



Full Length Article

“Silk Road here we come”: Infrastructural myths, post-disaster politics, and the shifting urban geographies of Nepal

Elia Apostolopoulou^{a,b,c,*}, Hitesh Pant^d

^a Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge, UK

^b Institute for Environmental Science and Technology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain

^c Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability, Barcelona, Spain

^d Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, UK



ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explain how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) drives urban transformation in Nepal reconfiguring geopolitical and geoeconomic relations and remaking the sociopolitical, cultural and material fabric of hitherto peripheral spaces. Given that BRI infrastructures materialize in parallel with Chinese-funded reconstruction projects, we pay attention to the role of post-disaster politics to unravel how ongoing urban transformation does not only affect the present and the future but also people's histories and post-disaster memories by treating places of (re)building as empty of previous life and history. By drawing on 16 months of fieldwork, we show that despite the evident role of the BRI as an agent of urban transformation, the materialization of most BRI projects depends on geopolitical rivalries, negotiations, unstable local coalitions and escalating social contestation. We conclude that in the post-disaster era, BRI projects have become new vehicles towards Naya [new] Nepal, along with many other infrastructural myths that preceded the country's modern history. Nonetheless, the Naya urban Nepal that is emerging from the ruins of the past is contested and uncertain, a far cry from the days of the Panchayat regime and the civil war, when such gargantuan projects were rarely challenged by Nepali people. This is the unique trajectory of Silk Road urbanization in Nepal: an ultimate path to reach a long due rural-to-urban transition that is inextricably linked with decades of infrastructural violence and precarity and strongly shaped by people's struggles against the unequal geographies of BRI-driven urban transformation.

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, is the single largest infrastructure project since the Marshall Plan, with a scope and scale that has no precedent in modern history (Ferdinand, 2016). The initiative is an exemplar of a new global paradigm of infrastructure-led development (Danyluk, 2018; Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Tooze, 2018) characterised by the establishment of tradespaces and mega-corridors across the globe (Hildyard & Sol, 2017). As the BRI's vision document (Chinese Government, 2015) and the location of key investments indicate, and as empirical evidence showing an intensification of urbanization alongside its infrastructural and trade corridors confirms (Derudder et al., 2018; Linlin et al., 2017), the initiative's potential to alter urban geographies is immense. From railways, airports, ports, industrial parks, optical fiber networks, and special economic zones (SEZs), to smart cities, greenfield investments, real estate and urban regeneration projects, the BRI brings about novel combinations of large-scale infrastructure with industrial projects (Blanchard & Flint, 2017) and major investments on the urban built

environment in impressively varying contexts across the South and North. Nonetheless, despite a few exceptions (Apostolopoulou, 2021a, 2021b; Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Smith, 2022; Wiig & Silver, 2019; Williams et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2021), geographical perspectives focusing explicitly on the urban aspect of the BRI are rare, which prevents an in-depth understanding of its scope and impact.

In this paper, by drawing on the case of Nepal, our goal is twofold. Firstly, we aim to further contribute (Apostolopoulou 2021a, 2021b) at addressing the above gap by focusing on the complex ways in which BRI-driven urban transformation is reconfiguring geopolitical and geoeconomic relations remaking the sociopolitical, cultural and material fabric of hitherto peripheral spaces. Nepal has participated in the BRI since May 12, 2017, when its foreign secretary and the former Chinese ambassador to Nepal signed¹ a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Kathmandu. Since then, various projects including road and train infrastructures, hydropower, smart cities, and industrial parks have been planned and are currently at different implementation stages. Some of these were agreed upon long before the BRI, with an indicative example being the Arniko Highway (Thapa et al., 2008), or were funded

* Corresponding author. Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge, UK.

E-mail addresses: ea367@cam.ac.uk (E. Apostolopoulou), hp417@cam.ac.uk (H. Pant).

¹ <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2017/05/12/nepal-china-sign-framework-deal-on-obor>.

by China but are not yet officially part of the BRI, while others are flagship BRI projects.

What links these projects is the quest for economic and trade connectivity between the two neighbours, a relationship that has particularly intensified since the 2015 earthquake that devastated Nepal, killing more than 8000 people and displacing 2.8 million (IOM, 2016). While the earthquake highlighted the inadequacy of Nepal's disaster response and its immediate reliance on emergency development aid, what is significant to our analysis is the Chinese state's increasingly overt interventions in infrastructure building across the Himalayan state, both physical and ideological. Within this context, the BRI becomes a key vessel for the Chinese state to consolidate social and economic influence in Nepal's foreign and domestic relations.

Connectivity is considered key for China's inspirations to expand its influence in South Asia by taking advantage of Nepal's strategic geopolitical location. It is also crucial for achieving the political goal of all successive governments in Nepal, namely economic development, or *bikas* (the more symbolic representation in the Nepali vernacular), which has been accompanied, particularly in the last decade, by a clear emphasis on fast-tracking urban development.

Secondly, and relatedly, based on an extroverted understanding of place (Massey, 1994) and in line with calls to explore the Belt and Road Initiative from the ground (de LT Oliveira et al., 2020; Murton & Lord, 2020; Sidaway et al., 2020), we sought to understand the intertwined policies, projects, discourses, and aspirations involved in BRI's unfolding in Nepal. By doing this, we aim to show how a Chinese-led strategy coalesces with multiple national and local, private and state interests, and materialises within diverse urban contexts producing variegated outcomes. In the case of Nepal, given that BRI infrastructures materialize in parallel with Chinese-funded reconstruction projects, this necessitates engaging with the complex terrain of post-disaster politics (Chand, 2017; Paudel & Le Billon, 2020) to understand how the latter influences BRI-driven urban transformation, urban futures and people's histories and memories (McKinnon et al., 2016; Watson, 2017).

