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The sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons

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Abstract
Whilst the idea of infrastructure has animated scholarship for the past 20 years at least, there remains a need for more expansive understandings of what infrastructure is, and what it can be. The speed, scale, and material disruptiveness with which many of the infrastructural megaprojects that constitute China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been developed both underpin and validate this need. The effects of the BRI are both manifold and diffuse, and all of them expose situations of infrastructural complexity. We see the BRI as an infrastructural layer that comes into contact, competition, and collision with pre-existing infrastructural formations. It is an infrastructural vortex that causes once shared resources and public or common goods to become infrastructuralized in ways that bring about the (re)negotiation of meaning and value. These processes are acutely felt in South and Southeast Asia, where sedimented patterns of religion and belief shape the ways in which the BRI is engaged with and understood. Surprisingly, the sacred dimensions of these infrastructural commons remain unstudied, despite there being evidence to suggest that it is the transformative power of the sacred, rather than of secular modernity, that shapes and structures everyday lives. In this vein, the articles that constitute this special issue explore the sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons through a series of case studies from South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: BRI; infrastructural commons; sacred; South Asia; Southeast Asia

Introduction

Infrastructure, it seems, is everywhere. The promise of 'infrastructure' has come to permeate the material (mega)projects, hopes, and aspirations of development and change, and the political economy of cross-border investment in the contemporary world. And yet the critical turn in infrastructure studies reveals a sense of scholarly

dissatisfaction with the material bias that has come to dominate the field and has triggered calls for a more expansive infrastructural imagination. As one of the largest and most disruptive infrastructure-led development initiatives of our time, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is symptomatic of these biases and dissatisfactions. Recent work on the BRI has become increasingly forceful in calling for a reorientation of scholarship: from treating the BRI as a material effect of China's world-building agenda, to interpreting it as 'method' of study[1] and a '*source* of theoretical implications and reflection'.[2] The aim is to trigger a shift away from top-down, elite-focused politico-economic and geostrategic accounts that reflect a 'relatively conventional approach to geopolitics and to political power' that rest on the assumption that ideas and visions originate from Beijing and unfold through national-level political frameworks, and to embrace alternative perspectives instead.[3] Whilst variegated and undefined, these 'alternatives' coalesce around the need to 'give analytical priority to agency and entitlements to communities on the ground'.[4] Besides methodological corrections, one apparently 'provocative' approach is to interpret infrastructure as an open-ended *starting* point of analysis, rather than a pregiven material fact.[5] Doing so might involve foregrounding the agency, multiplicity, and more generative analytical directions that are put in motion by an infrastructural perspective. This is a perspective that looks beyond the material and embraces the (dis)ordering effects of infrastructure on the livelihoods and world views of people situated at the tail-end of the BRI.

   Whilst this sort of reorientation stands to provide an important corrective to existing debates on the BRI, so too does it stand to contribute to the theoretical expansion of critical infrastructure studies. The uniqueness of the BRI is captured in Bunnell's observation that '"the BRI" is a label that serves to bring previously unassociated project sites and non-place-based infrastructure developments into comparative relation'.[6] Expressions of Chinese capital rub up against local or indigenous ways of being in the world; expressions of secular modernity associated with material development come into contact and collision with alternative, and deeply sedimented, cosmologies, systems of belief, and spiritual orientations; and natural environments and ecosystems are degraded, if not destroyed, to make way for concrete expressions of development and progress. By foregrounding these connections, we can begin to appreciate the extent to which 'infrastructures beget infrastructures but not

[1]Tim Oakes, 'The Belt and Road as method: Geopolitics, technopolitics and power through an infrastructure lens', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2021, pp. 281–285.
[2]Shaun Lin, Naoko Shimazu and James D. Sidaway, 'Theorising from the Belt and Road Initiative', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2021, p. 262, original emphasis after K.-H. Chen, *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[3]Oakes, 'The Belt and Road as method', p. 282.
[4]Jonas Lindberg and Robin Biddulph, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: The need for livelihood-inclusive stories', *Geoforum*, vol. 121, 2021, pp. 138–141. See also Gustavo de L. T. Olivera, Galen Murton, Alessandro Rippa, Tyler Harlan and Yang Yang, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground', *Political Geography*, vol. 82, 2020, pp. 1–4.
[5]Oakes, 'The Belt and Road as method', p. 283.
[6]Tim Bunnell, 'BRI and beyond: Comparative possibilities of extended Chinese urbanisation', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2021, p. 270.

necessarily in predictable ways'[7] and that the challenge for researchers, then, is to not 'see infrastructure in fixed, bounded or even concrete terms but as connective tissue that brings seemingly disparate and diverse entities into conversation and productive tension with each other'.[8] The speed, scale, and material disruptiveness with which many of the (mega)projects that constitute the BRI have been developed cause it to become an infrastructural vortex that might best be understood in processual terms. By taking the view that infrastructures are forces that act on us, we can begin to appreciate the generative theoretical potential associated with the 'infrastructuralization' of the world. Drawing on Larkin's 'peculiar ontology' of infrastructure as 'things but also the relation between things', infrastructuralization causes various and often discrete 'things' to be[9]

> implicated in the extraction of meaning and value … As much as infrastructuralisation involves the extraction of value, so too does it involve *imbuing* these systems with new forms of value. Importantly, infrastructuralisation also brings about a discursive shift from being standalone entities to becoming increasingly interlinked with, and even dependent on, other infrastructures.[10]

