern mobilities, there is a strong disconnect between rhetoric and reality, with the system under-used and the subject of much criticism (Nicolaisen, 2023, this issue). Saiyarod's (2023, this issue) interlocutors talk of taking what they term "the deviated route" for similar reasons. This does not mean that those disaffected by new infrastructures regard themselves as unmodern *per se*, even if they are very aware that they are losing from these initiatives (Harms, 2016; Lyttleton & Li, 2017). In contrast, they may simply regard that such infrastructures are not for them or may realize that they will lose more than they gain from such schemes even as they show apparently willing levels of engagement with such initiatives (Calabrese & Cao, 2021; Harms, 2012). As Käkönen (2023, this issue) shows in her paper, people may have very contradictory relationships with infrastructure, as her Cambodian interlocutors struggle with

reconciling hydropower projects that are, apparently, in the national interest (see also Dean, 2023, this issue), with the entrenchment of state power and what many of them regard as a green light for further cronyism and corruption.

This demonstrates a stark gap between rhetoric and reality. The BRI may appear as a coherent strategy on the part of Chinese policymakers (Cai, 2017; Yu, 2017), but on the ground, as we see here in this special issue, it is subject to a myriad of local negotiations, renegotiations, deviations and so on. This should not be a mere afterthought. Dean (2023, this issue) demonstrates how grand strategies are always subject to local negotiations and can only be fully understood in connection with the local contexts in which they are embedded. How infrastructure is negotiated in one country may look different in another, and often does. After all, the BRI – or any other (external) infrastructure project – is not operating in an empty space of exclusively passive recipient states. On the contrary, its full unfolding is centrally mediated by complex networks of different local actors – a point that is also central to Ayuttacorn's (2023, this issue) analysis of Chinese investment in Eastern Thailand through the lens of Actor-Network Theory. Moreover, as Brandtstädter (2023, this issue) shows, people are central to discussions on infrastructure, their promises, and discontents.

What constitutes the local with regard to land and water is not always clear, and has implications beyond the immediate and the visible. Ayuttacorn (2023, this issue) notes that in development initiatives such as special economic zones backed by powerful investor networks, farmers are at the front line of negative environmental costs in the form of rising levels of toxic waste, a point made elsewhere in this issue (Dean, 2023; Käkönen, 2023). This also underlines that what is apparently local has very real implications for places both near and far. It also underlines how infrastructure and mobility may well be the making of Asia (Hirsh & Mostowlansky, 2022), but that this has consequences that are both positive and less positive. This leads to the making of connections that are sometimes unwanted, ambivalent, or ambiguous (Saiyarod, 2023, this issue). These connections unfold in places where local, national, and global politics and agendas meet. The contributions to this special issue flesh out these connections between ordinary, local daily life and larger, transnational and global dynamics of change.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a pause to many increasingly mobile lives but the overall picture has not changed even in the age of spiraling inflation and rising costs of living. What it means to be modern, and to be mobile, and how these points intersect remains topical, especially as the BRI has now reached its tenth anniversary. After all, if mobility really is so central to ideas of what the future might look like, then it is high time to put this together with development and consider the two together.

We have suggested here that considering development, mobility, and modernity together is enlightening because it interrogates the connections between these interlocking themes at different scales and levels – be it in official state discourse, in social, political and economic practices and networks, or in (non-)articulated affects, aspirations, hopes, and fears. Moreover, to examine local engagements and negotiations between these themes is revealing, because it shows that policy is one thing, but lived

experience is far more nuanced. We have outlined above that it is vital to take infrastructure, and local engagements with infrastructure, seriously.

Finally, if the picture from Southeast Asia is multiple, then further research is needed to consider the importance of geographical proximity between Southeast Asia and China, and how the dynamics raised by the papers here play out (or not) in other regions. These case studies from Southeast Asia provide fascinating insights into what the future may look like for those in close geographical proximity to China, and further away.



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