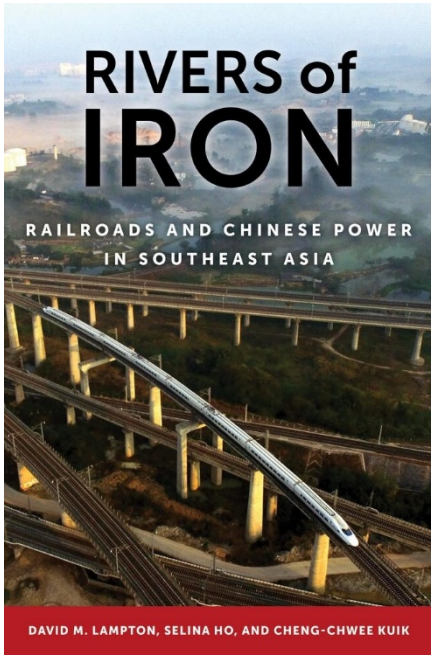

ChinaMade Review

Review of David Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng Chwee Kuik. 2020. *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press).

Darren Byler, March 2021

Over the past decade as China's domestic high-speed rail capacity reached 29,000 kilometers, connecting cities as distant as Harbin and Urumqi to Kunming, Chinese train builders began to look south. A Pan-Asia Railway, first imagined by British and French colonists in the nineteenth century, began to take form as built reality. The imagined rail lines linking Singapore to Kunming—traveling overland through Malaysia, Thailand and Laos—is a distance further than the 2858 kilometer Transcontinental Railroad that solidified the frontier expansion of the United States. In this context though, the Chinese-built railroad bisects postcolonial transnational territory, rather than the colonized lands of native peoples. The sovereignties of Southeast Asian nations combined with Chinese domestic politics and economy makes this a more complex story than American colonial expansion. In most scholarship on China's contemporary relationship with Southeast Asia new developments are often framed as a key example of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Southeast Asia after all is a site where global China has had some of its greatest successes, but also challenges in confronting intransigent governments, economic insecurity, and suspicious populations (Han 2019; Emmerson 2020; Hiebert 2020; Strangio 2020). Much of this scholarship has centered on unfolding policy debates across a wide range of developmental projects. Perhaps because of this encyclopedic approach and the unfolding dynamism of the situation, academic accounts have placed less emphasis on particular sectors of development projects and the forms of political power they engender.

In *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* David Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng Chwee Kuik, bring welcome precision and depth to this emergent body of scholarship. By limiting their examination to a single domain of Chinese infrastructure development stretched across seven nations in Southeast Asia and developing an extended discussion of political power, the authors contribute to an analytic of infrastructure power in the current moment of global China. The field of power that emerges from Lampton et al.'s analysis is multilateral and dependent less on coercive and symbolic forms of power than remunerative power. That is to say, from the perspective of many leaders and citizens of Southeast Asian nations, Chinese railroads offer a means to access a global economy, urbanize, and develop cosmopolitan identities. While some Southeast Asian nations already have access to the sea and well-developed infrastructure that brings interconnection across territory, an official in Laos told the authors "we have to build our own Iron River" in order to connect with the world (2). Importantly, the official did

not anticipate that this construction would produce dependency on China as much as leverage to move in multiple directions. He hoped that it would allow them to look to Kunming and Singapore simultaneously. It would make them less dependent on their immediate neighbors Vietnam and Thailand. From his perspective, the potential risks of debt, the arrival of Chinese construction workers, and real estate development, was outweighed by the outward looking, multilateral benefits.

The Pan Asia Railway (Source: Wikimedia)

The first three of the book's eight chapters focus on the historical and Chinese domestic contexts that led to China's rail development abroad. After first laying out the central international relations and social science questions of the book—ranging from broad questions on the role of infrastructure projects in economic development to specific questions about Chinese entrepreneurialism and the relationship between connectivity and social control—the authors present an authoritative account of recent railroad development in China. They then turn to the role of regional and national domestic politics in China. By drawing out both the centralized larger scale strategy and the more anarchic regional and industry-based interest in the project, the authors avoid the trap of reducing Chinese international investment strategy to the thinking of Beijing-based policy makers. Here, Lampton's past work on Chinese bureaucratic history and mechanisms is brought to bear in making sense of the complexity of the Chinese political and economic system (see Lieberthal and Lampton 2018; Lampton 2008).