In this schema, infrastructure should be interpreted in relation to the type and strength of force that it exerts in the world. Infrastructures are, by their very nature, embedded in the world, and thus come to recursively shape the worlds in which they are embedded in an ongoing, processual cycle of (re)invention. Embracing these sorts of ideas opens the discourse to parallel narratives, theoretical standpoints, and ethnographic insights that might be missed by more mainstream infrastructural analyses. Pushing these ideas to their theoretical limit so far is seen in Barua's call for research to explore how 'non-human life is itself rendered infrastructural'.[11]

Ideas like this reveal the theoretical opening from which the articles that comprise this special issue have been developed, the aim being to open discourse to the possibilities that emerge from embracing the sacred, the sentient, the spiritual, and the supernatural potentialities of an infrastructuralized world.[12] These possibilities were initially explored in an online workshop, hosted by The University of Hong Kong in June 2022, in which the contributors were challenged to think through the ethnographic and theoretical nexus of the BRI, infrastructure, and religion in different South and Southeast Asian contexts. Although these are contexts that are home to, inter alia, socially, linguistically, materially, racially, and spiritually distinct peoples and

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[7]Galen Murton, 'Roads to China and infrastructural relations in Nepal', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2020, p. 840.

[8]Orlando Woods, 'Between the commons and the cosmos: The sacred politics of the BRI in Southeast Asia and beyond', *Area Development and Policy*, 2022, p. 2.

[9]Brian Larkin, 'The politics and poetics of infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2013, p. 329.

[10]Woods, 'Between the commons and the cosmos', p. 4; original emphasis.

[11]Maan Barua, 'Infrastructure and non-human life: A wider ontology', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2021, p. 1469.

[12]After M. D Gergan, 'Animating the sacred, sentient and spiritual in post-humanist and material geographies', *Geography Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2015, pp. 262–275.

communities, they do share several characteristics. Most, but not all, have contested histories and memories of colonialism, communism, and foreign interference that might shape their orientations in and to the world. Some have well-established diasporic Chinese communities that provide a symbolic bridge to China. Many are home to 'numinous peoples that integrate the formalized beliefs of world religion with sedimented histories of animism and alternative cosmologies',[13] all of which reveal how the processes of infrastructuralization triggered by the BRI have 'no neat beginnings nor endings'.[14]

The sections that follow offer more detailed elaborations of these ideas. We first review key theoretical developments in critical infrastructure studies before highlighting the need for a more expansive infrastructural ontology. We then introduce a key heuristic used to align the articles that comprise this special issue—that of the infrastructural commons—and consider the place of religion therein. Following these theoretical moves, we pivot to the empirical case of the BRI, and argue that it should be understood as an infrastructural 'vortex' that reveals a plurality of infrastructural formations vying against each other for primacy. The final part of this Introduction presents the articles that comprise this special issue, identifying the themes that tie them together and the uniquenesses that define them individually, illustrating how each can be seen to advance the sacred dimensions of the BRI in South and Southeast Asia.

Towards a (more) expansive infrastructural imagination

Infrastructure is a strange term. It has expanded in meaning over the years and has now come to be a capacious signifier that is difficult to pin down in any specific way. By gaining currency in academic circles—and among social scientists in particular—the idea of infrastructure has been 'stripped of its former specialized meaning and can now fit nearly any circumstances'.[15] First used in nineteenth-century France to designate the foundational work (roadbeds, tunnels, embankments) that precedes the laying down of railroad tracks, the word spread to English-language specialist engineering circles discussing rail, navigation, and aviation projects in the early twentieth century. It acquired wide currency in English in the post-war era with the simultaneous deployment, in the military sphere, of NATO's Common Infrastructure Programme and, in the economic sphere, of the infrastructures of 'international development' spearheaded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Throughout the world, infrastructure became the guiding principle of national development and planning, public service provision, and inter-city and inter-country benchmarking and comparison. In many respects, the dominance of infrastructure-led development caused it to become a byword for material and technocratic progress, and an assumed

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[13] Woods, 'Between the commons and the cosmos', p. 3.

[14] Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, Peter Rowe and Loritta Chan, 'Of bombs and belts: Exploring potential ruptures within China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 186, no. 3, 2020, p. 340.

[15] A. Carse, 'Key word: Infrastructure. How a humble French engineering term shaped the modern world', in *Infrastructures and social complexity: A companion*, (eds) P. Harvey, Casper B. Jensen and A. Morita (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 38.

and uncritical boon for people and places the world over. In this vein, infrastructure has since come to be associated with the materialization of 'optimist dreams of modernist progress, enlightenment, and affective attachments to these abstract ideals',[16] in turn opening the discourse up to the idea that anything can be infrastructure, or infrastructuralized. Notwithstanding, Schouten and Bachmann caution against being seduced by the material-progressive bias of infrastructure studies, critiquing the fact that infrastructures have come to be known as 'obdurate, path-dependent systems that interact with collective human behaviour through their bulky, extensive physicality … but also as the physical scaffolding on which agendas of political domination are grafted'.[17]

Sentiment like this reflects the shift that occurred in infrastructure studies in the early 2000s, and the emergence of a perceptibly critical turn in how infrastructure is studied and understood. The publication of Graham and Marvin's book *Splintering Urbanism* in 2001 ushered in a new wave of scholarship that sought to uncover and foreground the regimes of power and influence that infrastructure-led development has wrought on the world.[18] The impact of their work can be found in the weaving together of urban development and globalization through a more relational understanding of how material infrastructures are in fact networked, causing them to interact with and shape the various worlds in which they are found. Inanimate as they might be, material infrastructures are nonetheless understood to play a pivotal role in shaping the ways in which everyday life is imagined and lived. Building on these ideas, Amin subsequently drew attention to what he calls the 'liveliness' of infrastructure and established the importance of understanding how the material infrastructures of the city—pipes, cables, housing, sewage, and so on—become inextricably entwined with everyday lives, hopes, aspirations and struggles, and the ongoing reproduction of community.[19] In turn,