Empirically, we draw on social science research that lasted from December 2019 to June 2021. This has involved on the ground and virtual ethnographic research focused on local communities' stories and experiences, including Newars (Indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu), in-depth interviews with urban activists, policy makers, including state officials, and civil society actors, primarily human rights organizations, and an extended analysis of policy and media documents. In our fieldwork, we considered community differentiation across lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and caste whereas field sites included both urban and rural regions where infrastructure projects are either ongoing or projected to begin soon. By adopting a broad analytical and empirical lens that encompasses but also exceeds the terrain of the city, we placed Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, the greater Kathmandu Valley, and strategic trade corridors like Rasuwagadhi, at the epicenter of our analysis.² When COVID-19 related restrictions allowed us, we drew on Katz's (2015) methodology to spatialize time and historize place through walks and conversations with local inhabitants. Our purpose in the analysis was to incorporate as much as possible the way residents of Nepal perceive the social, spatial, cultural, and physical transformations of their communities, as workers scramble to complete the delayed infrastructure and reconstruction projects where banners proclaim the everlasting friendship between Nepal and China.

² We initially planned to conduct research in several other places but this was not possible due to COVID restrictions. This means that the analysis of road projects is based on discussions with residents of the broader Kathmandu area and online interviews.

2. Silk Road urbanization, post-disaster politics and the geographies of memory and place

In what follows, we draw on the concepts of Silk Road urbanization (Apostolopoulou, 2021a) and Silk Road Urbanism (Wiig & Silver, 2019) to understand the distinct and diverse ways the New Silk Road is driving urban transformation in places where BRI projects materialize. Whereas Silk Road urbanization primarily highlights how the BRI intersects with patterns of growth and the restructuring of urban-regional space, Silk Road urbanism emphasizes the ways it transforms urban life and the urban experience more broadly (Apostolopoulou et al., 2022). To understand the wider context within which the Silk Road emerged and its role in shaping the global geographies of the urban, we link its emergence to the rise of infrastructure-led development at the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Furthermore, by drawing on classical ideas in geographical and urban research on the interrelationship between urbanization and capital accumulation (Christophers, 2011; Harvey, 1985; Lefebvre, 2003; Smith, 2010), as well as on scholarship that explores contemporary urbanization patterns within China (Hsing, 2010), we theorize the BRI as a major spatial fix to capital's overaccumulation crisis (Harvey, 2016; Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019; Summers, 2016), and as a key expression of China's emphasis on urbanization as a pathway to economic development and modernization. This is, *inter alia*, evident in the strategic combination of BRI transport infrastructure with SEZs and investments in the built environment, and underlines the importance of economic and trade connectivity for the BRI and its role in reducing spatial barriers by facilitating capital flows.

What is of particular importance here is the way in which BRI-driven urban infrastructural development incorporates historically marginal spaces into circuits of capital and establishes new spatial frontiers for global capitalism (Smith, 1996). This has been evident in Nepal and in a number of peripheral sites along BRI's corridors (Lesutis, 2020), which under the hegemonic narrative of reducing poverty and supporting national prosperity, have been subsumed under capitalist relations. It is important to note here that in line with the Lefebvrian (Lefebvre, 1970) notion of generalized urbanization, we adopt a broader understanding of the urban as process of creating material infrastructures for production, circulation, exchange, and consumption that is not strictly confined to urban agglomerations (Apostolopoulou, 2020). This is particularly relevant in Nepal, where the expansion of urbanization into places that are undergoing a rural-to-urban transition perforates the urban-rural divide and stresses the need to approach city and non-city landscapes, or hinterlands, as dialectically co-produced spaces (Brenner & Katsikis, 2020; Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

Moreover, and relatedly, in dialogue with critical topography and recent writings on planetary urbanization (Katz, 2021) and comparative urbanism (Robinson, 2021), we approach the novel phenomenon of Silk Road Urbanization by studying the concrete and the particular to trace its effects as they are etched on specific grounds, leaving space for the complexity and the uncertain spatialities of the urban to emerge. We also aim to respond to recent calls in BRI scholarship to move from an analysis of the initiative as primarily a discursive field of knowledge, towards understanding it as a materially grounded field of practice (Oakes, 2020). Towards achieving the latter, and in line with wider calls in critical geographical scholarship to stop treating urban infrastructures "as technical, hidden, and taken-for-granted domains" (Graham & Marvin, 2022, p. 1), we theorize BRI infrastructures as complex socio-technical assemblages that mediate urban lives and shape people's everyday perceptions and experiences of subjecthood in the city (Datta & Ahmed, 2020; Graham and McFarlane, 2015). Theorizing urban infrastructures and networks both from the point of their political-economic production and their social, cultural, and political significance (Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2005) unravels the contradictory forces and unequal power relations through which these are produced and lived. It also reveals that their provision, maintenance, and transformation are contested and politicized, which enables and embodies

various forms of violence (Datta & Ahmed, 2020; Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012). In line with the above, we adopt a grounded analysis of the BRI that places at its core the way urban dwellers experience urban infrastructures, and how these (re)shape urban lives, memories, hopes, fears, and aspirations for the future.