Over the next several chapters the regional expertise of Lampton's coauthors Selina Ho and Cheng Chwee Kuik is brought to the fore as the book considers the diversity of Southeast Asian responses to the rail initiative. Chapter 4 considers the responses of all seven Southeast Asian nations in turn, addressing infrastructure needs and considering to what extent patron-client relations of local leaders are balanced by their need to legitimate their authority – an approach that could be considered in dialogue in Ching Kwan Lee's framing of global China (Byler 2020). What emerges from this comparative discussion is the degree to which Chinese involvement in each country is viewed as controversial. Interestingly, even in the most China-dependent nations such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, Chinese economic and political involvement is contested particularly by regular citizens suspicious of a new imperial presence. This finding suggests that political dexterity on the part of Chinese policymakers and companies, as well as local leaders, is necessary to develop buy-in on the part of affected populations—a dexterity that the book shows is not always present. Chapters 5 and 6 develop these themes further by examining in detail where railroad projects have been more successful than others. They suggest that Chinese policymakers are learning from past mistakes and becoming more discerning in mitigating local frictions and potential roadblocks. For instance, they show that over time the bilateral relations favored by Chinese policymakers are complicated by transnational projects premised on interconnectivity. For the dream of a Pan-Asian Railway to be realized, Chinese policymakers and corporations are being forced to develop multilateral agreements. This need produces a great deal of uncertainty in the final development of the vision. For instance, if in the end, Thailand refuses to buy into the project and allow Bangkok to become the Chicago-like hub of the rail line,

the linkages between Myanmar, Laos and Malaysia will be lost. Here the book exhibits the strength of thinking infrastructurally about political power and transnational relations (see Oakes 2021).

One key contribution of Rivers of Iron *is in its discussion of what constitutes the global China field of power, or as Lampton et al. frame it, the power effects of a "China approach" to development. Because the strength of Chinese power in Southeast Asia flows from its remunerative capacity, rather than from discursive or coercive power, getting forms of strategic buy-in is often possible.*

Zooming out to a more longitudinal and theoretical vantage point, the final two chapters of the book draw conclusions first for an international relations audience before turning to its social science contribution. The first of these chapters focuses on the role of geoeconomics and political forces in shaping China-Southeast Asian relations. The central argument here is that rail interconnectivity will dramatically shape the region's competitive landscape both within Southeast Asia and at a larger subcontinental scale. Speaking here with regards to policymakers in the United States, Japan and India the authors suggest that this shift in dynamic will demand a balancing connectivity from non-Chinese actors both at commercial and geostrategic levels. They anticipate that new relations of remunerative, symbolic and, perhaps, even coercive power will be formed in response. This leads them to their final chapter where they build on Lampton's long term interest in political power, which he defines most broadly as the ability to both define and achieve national goals (2008). Here they consider China's ability to sustain political and economic commitment—both in China and in Southeast Asia—to maintaining clear definitions while implementing the project. They show that while Chinese remunerative power remains strong, the lack of symbolic power that would come from building China-centric social institutions and other forms of discursive norm setting, means that Chinese international power is often viewed as a means to an end, rather than a source of emulation. That is to say, for many Southeast Asian citizens a Japanese or United States ideal form of development remains more attractive to that of a Chinese alternative. At the same time, they conclude that the "Chinese approach" of "strategic direction, relentless entrepreneurialism and opportunism, a willingness to work with nations as Beijing finds them (not as it wishes them), and a capacity to focus resources" should not be underestimated (236). Given the diversity of Chinese bilateral relations they do not find the language of a "China model" of development useful as a conceptual frame, and instead advocate a more dynamic (but perhaps too vague) "China approach" to development (236).