> the new social science writing … tends to see the material and cultural as hyphenated, each closely implicated in, and part of, the other. Accordingly, both the social and the technological are imagined as hybrids of human and nonhuman associated, with infrastructure conceptualized as a sociotechnical assemblage, and urban social life as never reducible to the purely human alone.[20]

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[16]Julia Sizek, 'Zombie infrastructure: A legal geography of railroad monstrosity in the California desert', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2021, p. 762. See also Larkin, 'The politics and poetics of infrastructure', pp. 327–343; Carse, 'Key word: Infrastructure', pp. 27–39; Theo Aalders, Jan Bachmann, Per Knutsson and Benard Musembi Kilaka, 'The making and unmaking of a megaproject: Contesting temporalities along the LAPSSET Corridor in Kenya', *Antipode*, vol. 53, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1273–1293.

[17]Aalders et al., 'The making and unmaking of a megaproject', pp. 1273–1293.

[18]S. Graham and S. Marvin, *Splintering urbanism: Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[19]Ash Amin, 'Lively infrastructure', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 7/8, 2014, pp. 137–161. See also S. Graham and C. McFarlane, 'Introduction', in *Infrastructural lives: Urban infrastructure in context*, (eds) S. Graham and C. McFarlane (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2014), pp. 1–14; Lauren Berlant, 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, pp. 393–419.

[20]Ibid., pp. 137–138.

The 'new social science writing' that Amin refers to captures the post-materialist turn in infrastructure studies, which itself has brought about a reframing of the relationship between the social, natural, and material worlds. Important to note is Amin's recognition of the merging of the 'human' and 'nonhuman' into increasingly 'hybrid' infrastructural formations. 'Humans' are the 'socio' part of the socio-technical interface, whilst the 'nonhuman' is assumed to correlate with the technical part, which encapsulates the physical materializations of infrastructure. His contribution—which has been well received and has largely shaped many of the advances in critical infrastructure studies since then—is that humans are shaped by the infrastructures that enable (or obstruct) the living of life, which in turn causes them to shape the idea of what infrastructure is, and what it can(not) achieve in an ongoing dialectic. A recent example and extension of Amin's work is Aalders et al.'s study of an infrastructural megaproject in Kenya, which demonstrates how local communities affected by infrastructure create agency for themselves by, respectively, either 'attach[ing] additional features to an otherwise rather stable vision of its own "meganess"' or creating 'strands that splice off towards distant spatio-temporal imaginaries'.[21] Termed 'entangling' and 'fraying' respectively, these processes explicitly highlight just how interoperable the study of infrastructure and/on society has become.

Whilst the socio-political entanglements that underpin many infrastructural formations are important to acknowledge, it can be argued that privileging them has obstructed the development of a more generative infrastructural discourse. Privileging the 'technical' part of the socio-technical dialectic can be interpreted as narrow insofar as it is based on a materialist assumption of infrastructures as 'physical' things like roads, bridges, dams, pipes, cables, and more. Etymologically informed understandings of infrastructure, like that advanced by Carse, can instead be seen as generative in abstracting infrastructure to being a 'collective term: a singular noun that, like system and network, denotes a plurality of integrated parts' which, when collected together, are designed to 'support some higher-order project'.[22] Indeed, the ordering impulses of infrastructure—as a material thing, a set of ideas, a system through which life is sustained—are found in the 'infra' prefix, which gestures towards the idea of depth or hierarchy. Building on these ideas, there are scholars seeking to develop an even wider infrastructural imagination: one that continues to push the boundaries of what infrastructure is, might, or can be. Drawing on the critique that much infrastructural scholarship continues to rest on the assumption of socio-technical convergence, the goal is to advance a 'wider ontology of infrastructure' that 'tells us about the relations between infrastructure and other-than-human life'.[23] Important to note here is that whilst Amin's[24] intervention emphasizes the socio-technical interplay between the 'human' and the 'nonhuman', scholars like Barua[25] call

[21]Aalders et al., 'The making and unmaking of a megaproject', p. 1273.
[22]Carse, 'Key word: Infrastructure', p. 27.
[23]Barua, 'Infrastructure and non-human life', pp. 1467–1468.
[24]Amin, 'Lively infrastructure', pp. 137–161.
[25]Barua, 'Infrastructure and non-human life', pp. 1467–1489. See also Marien González-Hidalgo, 'The ambivalent political work of emotions in the defence of territory, life and the commons', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1291–1312.

for a shift in direction, to consider instead the nexus of human and *more-than*-human infrastructural formations. These 'more-than-human enfleshments and enmeshments with infrastructure, where corporeality and substrate meld' offer new possibilities for expansion.[26] The idea that 'ecosystems are infrastructure' is now widespread in the fields of conservation science and ecosystems management, referring to both the infrastructural properties of, say, river systems per se and the man-made modes of organization and management by which ecosystems are rendered 'legible, governable, and investable as *systems of critical functions that sustain and secure (certain forms of) human life*'.[27]