A grounded analysis of the BRI also acknowledges the complex role of geopolitical rivalries and social struggles in the way these projects unfold. As noted in the introduction, social struggles in Nepal cannot be understood without considering the role of post-disaster politics after the 2015 earthquakes. As Paudel and Le Billon (2020) explain, disaster and post-disaster reconstruction processes lead to wider socioeconomic and political restructuring, which offers particular sections of capital major opportunities for accumulation. Foreign post-disaster aid has historically embodied a geopolitical dimension, strengthened bilateral ties, and helped powerful donors to advance their interests by taking advantage of states of emergency (Chand, 2017). In Nepal, post-disaster aid and reconstruction processes constitute a complex terrain of geopolitical manoeuvring and geoeconomic accumulation (Paudel & Le Billon, 2020) that intertwine with the geoeconomic/geopolitical aspirations of the BRI vision, and the actual, material impacts of specific BRI projects. The contested nature of space and the multiple, shifting, and potentially unbounded identities of place (Massey, 1994) are particularly obvious in the context of post-disaster politics and inextricably linked to the contested terrain of disaster memory (Campbell, 2018; Hutt et al., 2021; Simpson, 2014). As McKinnon et al. (2016) point out, disaster memory has a clear spatial aspect: processes of rebuilding can assert particular visions of the past to ensure that reconstruction politics in the post-disaster period are defined by the interests of hegemonic social groups. Indeed, marginalized communities are often excluded from rebuilding processes, and their devastation is seen as an opportunity for renewal and profit (David, 2008). The second key element for understanding BRI's unfolding in the context of Nepal is the paramount importance of *bikas* (Pigg, 1992; Shrestha, 1995) throughout the country's history. As we will see in the following sections, the BRI has become embedded into the perennial question of *bikas*, offering Nepal's politicians and development administrators a pathway to elevate the country beyond the "least-developed" state within which global economic indices have placed it for decades. It is precisely on the latter that next section focuses on.

3. The quest for *bikas* in Nepal and the BRI as an agent of urban transformation: "Silk Road, here we come"³

Nepal's politics has been characterised by an oscillating joust between and within different governance forms. This has included the abolition of the Panchayat system in 1991, the fragile multi-party democracy marked by repeated shifts in ministerial regimes, the Maoist uprising, the dissolution of parliament, the regression to autocracy and the abolition of the 239-year monarchy in 2008 (Adhikari, 2014; Thapa, 1992). More recent political developments include the establishment of the 2015 constitution,⁴ the first provincial elections in 2017 (Malagodi, 2018), and the dominance of the Nepal Communist Party at the federal, municipal and local levels of government. The latter was characterised by a historical majority in the parliament, a transformation interpreted as a rejection of the Indian-aligned Nepali Congress Party (Paudel & Le Billon, 2020). While these mutations have wrestled the accumulation of power from one hand of the polity to another, it has had real implications on the lived experiences, aspirations, and imagined urban futures of Nepal's citizens (TRIAL International, 2017). Yet, the perpetual

struggle for the acquisition of political and material power is underpinned by a common refrain that somehow manages to ostensibly unite all factions of the political-economic nexus: *bikas*.

Bikas is a charged word in Nepal. It is the promise of uninterrupted hydroelectricity marked by local displacement (Rest, 2012). It is unhinged urban expansion shrouded by photochemical smog (Pradhan et al., 2020). And it is every pathway that claims to liberate Nepal from the doldrums of "least-development" to an economically developed state, a spectre that "grips the collective imagination in Nepal" (Pigg, 1993, p. 48).⁵ *Bikas* is an everyday occurrence (Pigg, 1992; Shrestha, 1995), and the congregation of multiple international development and aid organizations is symbolic of the field-trials and experiments that are contested and professed as the correct mode for Nepal's future prosperity. While the UK, the US and Japan have traditionally been the major providers of development aid, during the last decade both China and India have been added in the list of top donors. The national importance of development has rendered the presence or absence of its proxies, such as roads, hospitals, and hydropower facilities, a symbol of the perceived presence or absence of the state (Nightingale et al., 2018; see also; Harvey & Knox, 2015; Larkin, 2008). As many interviewees told us, in Nepal, improved infrastructure is equated with a state that cares for its constituents, whereas crumbling buildings and half-paved roads are signs of a government by and for itself.

In recent history, *bikas* has been explicitly linked to urbanisation, with Nepal becoming one of the fastest urbanising countries globally (UNDESA, 2014). Its demographic transformation is characterized by a rapidly growing population density along highways and road corridors, especially close to the borders with India and China, confirming to observers the fact that infrastructural connectivity is a key driver of urbanization (MoUD, 2017). Currently, the only city with more than one million residents is Kathmandu Metropolitan City, whereas Kathmandu Valley is the hub of Nepal's urbanization with nearly 22.4% of its national urban population residing in the area. Between 2014 and 2015, an impressive number (159) of new municipalities were designed, bringing their total number to 217 and the urban (municipal) population to 40% of the total population. This administrative transformation has not been matched by a reciprocal development of essential urban facilities, services and infrastructures (MoUD, 2017). Despite fetishizing urban growth and portraying it as the symbol, prerequisite and incentive of prosperity, a coordinated urban strategy is still absent. This is evidenced in the low quality of urban infrastructures and services, including water supply, sanitation and solid waste management, inadequate housing, transport and energy infrastructures, uneven urban poverty, and the rapid loss of open spaces in urban areas (ibid). Despite aspirations that government-induced fast-track urbanization would act as a catalyst for the modernization of Nepal's traditional rural-based society, urban growth has been haphazard, with the economic base of urban areas still remaining weak and unable to support the development of adjacent rural regions (ADB, 2010).

These infrastructural challenges along with Nepal's dependence on foreign development aid (Regmi, 2017) are essential to understand the country's evolving relation with China and BRI's role as a key driver of urban transformation. Even though Sino-Nepal relations have been cordial over the past decades, the 7.8 magnitude earthquake of April 2015 marked the intensification of the two countries' financial and geopolitical relations. In September 2015, Nepal was plunged into a humanitarian crisis after India forced an economic blockade in the southern border⁶ just months after the earthquake. While its causes were shrouded in accusations and denials, and despite India's expectations that it would convince Nepal to consider the demands of Madhesi ethnic

³ "Silk Road, here we come" was the title of an article in The Kathmandu Post in April 2017 citing Nepal's Prime Minister statement after his meeting with the Chinese Defense Minister.

⁴ <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/nepals-new-constitution-65-years-in-the-making/>.

⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/is-nepal-ready-to-become-a-developing-country/>.

