

March 10, 2020

## **INTERIM REPORT ON MAX WEBER FOUNDATION RESEARCH GROUP ON BORDERS, MOBILITY AND NEW INFRASTRUCTURES (JUNE 2017 - MARCH 2020)**

### Background and Focus

Supported by the Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien (DIJ) and the wider Max Weber Foundation (MWS), the Research Group on Borders, Mobility and New Infrastructures was established in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in June 2017. This followed discussions between the DIJ and FASS in 2016, in which FASS was invited to submit proposals for a research partnership. Within FASS, the MWS Group is one of five research centres/groups.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the Group works closely with the Asia Research Institute (ARI) in hosting of academic events (elaborated below). ARI was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of NUS: to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region located at one of its communication hubs. ARI engages the humanities and social sciences broadly defined and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. The Research Group on Borders, Mobility and New Infrastructures is able to capitalize on its interdisciplinary base in FASS and the strong connections with ARI.

The Research Group includes faculty members drawn from three FASS Departments: Geography, Japanese Studies<sup>2</sup> and Southeast Asian Studies. The MWS Group is led by Professor James D Sidaway from Geography<sup>3</sup>. Other FASS faculty members in the Group include Dr Weiqiang Lin also from Geography, Associate Professor Douglas Kammen and Associate Professor Yoshinori Nishizaki from Southeast Asian Studies, and Associate Professor Hendrik Meyer-Ohle from Japanese Studies. Members outside NUS include Dr Sonja Ganseforth, (DIJ), and Dr Vatthana Pholsena<sup>4</sup>, based at Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE) within Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris.

The group budget from the DIJ fully funds two postdoctoral fellowships. In accordance to the initial agreement which established the Group across two Departments in FASS, one postdoctoral fellow is placed in Geography and one in Southeast Asian Studies.

A third postdoc is part-funded (approximately twelve percent) by the group budget from the DIJ, with the bulk of funding for this third postdoctoral fellowship (who is placed in Geography) coming from a research scholarship block (RSB) scheme direct funding by the Ministry of Education in Singapore.

Further details on the research interests of the individual faculty members and three postdoctoral fellows may be accessed through following the links to member's homepages from the Group's website:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/research/researchclusters.html>

<sup>2</sup> Japanese Studies joined the Research Group in 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/geojds/>

<sup>4</sup> Dr Vatthana Pholsena initially worked with Professor Sidaway to establish the MWS research group, before taking up her position in France in 2018. Her CASE homepage is: <http://case.ehess.fr/index.php?593>

<https://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/researchclusters/max-weber-foundation-research-group-on-borders-mobility-and-new-infrastructures.html>

The Research Group's collective foci are changing cross-border infrastructures, borderscapes, and new scales and spaces of interaction. In particular, a major loci of interest is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and reactions to it. The Group has established an international reputation for this work.

#### The MWS Postdoctoral Fellows

Dr Shaun Lin joined the Group in June 2017 as the first postdoctoral fellow, based in Geography. He has remained as part of the team since. His broad research interests are political geography and border studies, with a current interest on BRI's impacts on Southeast Asia and the region's responses to China's plans and actions on the ground. Dr Andrew Carruthers joined in September 2017 as the second postdoctoral hire. He was based in Southeast Asian Studies until June 2018, before taking up an Assistant Professor tenure-track position in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>5</sup> He is a linguistic and sociocultural anthropologist specializing in maritime Southeast Asia. Dr Carruthers remains an associate member of the Group from his new base at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr Simon Rowedder took up the vacant postdoctoral position in Southeast Asian Studies in October 2018. Dr Rowedder's research has focused on cross-border mobilities and aspirations of small-scale traders and entrepreneurs, and a diverse range of actors in Laos and neighboring regions, against a backdrop of rapidly advancing (mostly China-backed) infrastructure projects.

Dr Felix Mallin was hired as the additional postdoctoral fellow, based in Geography from April 2019. Dr Mallin's work bridges political economy themes with political geography. His research on the Pacific engages with historical infrastructural links between spaces of the former German Empire there and the wider Far East/Oceania.