One key contribution of *Rivers of Iron* is in its discussion of what constitutes the global China field of power, or as Lampton et al. frame it, the power effects of a "China approach" to development. Power here must be understood as more than simply coercive force. A more nuanced understanding of political power is one that moves from proposals to realized outcomes that are accomplished by convincing others to support these intentions. In order for global China projects to be ultimately successful, they must convince leaders and citizens of other nations that it is in their best interest to buy into these projects. That is to say, if Chinese projects are to be successful in Southeast Asia, at a minimum, working with China must be, as Alice Ba puts it, "socially acceptable" (2014). Because the strength of Chinese power in Southeast Asia

flows from its remunerative capacity, rather than from discursive or coercive power, getting forms of strategic buy-in is often possible. Yet, because the relationships of Southeast Asian leaders and citizens to Chinese development are shaped less by the benefits of Chinese institutions and cultural systems and more by economic benefits and harms, the relationships that are built are often transactional and thus more fragile. This lack of consent is another factor in why Southeast Asian citizens are suspicious of Chinese involvement in their domestic systems.

Another way of framing this, something that is largely absent in Lampton et al.'s analysis, is that Southeast Asian citizens are aware that the Chinese presence in their countries is built in part to facilitate super exploitation or "off-shoring"—the process through which the manufacturers make additional or higher profits by moving production into devalued foreign labor markets. Many Southeast Asian citizens have some sense that the wages of manufacturing employees in China are twice to four times higher than in Vietnam or Thailand (Lampton et al., 8). They may even understand that the railway will allow Chinese manufacturers of consumer goods for both Chinese and international markets an easy way to extract value from them. And, as recent scholarship in Cambodia has shown, they may actually welcome those low-wage jobs, because having a job is better than not having one, even if it means that they will have greater dependence on the good will of Chinese employers (Franceschini 2020).

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For all of the strengths of the multi-authored, focused and thematic approaches of the book, as an anthropologist I found myself wanting even more on-the-ground analysis of how these systems effect people in their everyday lives (see Rippa 2020). This deemphasis on the material and lived realities that are created by the railway infrastructure is shaped at least in part by the contemporary flux of the project—as the book was going to press the first legs of the railway were just being completed in Laos so its longer-term operational effects on daily life remain largely unknown. Another element in their analysis though comes from privileging of the political, rather than material, effects of infrastructure development. From the authors' perspective infrastructure is interesting because it places differently positioned political actors in conversation with each other. The infrastructure itself is thus more of framework, and less of an analytic, for politics and an engine of economic growth.

Failing to look at displacement, labor and other grounded effects of the infrastructure also corresponds with the absence of critique of capitalist frontier-making in the book. The book starts from the position of formal Chinese and non-Chinese political power as the site of critique and does not push further to think both more broadly and more concretely about the role of global capitalism as the system that constrains and shapes those two formations of power. As a result, the book does not look beyond the great power and global market status quo and dwell on the short and long-term costs of railway construction in the lives of workers and farmers in places like Laos (see Rowedder 2020). While the authors do make some interesting points about the way grand infrastructure development requires state or state-like capital, where

immediate return on investment is subordinated to longer-term market growth and secondary developments, they do not fully consider the costs of dispossession and the uneven benefits accrued through these developments (see Zhu 2020). Instead, they call on non-Chinese state actors and investment banks to reinvigorate their infrastructure development efforts in Southeast Asia as a way of building a "balanced connectivity" with China (229).

These critiques aside, the book has much to offer regarding the current moment of Chinese international expansion and what it means for the future of political power in China and Southeast Asia. It is laudable that it avoids egregious mischaracterizations of Chinese grand strategy and intentions. By taking political mechanisms seriously, it presents a magisterial account of both Chinese bureaucratic mechanisms and the interests, and good faith actions, of local politicians across Southeast Asia.

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