⁶ India had imposed an economic blockade to Nepal also in 1989 due to the purchase of Nepal's government of anti-aircraft guns from China.

groups in its revised constitution,⁷ the blockade served as a proof to the Nepali state that it was grossly dependent on India for vital economic support. According to official statistics, the trade embargo led to a significant drop in exports, imports, and shipments that caused shortages in essential goods (Nayak, 2018).

Increasing criticism about Nepal's dependence on India⁸ led to a reorientation towards China, which was reinforced by the political consolidation of the Communist Party of KP Oli that won the 2017 elections on an anti-Indian plank, as Oli reached out to China to lessen the over-reliance on India. In the post-2008 era, Chinese influence was gaining momentum in Nepal, and in 2014, China's foreign direct investment had surpassed India's for the first time.⁹ In March 2016, Nepal and China signed the Transit Transport Agreement (TTA)¹⁰. This allowed Nepal to access a number of Chinese sea and land ports and enabled trade with third countries by shortening arrival times for international cargo. The ports included four Chinese seaports in Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang, and three dry ports in Lanzhou, Lhasa and Shigatse.¹¹ The vitality of Sino-Nepali relations can be further explained by Nepal's recent history. The Maoists had waged a civil war from 1996 to 2006, which culminated in the dissolution of the monarchical regime, the signing of the comprehensive peace accord, and the gradual assimilation of the former rebels into Nepalese institutional politics. Political observers believed that the Chinese Communist Party gave significant financial and military support to the rebels, training their ideologues in both theory and practice (Adhikari, 2014).

It was within the above context that Nepal's government enthusiastically embraced the BRI. The initiative was seen as a major opportunity for a landlocked country like Nepal to improve its transport connectivity and its position in international trade, two long-standing factors that have hindered the country's urban growth. Governmental aspirations have been obvious in the lavish grandiosity¹² that accompanied Xi Jinping's state visit to Nepal in October 2019 and the signing of a 20-point agreement between the two countries pertaining to infrastructure development, people-to-people connectivity, and Nepal's reiteration to the "One China Policy". The agreement was an extension of a joint communique issued by both governments after the conclusion of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in April 2019 and built on Nepalese Prime Minister K.P. Oli's visit to Beijing in 2018.¹³ As Bidhya Dev Bhandari, the President of Nepal, stated at the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing: "The far-sighted vision of President Xi to build a community of shared future for mankind through Belt and Road Initiative carries a huge potential [...] For a landlocked country like Nepal, connectivity is of paramount importance in its socio-economic development".¹⁴

Nepal's government initially proposed 35 projects to be included in

the BRI¹⁵ that were eventually brought down to 9 after negotiations with the Chinese side. A key part of the agreement was the commitment to develop an ambitious *Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network*¹⁶ of new trade routes and transport infrastructure, which included a Cross-Border China-Nepal Railway (hereon the Railway¹⁷). While it remains unclear which additional projects may be included in the BRI, the signing of a BRI MoU and Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal, the first by a Chinese president since 1996, set the scene for the increasing involvement of Chinese enterprises in Nepal's infrastructure, including numerous investments in smart cities, road construction, hydropower projects and industrial parks. This revealed an ambitious Chinese approach to strategically link the BRI with broader *trans-Himalayan* connectivity plans, and it marked a new era of BRI-related infrastructural myths in Nepal.

4. Chasing invisible voices: post-disaster memories and the reconstruction of Basantapur Tower

By being a controversial site of Chinese aid and reconstruction, we consider Durbar Square in Kathmandu City particularly relevant to discuss issues about the past, present, and future of Nepal's developmental state and ongoing urban transformation since the country's inclusion in the BRI. Chinese commitments to Durbar Square's reconstruction speak to increasing patterns of Chinese involvement in Nepal, especially after the earthquake and Nepal's official involvement in the BRI.

Durbar Square is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and palace grounds of the former city-state of the same name (circa 1200–1700 CE) that was severely damaged by the 2015 earthquake, or maha bhukampa in the local vernacular.¹⁸ Several of its temples and monuments date back to the 3rd Century CE,¹⁹ and over time the Square morphed into the historical city's commercial centre and marketplace. The temples, shrines, and stone waterspouts scattered across the Square are not only fragments of a former kingdom, but embody the memories of the living: the Taleju Bhawani Temple, Panchmukhi Temple, the shrine of Kaal Bhairava, and the Saraswati Temple are actively created by locals and visitors who weave through the ancient alcoves of the Square, pay their respects, and continue onwards, only to return once more and inject new meaning into the cityscape. But after the earthquake, many of these culturally vital monuments were severely damaged, including the Nautalle Durbar (hereon Basantapur Tower) and the Dharara Tower, both of whose shadows loomed large over Kathmandu's collective memory due to their deep political and cultural significance. Five years later, 4.5 billion USD in international aid has done very little to affect the structural malignancies that have stymied short- and long-term reconstruction and adaptation.

For one of us, as a citizen of Kathmandu, prior visits to the Square were a Proustian affair, where the quotidian conversations in teashops, curio stores, temple fronts, open markets, and ritual offerings struck the deepest chords of memory. The Square was the beating heart of Kathmandu's cultural identity, a colourful display of ethnic and aesthetic urban diversity. As a local vendor and a bricklayer told us respectively:

"It seemed the entire world passed through our streets. I've run my chiya pasal [tea shop] for 45 years here in the Square. I used to have street

⁷ The Madhesh movement is a social and political struggle initiated by the Madhesi peoples, an ethnically diverse group that historically inhabited the Terai, or plains, of southern Nepal. Among other things, the movement seeks a greater representation of minorities in political organs, equal citizenship rights, and an end to the social discriminations of caste and class inflicted on Madhesi communities. For an overview of the movement's current issues, see: <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/nepal-madhesi-protests>.

⁸ Nepal's negotiations with India regarding transit rights began since the 1978 treaty of trade and transit and remain a contentious issue in India-Nepal bilateral relations and a major electoral issue in Nepal (Nayak, 2018).

⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/china-is-largest-fdi-source-for-nepal-overtakes-india/article5618081.ece>.

¹⁰ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2018-09/07/c_137452422.htm.

¹¹ <http://archive.nepalitimes.com/blogs/thebrief/2016/03/21/nepal-gains-access-to-ports/>.

¹² http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/13/c_138467212.htm.

¹³ <https://www.financialexpress.com/infrastructure/railways/now-china-and-nepal-to-build-railway-line-linking-tibet-to-kathmandu/1216637/>.

¹⁴ <http://www.hakahakionline.com/en/9104/belt-and-road-cooperation-sharing-a-brighter-shared-future/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/october/11/chinese-investments-in-nepal-in-the-context-of-bri>.

¹⁶ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202012/24/WS5fe3d1dea31024ad0ba9de75.html>.

¹⁷ <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2019/0427/c36-1311.html>.

¹⁸ <https://theconversation.com/the-history-of-kathmandu-valley-as-told-by-its-architecture-41103>.

¹⁹ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/kathmandu-durbar-square>.

workers, merchants, priests, tourists, neighbours sharing stories, our troubles, our hopes.”

And:

“I cannot explain the reason why, but caste divisions did not seem to matter in the Square. Even in my childhood, when caste played a greater role in society, our communities in the ‘sahar’ [city] invited everyone, and we got along with everyone. Now I don’t recognize my own city”.

While this recent rhetoric of unfamiliarity may have been initially tied to demographic transitions after the Nepalese Civil War²⁰, it is the conferral of the Square’s post-earthquake reconstruction to the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), a sub-ministry-level executive agency under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China established in 2018, that drives a lot of the unease among Kathmandu’s residents. China’s post-disaster aid consisted of 25 reconstruction projects.²¹ This included, along with the Square, the construction of roads, schools, hospitals and heritage sites, which as our interviewees later explained to us, were tied to China’s broader plans for Nepal in the context of the BRI. The latter has been particularly evident in the case of the restoration of the nine-story Basantapur Tower that had been submitted in March 2017 and approved within only a month by Nepal’s Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. The restoration was supposed to last five years and cost nearly 90 million yuan (US\$13 million), all of which was paid by the Chinese government. The tower has fast become both a symbol of the increasing ties between Nepal and China and a key stage for the controversies surrounding Chinese-funded post-disaster aid and Nepal’s role in the BRI.

What we observed during our discussions with residents of Kathmandu is that there is currently a palpable wave of apprehension towards what locals see as the submission of their *jiwan* [life] and *samaj* [society] to a culture that is largely alien to them. This is primarily due to their complete exclusion from the reconstruction process and the government’s ignorance towards their social and cultural knowledge of the area. As two local vendors told us:

“Just look around you - do you recognise the words and notices around Basantapur? Even Kasthamandap has been draped with the Chinese flag. Where do you think the hand of our government lies?”

And:

“I heard that they would begin teaching Chinese in Durbar High School. It was good that the Chinese government helped re-build it, but is it right to just give the curriculum to them?”

In their research on agrarian communities in southern Nepal, Rankin et al. (2018) note how the transition to a federal republic initiated debates on the legitimacy of traditional authorities and raised questions about the decentralisation of decision-making power. The authors illustrated how district-level governance became the core site of political contestation, where “structural violence and transformative change are negotiated in practice” (ibid, 294). Similar resistances are found in the Square, where historians, conservationists, and urban activists openly challenge the federal government and their reconstruction policies, seeing them as proof of the unconditional commitment to the BRI. Locals have mobilised a strong movement against the government’s decision to permit foreign development firms rather than Kathmandu district’s conservationists over the maintenance of the Square and surrounding sites. As urban activists told us:

“Right from the beginning, it was about asking for money rather than learning from local people. We have the closest connection to the Square and its culture. We know each of our sisters and brothers in

the neighbourhood. But the public consultations that were held made no difference because they had already worked behind our backs. The earthquake gave a pre-text for increasing foreign influence and now the BRI is used to curb any opposition.”

And:

“The history of Kathmandu is erased every day. When the president of China came here to talk about Nepal’s role to the Belt and Road, they said a lot about cultural similarities. How can that be when the old architectural styles of the Square’s temples are being replaced by something completely different? We sent a petition to our local municipal authorities asking them to incorporate what was lost. But we got nothing.”

And so Durbar Square, similar to Jyatha,²² has gradually become a terrain through which “notions of Nepali’s literal and figurative place vis-à-vis China get[s] enacted, narrated, reshaped, and contested” (Linder, 2019, p. 165). Within this tense social climate, emblematic Chinese-funded interventions like BRI mandated projects are perceived as a challenge to local people’s capacity for self-governance and self-determination, and a potential threat to their culture, identities and livelihoods:

“First it was water [hydropower projects], then roads and the BRI Railway, now our land, our culture, and our capital city. Where does this end?” (Urban activist)

Local opposition should not be seen as a simple case of “betrayal” about the handover of a historical site to a foreign state. It reflects longstanding concerns about the direction of urban development in Nepal, the palpitations related to fast-tracking urbanization, and the BRI role’s in driving the latter. As a local resident put it:

“What happens here [in Durbar Square] is a reflection of what happens across the country. We still lack basic, life-supporting urban infrastructures but they are building –or promising to build nobody really knows– four smart cities across the valley and new industrial parks on Indigenous land. They destroy historical settlements –as in Khokana– and threaten livelihoods and the only thing they talk about is the BRI, foreign investors and urban growth.”

Therefore, outside the government, the BRI is widely seen as another mutation by which the state is reorganising the accumulation of political and economic power among the elites, “rearticulating their interests according to where they fit within one of the imagined belts and roads” (Klinger, 2020, p. 2). As a local vendor noted: विकासको नाममा जेपनी गर्दै भो [“Anything can be done in the name of bikas”], which leads us to the exploration of current projects to boost urban development in Nepal.

