

ENLIGHT workshop, Göttingen, September 11-12th 2023

**More than a Distant Relative:
China and its Neighbours in an Increasingly Turbulent World**

Abstracts

Keynote 1.

Julie Yu-Wen Chen, Professor of Chinese Studies, University of Helsinki

**Knowledge Production About China and Perception of the Rise of China in Central Asia:
Oral History Interviews with Senior China Experts and Sinologists**

This speech is part of the project on *Comparative Epistemology of China Studies*, which has been conducted for more than a decade under the leadership of Prof. Chih-yu Shih at National Taiwan University. Prof. Shih and his collaborators have collected oral history interviews from sinologists and senior China experts from many parts of the world. This presentation focuses on analyzing the results of oral history interviews conducted by the author in Uzbekistan and by Olga Adams in Kazakhstan. A comparative epistemological approach is used to examine how Central Asian intellectuals' research and knowledge of China are affected by the conditions of their societies, domestic and international politics, as well as how this has further implications for Central Asian countries' contemporary relations in education exchange and in political and economic links with China.

Session 1. China and Central Asia

Chi Zhang, University of St Andrews, **China's Development Challenges in Central Asia**

China's emergence and development in Central Asia faces intensifying headwinds as the region witnesses a range of challenges. Terrorism and political instability continue to be major concerns for the region, especially after the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan that created a power vacuum. The 'new Cold War' discourse that is being popularised, especially within American political discourse, is contributing to the intensification of multidimensional conflicts in the region. The speaker argues that it is essential to evaluate development challenges in Central Asia within the context of China's rising influence in the region through the BRI, as well as other regional frameworks like the SCO and China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

This talk examines the evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia within the broader context of the global ideological confrontations and the regional 'Great Game' between China and Russia. By drawing on think tank reports, English-language media, and scholarly works, it contends that China's investment and development strategy in Central Asia needs to factor in the complex geopolitical dynamics. The changing political landscape in the region have significant implications for China's engagement with Central Asian countries and its broader BRI that extends through Central Asia to Europe. It also highlights how the development challenges in Central Asia cannot

be reduced to a binary categorisation of development and security, and that political resilience is necessary to ensure successful and sustainable development.

The speaker suggests that China's approach to Central Asia requires a nuanced understanding of multidimensional conflicts and political resilience of local state and non-state actors. The re-evaluation of China's development strategy in Central Asia will not only benefit its long-term interests in the region but also contribute to greater regional stability and prosperity.

Roza Turarbekava, Justus Liebig University Giessen, **Kazakh-Chinese Relations: Challenges to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'**

The official Kazakh political discourse describes relations with China as a 'comprehensive strategic partnership.' In the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and the risk for Kazakhstan, as an ally, to be drawn into an armed conflict, as well as large-scale sanctions against Russia, China appears to be a stable and promising partner. Nevertheless, bilateral relations face several challenges that are not mentioned at the official level but are significant enough to pose a threat to an 'unclouded' partnership in the future.

The first challenge is the water distribution of the Irtysh River and its tributaries. In arid conditions, it is extremely important for South Kazakhstan's agriculture to receive sufficient water for irrigated farming and livestock. However, Chinese water withdrawal reduces the runoff available to Kazakh farmers. The second challenge is the harsh discriminatory policy of the Chinese authorities towards the Muslim communities of Xinjiang, including the Kazakhs. The relatives of those repressed regularly raise concerns about their migration and citizenship. The third challenge is public opinion concerning Chinese economic policy in Kazakhstan and protest activity. As none of these issues are officially recognized or addressed proactively, they have the potential to significantly complicate the nature of bilateral relations in the future.

Karolina Kluczevska, Ghent University, **Tajikistan's Engagement with China: Trends, Peculiarities and Perceptions**

This presentation analyses Tajikistan-China cooperation from Tajikistan's point of view, namely by situating this relation within Tajikistan's broader international relations, and in particular development cooperation. Tajikistan has been a recipient of development assistance from abroad – mainly from the West – since the early 1990s, which largely determined how the Tajik government approaches its partners and donors and what it expects from them. In this context, China was a relative latecomer in Tajikistan, as the first, initially small-scale Chinese projects were implemented in this country only in the mid-2000s. Since then, however, China has gradually become Tajikistan's largest source of foreign investment, which is concentrated in construction, communication, agriculture and mining sectors. China is also now among Tajikistan's top trading partners. The presentation compares the mechanisms and fields of Tajikistan's cooperation with China with its other major partners. It also points to what Tajik political elites view as strengths and weaknesses of cooperation with China vis-à-vis the country's other partners.

Maryia Danilovich, University of Göttingen. **Structuring its Power: China's Recent Engagement with the Central Asian States**

This talk delves into the recent engagements between China and the Central Asian states, placing a spotlight on the "China plus Central Asia" (C+C5) cooperation framework. It aims to examine the initial hypothesis that this framework functions as a new instrument for structuring China's power in the region, especially against the backdrop of the altered regional and global context since 2022. The talk involves an in-depth assessment of the design and mechanics of the C+C5, alongside its role in China's ongoing strategy towards the region. Additionally, it explores the reactions emanating from Central Asia in response to this new multilateral framework.