#### Key Achievements (Events and Publications)

We began with an impactful launch event. In January 2018, six months after the Research Group was established, we organized – together with ARI (who provided co-funding) - a workshop on “Borders, Mobilities and New Infrastructures in an Age of Shifting Power Configurations”.<sup>6</sup> Professor Hans van Ess, President of MWS, and Dr. Harald Rosenbach, the Executive Director of MWS, along with Director of the DIJ, Professor Franz Waldenberger also participated in and attended the event, along with 73 registered delegates and 20 speakers and discussants. Professor Håkan Wahlquist (The Sven Hedin Foundation, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences) gave a keynote lecture: “Albert Herrmann: A missing link in establishing the Silk Road as a concept for Trans-Eurasian networks of trade”.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthropology/people/andrew-carruthers>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/borders-mobilities-and-new-infrastructures-in-an-age-of-shifting-power-configurations/>

# Borders, Mobilities and New Infrastructures in an Age of Shifting Power Configurations

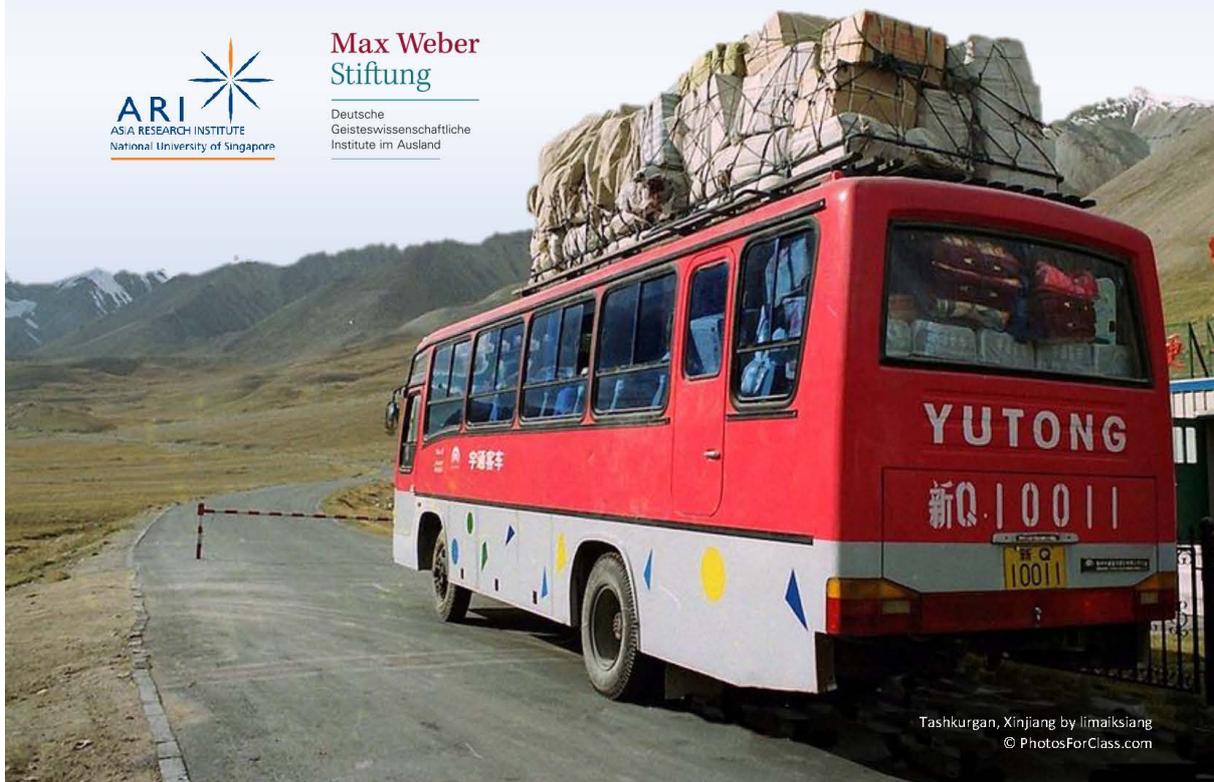
9-10 January 2018

Asia Research Institute Seminar Room  
AS8, Level 4, National University of Singapore



Max Weber  
Stiftung

Deutsche  
Geisteswissenschaftliche  
Institute im Ausland



Tashkurgan, Xinjiang by limalksiang  
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Selected papers from the January 2018 workshop are forthcoming as a special section of *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* on the theme of politics and spaces of China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>7</sup> Dr Shaun Lin (with NUS colleague, Dr Carl Grundy-Warr) and Dr Andrew Carruthers feature in the set with papers on 1) China's BRI foray in the Mekong River and 2) the notion of aquatectonics. These papers explore the confluence of intensive flows and infrastructural formations in the context of the BRI respectively. Professor James D Sidaway led the guest editing of the set of seven papers, joined by Dr Weiqiang Lin and Dr Vatthana Pholsena. Dr Simon Rowedder also came on board as one of the key guest editors when he joined the Research Group. Additionally another colleague from NUS (Associate Professor Chih Yuan Woon) is one of the guest editors.