Fast-tracking urban development in Nepal: “Smart” cities, special economic zones and contested roads.

Under the shadow of construction and ruin, we also spoke with local residents about how the reconstruction of Durbar Square relates to and reflects wider, ongoing urban transformations in their country. Our conversations focused on the frenzy of construction both in the capital and across places in a direction that in most cases does not reflect people’s needs. As urban activists explained to us, Nepal’s long history of fragmented urban development has been hindered by the lack of road access (see also ADB, 2010). It therefore did not come as a surprise when all government tiers -local, state and federal-prioritized road construction after the first elections under the 2015 Constitution. What is of particular importance, however, are the changes that occurred after the signing of the BRI MoU.

Firstly, as state officials explained to us, there has been an increasing

²⁰ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/redefining-nepal-internal-migration-post-conflict-post-disaster-society>.

²¹ <http://np.china-embassy.org/eng/EconomyTrade/chinaaid/t1770299.htm>.

²² We refer here to Linder’s (2019, 165) analysis of the ongoing development of Jyatha into a Chinatown enclave through the stark increase of Chinese influence on its material, demographic, and social landscape.

involvement of Chinese contractors in Nepal's infrastructure and urban development projects. This has manifested both in the emergence of new projects and in the fact that already agreed projects changed hands. Secondly, the construction of new roads or the upgrade of existing ones has been linked to the creation of new industrial parks, SEZs, and smart cities as part of an orchestrated effort to fast-track urbanization. This has led to a situation where a number of new projects are springing up promising prosperous urban futures, but are then indefinitely delayed.

At the same time, other projects are rapidly proceeding with no local consultation, fair compensation, and rehabilitation plans, and without adequate social and environmental impact assessments profoundly affecting livelihoods, sociocultures and places. An indicative case is the Rasuwagadhi-Kathmandu Road Upgrade, one of 9 BRI projects that have been officially agreed between Nepal and China. The project is funded by the Chinese government and implemented by Tibet Tianlu Company Limited, and its MoU was signed in 2019²³ between Nepal's Ministry of Finance and CIDCA. Both sides have flagged the upgrade as a key development to promote trade along the Rasuwagadhi-Kerung border, through which 20% of Nepal's trade with China occurs. Thus, the project has been advertised as a critical infrastructure that would bring national prosperity. Nonetheless, its implementation has been characterised by major delays, attributed by the Chinese contractor to the project's complexity. It has also created major controversies due to the Chinese side's insistence that the Nepal government clear all settlements and housing infrastructure, including electricity poles, drinking water pipes, and houses before starting the construction.

The key role of the BRI in boosting Chinese investments in Nepal, and the striking contradiction between promises and actual on-the-ground impacts is also evident in the case of the Butwal-Narayanghat Road Improvement Project, which interviewees included in the long list of controversial projects. The project is financed by the Asian Development Bank and forms part of the East-West Highway. It has been promoted by Nepal's government as key for connecting urban centres and boosting urban growth through the establishment of ten new "model cities" along its path. After the cancellation of the first selection process²⁴ and following the signing of the BRI MoU, China State Construction Engineering Corporation Ltd. (CSCEC) with the support of GCE Group, a company based in Nepal,²⁵ won the contract in December 2018.²⁶ The road is expected to impact 36 households including Indigenous people, and threatens to displace local people who will lose their land.²⁷ In January 2021, with only 2% of the work completed, the project's construction halted due to protests by labourers who went on strike demanding a minimum wage from the Chinese contractor. In March 2021, the conflict around workers' rights violations escalated, leading to a clash between the contractors and the labourers.²⁸

Mass and forced evictions of Kathmandu's Indigenous Newar ethnic community have also been caused by the Kathmandu Valley Road Expansion Project, supported by both China and the Asian Development Bank, which has led to the demolition of more than 15,000 houses,

disproportionally affecting women, children and older people.²⁹ Despite the Supreme Court's decision in favour of affected communities³⁰, city authorities continued the expansion works. This led to a major protest in February 2021.³¹ As protestors told us:

"There are two realities in Nepal: the one is that of people who are negatively affected by road projects because they are losing their land, their houses, their livelihoods and their cultural heritage. The other is that of the government and their Chinese partners that has been systematically downsizing these impacts and even celebrate these projects for bringing 'happiness' to Nepali people".

Importantly, as already noted above, in the post-2015 era and after the signing of the BRI MoU, the sharp rise in road projects has been accompanied by a governmental support for smart cities, SEZs and industrial parks and their portrayal as catalysts for urban growth. Even though most of these plans were not new, it was the signing of the BRI MoU that created hopes that the combination of urban infrastructures with industrial projects and investments in the built environment was feasible and had the potential to open a pathway towards national prosperity. It is indicative that the first SEZ (called at that time an "Export Processing Zone") had been established in Nepal in 2000 and for 16 years it has not been in full operation.³² The parliament approved a dedicated SEZ Act in 2016 for the first time to provide a number of strong incentives for investors, including exemptions on customs duties, simpler registration processes, and the prohibition of labor strikes. As people involved in the process explained to us, this happened just before the signing of the BRI MoU and its primary target was to attract Chinese investments by promising a smooth construction process. This became evident in 2018 when the first MoU to build a SEZ in Rasuwagadhi near the Nepal-China border was signed between China and Nepal. In 2019, following an increasing interest from China to invest in Nepal's SEZs, an amendment to the Act³⁴ was introduced offering even more favorable conditions to investors. As interviewees involved in these processes explained to us:

"In 2019, a MoU was signed for the China-Nepal Friendship Industrial Park, that is located 8km south of Damak city by a joint Chinese-Nepali venture company and Nepal's Investment Board (IBN). The Board's guide is now also available in Chinese which shows quite well who they consider their primary target group".