This more-than-human infrastructural imagination pushes us to consider how religion might act as an infrastructure for mediating the relations between the human and non-human worlds. In this conception, religion is no longer seen as merely 'beliefs' located entirely within peoples' minds, nor as merely 'practices' that people enact among each other. Spirits, deities, and numinous powers are associated with particular sacred places and times; to relate to the beings and phenomena of nature is to relate to spiritual beings, whether the phenomena are seen as embodiments, manifestations, signs, or creations of spirits or deities. Sacred places, times, and practices are those in which such relationships are activated and/or commemorated. Religion is the infrastructure of coordinated and interconnected organization of space, time, people, and knowledge through which the sacred is marked off and its explosive powers are activated, managed, channelled, and contained. Prayers and rituals are often technical acts designed to open communication with other-than-human beings. Divination techniques and methods of scriptural hermeneutics decode phenomena, happenings, and experiences as signs of other-than-human intentions or processes within a cosmological framework. Religiously inflected conversations generate and elaborate meanings and narratives around these signs and communications. The infrastructure that makes these acts, techniques, and conversations possible consists in the assemblage of ritual objects, buildings, texts, and the training system and organization of priests, monks, shamans, spirit mediums, or other religious personnel—all of which overlay specific points in the landscape and in temporal rhythms that are the ecological infrastructure of religion.[28] Indeed, the rhythms of ritual activity and the spatial network of places of worship and sacred sites are embedded in natural and human ecologies. Common religious infrastructures serve to coordinate and integrate the economic and social life of human populations into the non-human ecological infrastructure. Bringing religion into the theoretical discussion on infrastructure thus offers a radical counterpoint to the 'modern secular tendencies' that permeate much infrastructure scholarship by foregrounding 'sacred, sentient, and spiritual accounts and experiences' instead.[29]

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[26]Barua, 'Infrastructure and non-human life', pp. 1467–1489. See also González-Hidalgo, 'The ambivalent political work of emotions', pp. 1291–1312.

[27]Sara H. Nelson and Patrick Bigger, 'Infrastructural nature', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2021, pp. 86–107; emphasis in original.

[28]David Alexander Palmer, 'Cosmology, gender, structure and rhythm: Marcel Granet and Chinese religion in the history of social theory', *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 160–187.

[29]Gergan, 'Animating the sacred, sentient and spiritual', p. 262.

The infrastructural commons

Having considered how religion can contribute to existing debates concerning infrastructure studies, we now turn our attention to the commons. In doing so, we first need to backtrack slightly—by looking at infrastructure through a solely socio-technical lens, and as a construct that is analytically distinct from existing understandings of the commons. We then conjoin the two terms and offer a more concrete explanation of what we mean by the 'infrastructural commons'. The need to backtrack and decouple (but then also, and later, conjoin) the terms 'infrastructure' and 'commons' rests on the observation that the infrastructural megaprojects that define the BRI (and many other large-scale development initiatives around the world) are deeply disruptive to the various commons that they intersect with. For a long time, the commons was understood as shared natural resources such as irrigation, water, fishery, forestry, and animal husbandry, and the mechanisms of their collective governance.[30] Later, the meaning of the term expanded to include shared knowledge, digital resources, and culture.[31] More recent scholarship has critiqued the resource-extracting focus of the commons and emphasized 'commoning' as a process, which Garcia-Lopez et al. have defined as involving 'practices, imaginaries, relations and ways of being in other-than-capitalist frames'.[32]

Especially relevant to our discussion are the 'cultural commons', which Santagata et al. define as 'cultures located in time and space—either physical or virtual—and shared and expressed by a socially cohesive community … Ideas, creativity and styles of a community, traditional knowledge, credence, rites and customs, shared and participative productive techniques define a Cultural Commons'.[33] What distinguishes this concept from conventional definitions of culture is the distinction between the shared creation, negotiation, production, and transmission of culture within a commons, and extractive forms of commodified cultural production and consumption. Extraction reveals a relation of power that might come to shape the cultural commons, but it is not a prior part of its existence. Cultivating and maintaining shared space and community, whether physical or virtual, are essential dimensions of a cultural commons.[34] Thus, any commons, to the extent that it includes customary, informal, or collective methods for negotiating the governance of shared resources, is a cultural commons, irrespective of whether the commons revolves around natural resources, information,

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[30] Frank van Laerhoven and Elinor Ostrom, 'Traditions and trends in the study of the commons', *International Journal of the Commons*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, p. 19.

[31] Julian Stallabrass, 'Digital commons', *New Left Review*, vol. 15, 2002, pp. 141–146; A. Borchi, 'Towards a policy for the cultural commons', in *Cultural commons and urban dynamics*, (eds) E. Macrì, V. Morea and M. Trimarchi (Switzerland: Springer, 2020).

[32] Marta Garcia-Lopez, Thibaut Lurier, Marie Bouilloud, Julien Pradel, Caroline Tatard, Diana Sepulveda, Gwendoline Anfray, Julie Dussert, Pascale Bourhy, Nathalie Charbonnel and Zouheira Djelouadji, 'Prevalence, genetic diversity and eco-epidemiology of pathogenic Leptospira species in small mammal communities in urban parks Lyon city, France', *PLoS One*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2024, p. 1201.

[33] Walter Santagata, Enrico Bertacchini, Giangiacomo Bravo and Massimo Marrelli, 'Cultural commons and cultural communities'. Paper presented at 'Sustaining commons: Sustaining our future', the Thirteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons, Hyderabad, India, 2011, p. 1.

[34] Ibid., p. 3.

or even sacred places and meanings. Following this line of thinking, there may be a tension between 'religious commons' as a specific form of cultural commons and forms of institutional, doctrinal, and ideological productions of religion that are disconnected from the shared life-worlds of local religious communities.

Notwithstanding the analytical value attributed to understanding 'infrastructure' and the 'commons' discretely, so too is there hitherto unrecognized value in their overlaps and conjoining. In this vein, whilst the commons might, in some respects, be interpreted as infrastructures unto themselves, so too are they constantly being infrastructuralized in ways that bring about the negotiation of meaning and value. Blaser and de la Cadena's analysis of how the 'commons' and 'enclosure' are respectively understood is helpful here.[35] Infrastructural megaprojects, they argue, have led to the conflation of the two concepts. Given that large-scale infrastructural development 'often involve[s] the destruction and/or enclosure of "commons", it is not surprising to see neo-extractivist governments depicting them as "common goods" to be appropriated by corporations, or the state, in pursuit of the national "common good"'.[36] Examples of these processes and depictions are found throughout the empirical articles in this special issue. At the same time, local commons are inevitably disrupted by infrastructural developments, transforming the spaces and communities that sustain them. But new spatial and material configurations can also be appropriated by local communities, enfolding them into the material infrastructure of evolving cultural commons.