From September 28, 2018 to October 7, 2018, the Research Group hosted (again together with ARI) a Transregional Academy on the theme "Infrastructures, Regions and Urbanizations". This event was sponsored by the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien. This event hosted a mixture of 20 graduate students, early-career scholars and senior scholars to present work in progress and to gather feedback. A blog was created, highlighting the discussions held and transnational academic networks established.<sup>8</sup>

In mid-June 2019, the three postdoctoral fellows took part in a network meeting, "The Pacific Space as a space of knowledge and interaction? Questions, concepts, and actors" at the German Historical Institute Moscow (DHI Moscow). This is part of a larger MWS research project on "Interactions and Flows of Knowledge: Entanglement and Disentanglement Processes in the Pacific Region" with the German Historical Institutes in Moscow and Washington and the DIJ. The meeting reviewed future opportunities for collaborations.

From September 15, 2019 to September 18, 2019, Professor James D Sidaway, along with two of the postdoctoral fellows (Dr Shaun Lin and Dr Simon Rowedder) participated in "The 1st Financial Geography Global Conference" at Beijing Normal University, China. In line with the Research Group's major focus on China's BRI, James and Shaun (together with Associate Professor Karen Lai of Durham University, UK) co-organized a panel, "Financing BRI". Simon presented on the local implications of the planned China-Laos Railway in this panel. Together with other presentations in the panel, a colloquium on "Financing the BRI", guest edited by Karen Lai, Shaun Lin and James D Sidaway is now published in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*.<sup>9</sup> Besides featuring Simon's paper, the set contains a lead authored paper by Professor Weidong Liu, a key Chinese researcher on China's BRI. Professor Liu is Chair of the Centre for the Belt and Road Initiative, Institute of Geography, Chinese Academy of Sciences. This colloquium on *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, and the event in Beijing have further positioned the Research Group as shapers of key debates on the BRI. They also drew considerable attention from the wider financial geography academic community.

In December 2019, the three postdoctoral fellows, plus Dr Weiqiang Lin, Associate Professor Hendrik Meyer-Ohle and Professor James D Sidaway participated in a two-day workshop on Comparisons held at DIJ Tokyo. The event, which also involved the entire scholarly community based at DIJ Tokyo, reflected on what comparative research meant in theory and practice. The exchanges will appear in the TRAF0 - Blog for Transregional Research.

Besides the above series of collective efforts, each postdoctoral fellow has individually presented on their research interests at major conferences. Shaun presented on Singapore's role in China's BRI in the Annals of the American Association of Geographers meeting at New Orleans in April 2018, and subsequently co-published this research as first author with Professor James D Sidaway and another NUS Geography colleague, Associate Professor Chih Yuan Woon in *The Professional Geographer* in

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<sup>7</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epc#>

<sup>8</sup> <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/17723>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showAxaArticles?journalCode=rege20>

2019. The article: "Reordering China, Respacing the World: Belt and Road Initiative (一帶一路) as an Emergent Geopolitical Culture", has already garnered over 1500 downloads and 9 citations.<sup>10</sup> Shaun also secured a small internal NUS grant from the NUS "Staff Support Research Scheme" with Geography colleague, Dr Carl Grundy-Warr, to examine political-environmental issues of inland fisheries in Cambodia. The research work was presented in a workshop on transboundary commons in ARI in November 2018 and has been published in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*.<sup>11</sup> Furthering the Research Group's links with ARI, Shaun together with an ARI postdoc (Dr Yang Yang) has received an ARI workshop grant to host a symposium on "Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones: Alternative Imaginaries of China's Presence in Southeast Asia in Contemporary Contexts". This workshop (currently scheduled for August 2020) focuses not just on the BRI, but also earlier Chinese interactions with Southeast Asia that precede and exceed BRI concerns.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, Shaun together with James and several UK-based colleagues are embarking on furthering intellectual and applied aspects of Geography and Public Policy, organizing a panel on the theme at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers in London in September 2020.