The IBN is a government body focused on promoting large-scale investment that not only facilitated the agreement but also stated (through its CEO) that the Park, "by utilizing at its maximum the economic opportunities offered by the BRI", would be a "milestone" for industrial infrastructure development and urban growth in Nepal. In December 2021, local communities organised a public protest against the Park,³⁵ citing the inadequate compensation for land acquisition and limited transparency on the decision-making process. As a local activist told us:

"Nepal has a long history of controversial and unfair acquisition of lands. The current construction frenzy wakes hard memories and historical

²³ <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/chinese-team-starts-upgradation-work/>; <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/10/14/nepal-china-sign-mou-to-develop-50-km-road-linking-kathmandu-and-rasuwa-gadhi-a-town-bordering-china>.

²⁴ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2018/03/08/butwal-narayanghat-road-improvement-plan-held-up>.

²⁵ <http://gce.com.np/project/sasec-roads-improvement-project-narayanghat-butwal-highway-road-improvement-project/>.

²⁶ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/23/c_137918192.htm.

²⁷ <http://gce.com.np/project/sasec-roads-improvement-project-narayanghat-butwal-highway-road-improvement-project/>.

²⁸ <https://english.khabarhub.com/2021/24/172744/>.

²⁹ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=23122>.

³⁰ <https://kathmandupost.com/valley/2018/06/30/sc-puts-brake-on-road-expansion>.

³¹ <https://kathmandupost.com/visual-stories/2021/02/28/civil-society-road-expansion-victims-protest-in-front-of-kathmandu-metropolitan-city-office>.

³² http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2019-01/29/c_137784512.htm

³³ <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/bhairahawa-sez-not-in-full-operation-even-after-20-years-of-launch>.

³⁴ <https://nepaleconomicforum.org/neftake/special-economic-zone-first-amendment-act-2075-a-review-neftake-nepaleconomicforum/>.

³⁵ <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/locals-protest-china-sponsored-project-in-damak>.

injustices to people gradually destroying initial hopes that the BRI would offer a way out of rural poverty. What we often feel is that they see our demands as obstacles to their profits and instead of taking them into consideration they simply choose to act as there were never real people living in these places”.

The construction of roads and SEZs has been followed by investments in “strategic” market and border towns, and an emphasis on “smart city” concepts (MoUD, 2017). Under the slogan of initiating an urban transition that would end rural poverty by securing modern and prosperous urban lives for Nepal’s subsistence society, and in line with the governmental decision to reclassify rural areas into urban, current plans include the creation of at least one smart metropolitan city in each of Nepal’s seven provinces, new cities along key highways combined with hi-tech businesses and industry hubs, and four smart cities in Kathmandu Valley. According to the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVDA), the goal is to equip smart cities with modern technology and urban services.³⁶ In 2020, maps and images of the future smart cities in Kathmandu Valley were released. Nonetheless, the government budget remains too low, and controversy around land acquisition continues to escalate, rendering unclear which of these plans actually reflect real agreements and which are speculative on the BRI, which in turn is becoming cemented into Nepal’s new infrastructural myth. As an urban activist told us:

“Isn’t it absurd to talk about ‘smart cities’ when existing cities are still lacking basic urban infrastructures? When smart cities became a priority for Nepal? It’s like they are using the opportunity of the earthquake disaster to rebuild a different country [...] This is not unrelated to the BRI – our government speculates to attract investors dazed by the country’s inclusion in the Chinese megaproject. Chinese investment is everywhere nowadays, I suspect in few years Chinese-funded projects would be countless”.

In closing this section, it is important to briefly refer to the Expressway, as it is a project that was mentioned by several interviewees as an indicative example of not only increased Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects since the signing of the BRI MoU, but also of the controversies attached to the latter. The Kathmandu-Terai/Madhesh Fast Track Road (Expressway) is a mega-highway project that aims to connect urban areas in the central region with evolving urban centres in the inner-Terai region. It forms part of a broader development of North-South road corridors designed to reduce travel distance from Kathmandu to the South of Nepal, and between key trading points with India (Raxual) and China (Kerung). The first expression of interest occurred in 1996, but it was not until 2015 that its construction was given to the Indian company Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Service (IL&FS). The blockade by India led Nepal’s Supreme Court to halt the deal, and in 2017 the new Government gave the responsibility for construction management to the Nepali Army.³⁷ In 2020, the Nepali Army awarded the contract to the Chinese contractor Poly Chhangda Engineering Company and China State Construction Engineering Corporation Limited. As representatives of civil organizations that are active in the area told us:

“Nobody was surprised when the construction passed into Chinese interests. Even though the Expressway is not yet part of the BRI, at least officially, its role for facilitating international trade and improving the accessibility of rural areas that have been now reclassified as urban is pivotal [...] Everybody talks about how promising the combination of the Expressway with the BRI Railway will be”.

Despite its framing by Nepal’s government as an “infrastructure of

national pride”³⁸ and a “national liberation project”, the Expressway has been faced with major opposition. As activists explained to us, the same year that the project passed to Chinese contractors, the Save Nepa Valley movement and Nepal Sanskritik Punarjagaran Abhiyan asked UNESCO, ILO and UN offices to intervene. They cited the threats of displacement of Indigenous Newar communities, violations of their land and resource rights, ignorance for their cultural heritage and ethnic identity, and adverse impacts in the historical settlements of Khokana and Bungamati. The two movements also referred to the cumulative impacts of fast-tracking urbanization by arguing that several interrelated infrastructure projects demanded land acquisition. These, inter alia, included the Bagmati corridor, a Chinese-funded 132 KV transmission line³⁹ and a new smart city. As activists that have been involved in the protests told us:

“The road passes through cultivated agriculture land and requires the demolition of houses and the clearance of forest land. Opposition escalated in July 2020 when a major clash occurred between the police and local people at Khokana in the place where land has been acquired for the Expressway’s starting point”⁴⁰. [...] People wanted to show that they are not invisible, they have been here, they are still here and they are excluded from what is being planned on their land”.