Our conjoined notion of the 'infrastructural commons' ties these ideas to the infrastructural formations associated with projects like the BRI, and trigger claims to, and debates over, the 'common good'. With large-scale infrastructural projects, like those associated with the BRI, once shared resources and public or common goods become infrastructuralized, causing the infrastructural commons to manifest. Accordingly, the infrastructural commons recognize the heterogeneity of worlds that are indexed to, and brought to life through, different infrastructural formations. These becomings disrupt and disturb the commons. They can usher in processes of secular modernity or Chinese world-building. Or they can reify the sacred ontologies that are indexed to the natural world. Doing so creates openings through which the wide-ranging effects of infrastructuralization can be embraced.[37] A theoretical standpoint like this is particularly important for scholarship on the BRI, as it can reveal both the 'close interoperability of material, natural and supernatural infrastructural formations' as well as the BRI's 'influential role … in disrupting any pre-existing sense of infrastructural equilibrium'.[38] By paying close attention to the disequilibriums set in motion by initiatives like the BRI, new understandings of infrastructural politics can be developed. These are understandings that draw on the fact that 'infrastructures are never agnostic

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[35]Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, 'The uncommons: An introduction', *Anthropologica*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2017, pp. 185–193.

[36]Ibid., p. 187.

[37]Gergan, 'Animating the sacred, sentient and spiritual', pp. 262–275; Bunnell, 'BRI and beyond', pp. 270–273; Dominic Wilkins, 'Where is religion in political ecology?', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2021, pp. 276–297.

[38]Woods, 'Between the commons and the cosmos', p. 6.

and often bring about confusion, complexity, and hybridity of meaning' according to one's position within the infrastructural matrix.[39]

These positions can be defined in relation to various scales and spheres of influence. A construction manager working on one of the BRI's megaprojects will see its impact on natural ecosystems in a very different way from a local community that relies on such ecosystems for survival. The point is that there is a scalar logic that underpins most assumptions of equilibrium, an assumption by which smaller-scale infrastructural commons become nested and aligned with their larger-scale counterparts, creating a desired 'whole'. Assumptions like these are blind to the fact that 'commons come into existence, or they become large or small, depending on how domains relate to each other'.[40] 'Domain' here refers to potentially overlapping or clashing domains of shared resources such as local livelihoods, national energy needs, or planetary biodiversity. Each of these domains brings together, around a purported set of shared resources and concerns, a range of actors such as local producers, state energy utilities and users, or international NGOs and media audiences. A dam on the Mekong, for example, may become the locus for the overlapping constitution of all these domains. A given infrastructure not only sets in motion the emergence of new commons around those who come to have a shared interest in its successful completion and operation as a public good. It also disrupts, destroys, reconfigures, connects, or expands the reach of pre-existing commons. It may also, through the rise of movements, or resistance, or opposition, catalyse the formation of alternative commons.

By infrastructural commons, then, we refer to the convergence, overlapping, and confrontation of multiple commons *through* infrastructure. The value of the concept is that in infrastructurally chaotic environments, like those in which the BRI materializes, it is an analytic that 'sets lines of articulation and instantiates particular conceptions of space and time' and, importantly, 'always engenders shadows, recesses, and occlusions that can be occupied as staging areas for unscripted incursions'.[41] Infrastructure plays a commoning role: it *creates*, extends, and sometimes tries to claim the commons as its own. It creates, in other words, the capacity for resistance, and for infrastructure to become not just a hegemonic inscription of material dominance on the environment, but also a source of strength and solidarity through which the dispossessed fight back.[42] Infrastructural megaprojects trigger 'affected communities [to] mobilise, align or attach their own aspirations, hopes, fears and memories in their encounters with megaprojects'.[43] These temporalities stretch into the future whilst simultaneously harking back to the past. They create hope, excitement, and desire, but so too do they bring to light a sense of mourning and loss for what once was.

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[39] Orlando Woods, 'Infrastructure's (supra)sacralizing effects: Contesting littoral spaces of fishing, faith, and futurity along Sri Lanka's western coastline', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 112, no. 8, 2022, pp. 2344–2359.

[40] Blaser and de la Cadena, 'The uncommons', p. 187. After Casper Bruun Jensen, 'Mekong scales: Domains, test sites, and the uncommons', *Anthropologica*, vol. 59, 2017, pp. 204–215.

[41] A. Simone, 'Relational infrastructures in postcolonial urban worlds', in *Infrastructural lives*, (eds) Graham and McFarlane, p. 28.

[42] Lauren Berlant, 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, pp. 393–419.

[43] Aalders et al., 'The making and unmaking of a megaproject', p. 1278.