Besides working on a book from his PhD, Simon has published an ethnographic paper on new dynamics of entrepreneurship, cross-border trade and urbanization in northern Laos in *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* (March 2020).<sup>13</sup> Additional fieldwork in Laos and Thailand in August 2019 contributed to further regional networking, including engagements with scholars at the National University of Laos in Vientiane and Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Regarding the latter, he has been in close dialogue with scholars at the School of Social Innovation. Their annual organization of the "Conference on Border Studies and International Development" has been a fruitful platform of exchange and an apt venue to advertise the MWS Research Group. Simon is also co-organizing a panel "Express train to conviviality and coexistence? The Kunming-Singapore Railway and the reshaping of borderlands in Southeast Asia" at the 7th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN) to be held in Seoul in June 2020.

Since taking up his fellowship in April 2019, Dr Felix Mallin has published a collaborative article on the geopolitical and financial implications of philanthropy-driven large-scale conservation in the Pacific islands' region.<sup>14</sup> Felix also played a key role, together with James as (PI) in securing a conference grant from FASS for a workshop on critical geo-economics, which will be held at NUS in November 2020. Sonja Ganseforth (DIJ) is also a co-organizer of the event.

### Future Directions

The original agreement between the DIJ and FASS envisaged the Research Group operating until December 31, 2020. This has now been extended to December 31, 2023. We are therefore now able to plan another three years of activities.

This planning has been further enabled by the fact that Dr Weiqiang Lin was one of three recipients of the inaugural Social Science and Humanities Research (SSHR) Fellowship awarded in a competition held by Singapore's Ministry of Education in 2018-2019. The project led by Weiqiang involves

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00330124.2018.1547979>

<sup>11</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14678373>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/crossing-the-river/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/352>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X18304214>

collaborations with two Europe-based leading mobilities scholars: Professor Peter Adey (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Dr Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam). The project, entitled “Peopling Infrastructure: Aeromobilities, Automation and Labour Mobilisations in Asia” seeks to understand the role of labour and automation in the aviation industry, drawing on research on the development and maintenance of airport infrastructures in four Asian cities: Beijing, Dubai, Jakarta, and Singapore. The new grant will fully fund a fourth postdoctoral fellow. From April 2020, Dr Benjamin Linder will join the NUS Geography Department as SSHR postdoctoral fellow and be affiliated with the Research Group. Benjamin holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In summary, the MWS Research Group has had a productive three years in terms of research and networking. In the process, members have also secured substantial local funding, from FASS and the Singapore’s Ministry of Education, to enable two further postdoctoral fellows/affiliates. We benefit from a strategic and fruitful relationship with ARI through joint-hosting several key academic events. This will continue. For example, the MWS Research Group will partner with University of Colorado Boulder’s China Made Research Group<sup>15</sup>, led by Professor Tim Oakes., with a roundtable discussion on Chinese infrastructure in Asia in their conference to be held with ARI in May 2021. This will further raise the MWS Research Group’s profile in North America and the two sides will swap notes for future collaboration.

Other future possibilities include closer collaboration both with the DIJ and with other MWS research institutes elsewhere. As a first step, Dr Felix, in collaboration with Sonjia (DIJ Tokyo), is co-organizing a workshop on Japan’s position in the emerging global blue economy at DIJ. This has been scheduled for May 2020.<sup>16</sup>

The research funding environment at NUS and in Singapore more widely is enabling – and there are good prospects to seek further local funding to broaden and deepen the activities of the Group.

Two future strategic research directions that complement our existing BRI focus include Japan’s multi-faceted role in Southeast Asia (both in historical and contemporary forms) and what we term “portals of globalization” – maritime and inland ports, which feature as key BRI nodes.

Foremost amongst these nodes is the world’s largest inland port and European terminus of the BRI at Duisburg. Such emerging “Europe-Asia”, as well as other, infrastructures offer promising sites and pathways for further empirical research and theoretical reflections for the next three-plus years of the Research Group – and beyond.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://chinamadeproject.net/about/>

<sup>16</sup> The Covid-19 emergency may require this to be rescheduled.