Session 2. **China and Southeast Asia**

Wanjing Chen, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, **Riding the Wave: Chinese Entrepreneur Migrants and the Making of Belt and Road Initiative in Lao**

Since China's market reform in 1979, an unspecified number of entrepreneur migrants have trickled into the global South. They established themselves by trading cheap Chinese merchandises. These migrants and their commercial activities have been examined under the rubric of ethnic business formation. They are largely excluded from recent debates on global China, which focuses on high-end globalization mobilized by the Chinese state. This paper examines the encounter between entrepreneur migrants and more elite segments of Chinese parachuting into the Laos following Beijing's call for Belt and Road. The new structural condition marginalizes entrepreneur migrants in the long term, while also present them with immediate opportunities to capture windfall. Thus, it propels entrepreneur migrants to try riding the wave at all costs, which lead to clandestine business practices.

Neil Loughlin, City University of London, **Is Chinese Investment Driving Authoritarianism? Evidence from 10 Years of the BRI In Southeast Asia.**

This paper explores this question applying the concept of authoritarian linkage to the first decade of China's colossal BRI in Southeast Asia. Particular attention is paid to Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar—diverse cases which have been key recipients of BRI funding, and which have operated under *various* and *changed* authoritarian and democratic regime-types since the BRI was announced. Employing a critical political economy approach and drawing from case studies of BRI projects, the article analyses democratization and autocratization associated with Chinese investment. The article findings show that, in Cambodia, Chinese investment stabilized the authoritarian regime in crisis, while in Malaysia it was factor in the collapse of the long ruling authoritarian coalition. In Myanmar, Chinese investment has been a factor in both its recent democratizing and autocratizing moments. This variation is evidence that local political economy dynamics and local agency mediate Chinese investment, contributing to varied democratic and authoritarian outcomes.

Felix Heiduk, **Security in Southeast Asia: the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ vs. China’s ‘Circle of Friends’**

The regional security order in Southeast Asia is transforming. For decades it had been based structurally, as well in practice, on a US-led system of bilateral alliances - the so-called hub-and-spoke system. Since 2014, the Communist Party of China under Xi Jinping has begun to initiate her own ideas for reorganising the regional security system and to implement them, at least in part. Xi Jinping described the US-led military alliances as an outdated relic of the Cold War and directly questioned the future of the US-led hub-and-spoke system by calling for a regional security architecture "by Asians for Asians". In opposition to US-led alliances Beijing seeks to form a China-centric network of close partnerships frequently dubbed its "circle of friends". In response, Washington has declared the preservation of US hegemony to be the central strategic goal of US foreign policy in the region. The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) is seen as a counter strategy to a Chinese-dominated reorganisation of the region and has gradually replaced the previously dominant construct of "Asia-Pacific". Hence, increasingly two competing visions of a new regional security order are materializing. At the same time most Southeast Asian states do not want to choose sides in the great power rivalry. This analysis will take stock of the fragmented regional security order and assess how states in the region respond to it.

Keynote 2.

Ivan Franceschini, University of Botswana

Global China’s Dark Side

Scholars have been examining Chinese engagements overseas for decades, but only in recent years all these different facets have been subsumed under the single label of ‘Global China’. But what is ‘Global China’? In this talk, the speaker will argue that it is possible to distinguish between two different *layers* in current analyses of Global China. The first, which he calls ‘Global China from above’, focuses on the macro, top-down dynamics related to China’s international engagements; the second, ‘global China from below’, covers all sorts of grassroots encounters between Chinese state and non-state actors and local communities in foreign contexts. While these two dimensions dominate current discussions, the speaker highlights the existence of a third, less visible layer, which he calls ‘Global China’s underbelly’. This includes the operations of Chinese organised crime syndicates that branch out overseas, their underground money flows, and their engagements with foreign counterparts. Studying these situations is possible, although challenging, and can yield important insights on how to situate Global China today.

Session 3. **China and its Neighbors: Lessons for Theory**

Agha Bayramov, University of Groningen, **Russia's War in Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as an Alternative Route for Sino-Western Trade Relations**

Since the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the global community has been looking for alternative trade routes avoiding the Russian Federation. This presentation focuses on the emergence of the Middle Corridor as a viable option, connecting Europe, Central Asia, and China, and its potential to become a new trade link between the East and the West. It will also discuss the main opportunities, challenges, and environmental consequences of the project.

Monique Taylor, University of Helsinki, **Energy security and the Indo-Pacific concept**

Energy security is an under-theorised area of scholarly research. Abundant attention in the extant literature has been afforded to defining energy security and debating its various meanings, but here the focus is on terminology rather than deeper conceptual understanding. This talk attempts to bridge this gap drawing on theoretical perspectives from international relations and political economy to illustrate the ways in which theory can enrich our understanding of energy security. The theoretical findings are then applied to the new geostrategic concept of the Indo-Pacific to show not only the utility of theory but to evaluate to what extent the Indo-Pacific strategic discourse is effective in highlighting and addressing regional energy security issues.

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