Infrastructural pluralism and the BRI-as-vortex

The importance of the BRI lies in the scale and fragility of many of the infrastructural mega projects that have come to define it. 'Scale' can be interpreted in manifold ways. The scale of expenditure, the sheer physical size of the projects, the scale of ambition, the disruptions to local environments and ways of living—the list goes on. Aalders et al. note that in the five years between 2004 and 2008—a period before the BRI was officially announced—China 'spent more on infrastructure than [it did] in the entire twentieth century; and most of it went on projects that can safely be considered "big"'.[44] Far from being hegemonic inscriptions of materialist power on the landscape, unique to these projects is that they reveal the vulnerability of size. Just because they are 'big' does not mean that they can necessarily, or by default, be considered successful. Indeed, they demonstrate how the '"making" of megaprojects requires hard work, not only in terms of the material construction of concrete infrastructures but also in terms of coherently aligning different "futures"'.[45] The hard work of 'coherently aligning different "futures"' gestures to the plurality of infrastructural formations that the BRI must jostle with for recognition and acceptance, but also how the scale of the BRI causes it to become a vortex of infrastructural overlap. As vortex, the BRI is a 'convergence scene of various value abstractions, material protocols for metabolizing resources, and social distributed experience'.[46] It sets in motion processes of infrastructuralization through which claims to the infrastructural commons are made and contested by the 'negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds (and their practices)'.[47]

Our point, and indeed our contribution to existing understandings of the BRI, is that the infrastructural megaprojects that have come to define the BRI do not exist in isolation from other infrastructures. We argue that scholarship must recognize, and analytically foreground, the fact that the infrastructure projects that define the BRI are built on top of, and thus overlay, and eventually merge with, the messy complexities of the infrastructural formations that came before. They are the latest, but not the last, accretions on the landscape. Sensitivity to the accretive effects of infrastructure reveals their destructive capacity. New projects pose a 'threat' to the 'worlds sentenced to disappearance in the name of common goods of progress, civilization, development, and liberal inclusion'.[48] These 'common goods' offer a dominant and seductive vision of what an infrastructuralized future might look like. Yet, the point is that

> the affordances of control offered by infrastructure are deeply lodged in our collective sub-consciousness. Where infrastructure works as it should, we tend to perceive it as the flat, dull, and passive background to repetitive collective

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[44]Ibid., p. 1276.

[45]Ibid., p. 1275.

[46]Berlant, 'The commons', p. 403. See also Franck Billé, 'Volumetric sovereignty', *Society and Space*, 3 March 2009.

[47]M. Blaser and M. de la Cadena, 'Introduction: Pluriverse. Proposals for a world of many worlds', in *A world of many worlds*, (eds) M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), pp. 2–22, after Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory notes on an ecology of practices', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2005, pp. 183–196.

[48]Ibid., p. 3.

action. But most people in most parts of the world do not live in monotone infrastructural bubbles.[49]

Instead, they live in what Schouten and Bachmann term 'infrastructural frontiers' that exist at the nexus of infrastructural overlap.[50] These frontier sites are those in which the unruly politics of power and dispossession are commonplace. They are those in which 'broader processes of order-making and resistance often become operational at the material edges of states … terrains less amenable to remote control'.[51] These are terrains defined by a chaotic array of competing influences and claims to primacy. In our schema, the infrastructural commons recognizes the fact that, through infrastructural overlap, the secular rubs up against the sacred and spiritual, the material against the cosmological, the future against the present and past, the foreign against the local. These are terrains defined by infrastructural pluralism, and the constant and ongoing renegotiation of meanings and values. Given the need for scholars to embrace more of a 'plural conversation around infrastructure',[52] the importance of the BRI is that it must be understood as a 'series of openings to much (spatially) wider and historically deeper forms of comparison'.[53] Throughout post-colonial South and Southeast Asia, the BRI overlays the colonial and developmental infrastructures that came before, merging with them, and dredging up old memories of past dispossessions. These are what Sizek calls 'zombie projects' inasmuch as they 'show the life and death of infrastructure' which in turn can 'reveal how contemporary capitalists enliven old infrastructures for new purposes'.[54] Old or pre-existing forms of capital investment are repurposed, or even replaced, to serve new purposes, in turn leading to the 'resurfac[ing of] histories of dispossession of labor and land'.[55] Zombie projects bring to life what once might have assumed to have been dead. They cause past struggles and injustices to resurface, taking on new meanings and significances in contemporaneous response to China's world-building agenda.

The sacred dimensions of the BRI in South and Southeast Asia

South and Southeast Asia are distinct regions that share entangled histories with each other, and with the rest of the world. They are also regions that are defined by infrastructural complexity, which has recently been exacerbated by the infrastructural vortex wrought by the BRI. For centuries now, waves of modernizing impulses from outside the region have triggered processes of change and adaptation that sit

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[49]Peer Schouten and Jan Bachmann, 'Infrastructural frontiers: Terrains of resistance at the material edge of the state', *Geoforum*, vol. 136, 2022, pp. 219–224.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Barua, 'Infrastructure and non-human life', p. 1482.

[53]Bunnell, 'BRI and beyond', p. 270.

[54]Julia Sizek, 'Zombie infrastructure: A legal geography of railroad monstrosity in the California desert', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2021, p. 758.

[55]Ibid., p. 759.

better with some countries and communities than they do with others. Many of these impulses have been development-oriented and have manifested as material infrastructures that have become 'conduit[s] for secularizing forces to permeate public life'.[56] Often, these forces become points of differentiation and division that rub up against, and become entangled with, religious commons and infrastructures which in turn articulate distinct, and often uneasy, contrasts with the developmentalist ethos of infrastructure. The articles that comprise our special issue embrace and expand these premises through detailed ethnographic work, often conducted over many years or decades of study, in selected countries throughout the region. Through these articles, our contributors are uniquely positioned to unearth the 'situated epistemologies that coexist side-by-side' with the BRI and flesh out the engrained politics that 'contest the very nature of the initiative itself'.[57] Indeed, the need for and value of more contextually nuanced, ground-up insight appears to be one of the emergent trends for research conducted in the second and subsequent decades of the BRI in/and the world. The collection covers seven countries, in each case interrogating how various actors that span the domains of the religious, the sacred, and the spiritual negotiate the symbolic and material dimensions of BRI infrastructures. These include spirit-medium cults among the Hakka Chinese of West Kalimantan in Indonesia; the ethnic religion of the Lanten Yao of northern Laos; local communities and their spirit mediums in Cambodia and Thailand; Kachin Christians and Burmese Buddhists in Myanmar; Catholic fishermen in Sri Lanka; and an Islamist political party in the Maldives.

The first article, by Emily Hertzman, develops the concept of religious infrastructures through her study of Chinese Indonesian communities in West Kalimantan. The Hakka of Singkawang, whose history goes back to the eighteenth century, are faced with two Chinese imaginaries: the vision of civilizational power, modernity, and prosperity conveyed by the BRI, and the thriving world of Chinese deities, with whom they regularly engage through a dense network of hundreds of temples and spirit-medium shrines. While the Chinese intellectual imagination might expect the Hakka to leave their gods behind to get on the high-speed train of the China Dream as it spreads to Indonesia, Hertzman paints a far more ambiguous picture. The large infrastructure projects of the BRI are physically, socially, and financially too far from the Singkawang community, even for its Chinese business elites, to elicit any meaningful engagement. On the other hand, they continue their investment in their religious commons, as local Chinese religious life continues to expand. It is through networks of temples and spirit mediums that the Hakka keep their connections to China alive, both through the sacralization of local spots and through pilgrimages to ancestral temples in China. And yet, the pride in Chinese identity and the quest for material prosperity that is a central concern in Chinese religion ultimately converge with the values exemplified by the distant BRI.

Hertzman shows that Chinese religion can be seen as a 'shadow infrastructure'. As a celestial bureaucracy, many of whose gods are heavenly kings and officials in a formal hierarchy, whose temples are palaces where the officials preside over the invisible

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[56] Woods, 'Infrastructure's (supra)sacralizing effects', p. 3.
[57] Gustavo de L.T. Olivera, Galen Murton, Alessandro Rippa, Tyler Harlan and Yang Yang, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground', *Political Geography*, vol. 82, 2020, p. 2.

world, and whose rituals are often performed as audiences for presenting written petitions to the said officials, Chinese religion is conceived of as an infrastructure of government. But this is the government of the world of the dead and of the invisible world, known as the world of *yin* in Chinese cosmology, which is in a yin-yang relation to the world of the living. Its *yang* counterpart in past times was the Chinese imperial state. Today, for the Hakka of Singkawang, it is the modern Indonesian state—and, increasingly, in relation to the imagined Chinese world, it is the modern imagination of China carried by the vision of the BRI. The infrastructure continues to thrive in the shadow of the state, its policies, and its development plans—and, while these *yang* infrastructures tend to be centrally controlled from a distance, the *yin* structures of Chinese religion are decentralized and localized, the locus of a cultural commons rooted in connected networks of places.

The second article, by Joseba Estevez and David A. Palmer, picks up on the notion of shadow infrastructure through the case study of the Lanten Yao of Luang Namtha in Laos. Yao religion is a form of Daoism whose basic structure ritualizes the relationship between the Chinese empire and a peripheral ethnic group. Through an empirical exploration of the perpetual transformation of the Lanten Yao, Estevez and Palmer develop the idea of 'infrastructural sedimentation' to show how, over centuries, the ideas, influences, and relics of various infrastructural formations of rice and opium cultivation; equine and rail transport; military mobilization; and imperial, colonial, and socialist government accrete over time, and come to shape the relationship between people and place. For the Lanten Yao, new high-speed rail and urban development around Special Economic Zones of the BRI are both highly disruptive and open new opportunities that are beginning to, once again, profoundly reshape the commons. These sedimentations clearly foreground the role and importance of the commons as an integrative heuristic that stretches across time and space, collapsing hitherto distinct epochs, territorial formations, and power structures into one analytical construct.

The third article, by Ian G. Baird and Akarath Soukhaphon, takes the idea of infrastructural sedimentation and offers a focused case study of how the development of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam (LS2) has impacted on the spiritual practices of the Lao people in northeastern Cambodia. The sedimented nature of the LS2 lies in its protracted construction, which was initiated by a Vietnamese company in 1998 but only completed by a Chinese-led consortium in 2018. Baird and Soukhaphon consider how, over a period of 20 years, the development of the dam has transformed nature-society relations and the mediatory role of spirit mediums among Lao communities. Adopting a feminist political ecology approach, their article reveals the effects of an increasingly infrastructuralized world on the (dis)placement of spirits from natural formations, and the resulting impact on the religious commons. At the same time, we see how religious infrastructures are the medium through which the non-human world speaks to humans in human language, through the institution of spirit mediums. In this case, female spirit mediums interpellate the human community through the voice of displaced river spirits and become the fulcrum for local opposition to dam development. And yet, the mediums also play a complex and subtle mediating role, incarnating the power dynamics between different ethnic groups—the Khmer, the Lao, and the Chinese—and negotiating between resistance to the dam and acceptance of its reality. This case shows how the commons, like overlapping eddies of water, integrates the

ecological, the cosmological, and the infrastructural, and is continually reshaped by the changing relations between ethnic groups, state building, and infrastructural development.

Also important is the focus on littoral spaces—and how the aquatic-terrestrial interplay is disrupted by damming projects' association with the BRI—which provides a connective thread that unites the following articles. Whilst Baird and Soukhaphon's article focuses on the Sesan and Srepok rivers—two tributaries of the Mekong—the fourth article, by Andrew Johnson, is empirically situated in the Mekong itself. Johnson uses the analytic of 'development' to consider how the BRI as imagination and as reality meshes with competing engagements with the ecological infrastructure of the Mekong. In one mode, the BRI fits neatly into the sacralization of the developmental imaginary by the monarchical state, in which, in Thailand, the king, as divine figure, orchestrates the development of the national geobody, as a benefactor to his people. In the riverine localities, however, spirit mediums connect the human world to the shadow infrastructure of river deities and sacred localities and give voice to local fears and resistance. But they also give voice to disillusionment, resignation, and adaptation, as dam projects' distinctly hydrological effects become permanent: turning red, silty water blue and clear, and provoking flooding during what were once thought to be 'dry' seasons. These alterations of the commons blend the economic with the cultural, but the commons seem to dissipate while residents wait for things to change for the better.

The fifth article, by Laur Kiik, continues to explore the transformation of the littoral commons by BRI-backed dam megaprojects, but focuses empirically on the Myitsone Dam in Burma (Myanmar). This is a project that injects Chinese voices into a region that has long been fractured by the Burmese military regime, Bamar and Buddhist nationalist repression, and the ethno-religious struggles of the Kachin people. Kiik shows how the dam causes local disputes to become transnational power struggles that are rooted in the struggles for an ethno-religiously defined homeland, but which implicate the economic livelihoods of the Kachin people, the legitimacy of the Burmese military-state, and the politics of Chinese investment in a region that is already fractured along multiple lines of difference and dispossession. Religious infrastructures play a critical role in these divisions and scaling effects: it was in Catholic and Baptist churches and networks that the first seeds of opposition germinated and spread, ultimately uniting the Kachin around the resistance to the project. The mobilization of sacred imagery and emotions allowed nationwide opposition to the dam to crystallize, and to make inoperative Chinese attempts to draw on Buddhist soft power to unite the Burmese majority in support of the dam. This case shows the power of the infrastructural commons which simultaneously divides local commons but triggers the formation of a new transnational, trans-ethnic, and trans-religious commons around activist practices, natural ecologies, and sacred values.

The sixth article, by Orlando Woods, reframes the inter-village divisions that Kiik identifies as a form of 'infrastructural splintering'. Through an exploration of the China-backed Colombo Port City initiative in Sri Lanka, Woods considers how the overlapping of hitherto distinct infrastructural formations—some material, others discursive; some deeply sedimented, others recently accreted—can lead to their eventual splintering along different vectors of meaning and oppression. More concretely, he considers the splintering of the Catholic Church into different factions according to its

(non-)resistance to the Colombo Port City—a project that has seriously jeopardized the livelihoods of subsistence-level fishermen and their families located along Sri Lanka's western coastline.

In many respects, these splintering effects can be traced through all the case studies presented as part of this special issue and reveal some of the theoretical and empirical outcomes that arise from situations of infrastructural overlap. As vortex, the BRI forces otherwise distinct, and sometimes relatively harmonious, infrastructural formations into close and sometimes competitive tension with one another, the outcomes of which can be seen to pave the way for new worlds to emerge,[58] just as old ones are struggled over and dissolved.[59] Whilst the BRI is an infrastructure of complexity, our intention with these contributions is to offer some points of generative clarity from which new research agendas might emerge.

In the final article, Thoiba Saeedh and R. Michael Feener take us to the Maldives and the socio-symbolic effects of the Sinamale' Bridge—the largest foreign investment in the Maldivian archipelago and a hallmark of the Belt and Road. We see how, under the presidency of Yameen Abdulla, building the bridge was part of a political agenda of strengthening national sovereignty vis-à-vis India through infrastructural development, reviving national culture, and strengthening Islamic identity. We also see what might be called 'infrastructural aggregation', in which a physical infrastructure becomes tied to the strategy of a single political party and its mobilization of economic, national, and religious visions. But the aggregation produces its own splintering, with the election of an opposing political party that promotes other new bridges with investment from India and foregrounds anxieties about China's growing influence. In this vein, the Bridge is shown to be an infrastructural vortex through which these divergent, and sometimes competing, narratives are brought into conversation and tension with each other. How Islam provides a sense of political legitimacy, and how Chinese or Indian infrastructural investment symbolizes national progress or foreign influence, are but two of the many layers of powerful meanings that come to be invested in the materiality of bridge construction.

Overall, this set of articles shows how the physical infrastructures of the BRI become entangled into a multiplicity of other infrastructures, ranging from the ecological substrate to political infrastructures, including bureaucracies, political parties, and infrastructures of social activism. Religious infrastructures play pivotal roles. In the cases presented in this special issue, at the local level they are instances of cultural commons in which residents share and participate in the protection and reproduction of sacred meanings, practices, and sites. We find parallel 'shadow infrastructures' that preserve the sediments of historical layers of infrastructure. Locally controlled, they mediate relations with the non-human world, and structure local communities.

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[58] Orlando Woods, 'A harbour in the country, a city in the sea: Infrastructural conduits, territorial inversions and the slippages of sovereignty in Sino-Sri Lankan development narratives', *Political Geography*, vol. 92, 2022, pp. 1–9.

[59] Orlando Woods, 'Neoliberal shifts and strategies of religious adaptation in post-war Sri Lanka', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2024, pp. 69–86.

Operating in the shadows, they may survive in obscurity in periods of repression, but they also channel the voices of local spirits when the community feels threatened. They catalyse opposition, but also mediate expectations and adaptations. Religious infrastructures may provide the organizational basis for resistance and can be scaled up to link with other movements and networks, but they may also become the site of splintering within a local community or a religious institution. They become the focus of local identity building and may amplify or come into tension with the national or transnational identity constructions of religious institutions, governments, or political parties. Local religious commons may be guardians of local expressions of the sacred, but other sacralities escape their reach, such as in the domains of development or national identity, which often imbue their utopian meanings into BRI infrastructures. It is through all these processes that the BRI becomes a vehicle for the construction and destruction, the aggregation and the splintering of the infrastructural commons.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.