The Nepal Army’s decision to award the contract to Chinese contractors was short-lived. Following major controversies at the national level⁴¹ and local conflicts, in March 2021, Nepal’s parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC) started an investigation regarding the bidding process over concerns for a favorable treatment of Chinese companies.⁴² In April 2021, the PAC terminated the contract arguing that it violated Nepal’s public procurement law.⁴³ The future of the Expressway is currently uncertain and even though the project is still considered key in discourses surrounding the BRI in Nepal, it shows the pivotal role of social contestation and conflicts in the production of any infrastructural and urban fix.

5. The China-Nepal cross-border railway: trans-himalayan connectivity, BRI infrastructural myths and post-disaster politics

In the last part of our analysis, we are moving to Rasuwagadhi to discuss the China-Nepal Cross-Border Railway. Currently the flagship BRI project in Nepal, the Railway offers the allure of linking Nepal’s urban nodes and smart cities into BRI’s global infrastructural networks. The Railway is proposed to start from Shigatse Railway Station in Tibet and arrive at Kathmandu through the Himalayas, directly cutting through Langtang National Park. The rail line from Shigatse to Gyirong in Tibet reopened in 2014 and upgraded to an international port in 2017. Gyirong is considered a major gateway⁴⁴ for the BRI in terms of promoting trade and economic connectivity, and crucial for transferring Chinese products in Nepal and across South Asia.⁴⁵ In what follows, we discuss the contradictory discourses that surround its construction showing the stark contrast between state and governmental aspirations and people’s thoughts and experiences.

³⁸ <https://www.nepalarmy.mil.np/fasttrack/home>.

³⁹ <https://cemsoj.wordpress.com/2020/04/01/unesco-ilo-and-un-nepal-office-called-to-take-actions-against-displacement-of-newars-in-khokana-and-bungamati-due-to-fast-track-highway-and-other-projects/>; <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/energy/transmission-lines-in-nepal/>; <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/nepal-and-the-china-eu-lending-race/>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.eadarsha.com/eng/clash-between-police-and-local-people-takes-place-at-khokana/>.

⁴¹ <https://english.khabarhub.com/2021/01/153233/>.

⁴² <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/pac-to-probe-phase-2-contract-awarding-procedures-of-ktm-tarai-fast-track-project/>.

⁴³ <https://www.seetao.com/details/76665.html>.

⁴⁴ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1143629.shtml>.

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFTJeVW7g40>.

³⁶ <https://www.nepalisansar.com/tourism/nepal-urbanization-kathmandu-valley-to-have-four-smart-cities/>.

³⁷ <https://www.nepalarmy.mil.np/fasttrack/home>.

The Railway is a challenging project that to transition from paper to the physical plane would require an ingenuity of civil engineering not seen before within Nepal's administrative boundaries. As interviewees told us, the results of the pre-feasibility study were never made publicly available. Nonetheless, as sources from the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation confirmed, most concerns were confined to the risks related to the region's unique topography given that 98% of the Railway would have to be connected by tunnels and bridges (Bhushal, 2019). Technical challenges along with significant delays led several interviewees to question the Railway's feasibility and China's actual commitment to it. Within a context of rising concerns, in May 2020, an article was published in the Silk Road Briefing⁴⁶ stating that the China-Nepal route over the Himalayas is now "open for business" referring to the route launching by China Railway Xian Group and China Railway Container Transport. Similarly, "the trans-Himalayan railway line is not built yet, but first weekly Nepal-bound freight train arrives in Xigatse" was the subtitle of another article referring to a cargo train carrying COVID-19 medical supplies and construction material from Xi'a to Xigatse.⁴⁷ These were transferred to Rasuwaghadhi via trucks with the journey and cross-border trade seen as the TTA's activation and the commencement of the future –not yet built– Railway. In August 2020, amid increasing speculations, Chinese constructors shared photos in social media from initial surveys.⁴⁸ During the same period, Nepal's government reiterated that the Railway was a critical project that would grant the country land access to China's eastern seaports and revitalize urban centres along its way, most notably Kathmandu. As a Civil Servant from the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport told us:

"Our land-locked geography has hindered our development. The BRI Railway presents a historical opportunity to expand global trade and link our cities with the world by cooperating with our close neighbour".

This certainty cannot be explained without considering China's contribution to Nepal's recovery from the earthquakes. Delays in India's relief assistance made China the first donor in terms of actual disbursements.⁴⁹ Even though China directed a significant part of its aid to projects that were beneficial for its own interests, Chinese investors pledged to invest \$8.3 billion in infrastructure, the largest amount by foreigners in Nepal's development history. It was under the shadow of this diplomatic bonhomie and bitter experiences from the Indian blockade, that the Railway became a generous display of neighbourly friendship and goodwill. As civil servants working in the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport put it:

"We suffered during the maha bhukampa [Great Earthquake], but Chinese aid was swift. They not only provided emergency support but they are also helping us reconstruct Durbar Square and other historical sites across Kathmandu."

And:

"The railway will be proof of the impenetrable relationship between our two countries. It will strengthen our cultural ties and work for Nepal's prosperity."

Following a similar line of argumentation, President Xi during his visit to Kathmandu stated that, by developing a Trans-Himalayan Network linked to BRI's corridors, China would help Nepal to "realise its

dream" [sic] to transform from a landlocked to a land-linked country⁵⁰.

Nonetheless, stories from the ground put under scrutiny grandiose expectations. What is described by its supporters as the "world's highest railroad" and a "miracle"⁵¹ is simultaneously criticized as a "dream" or "futuristic" project⁵² by local residents in Rasuwagadhi, the proposed cross-border entry point of the Railway on the Nepal-China border, who find it hard to believe that the grandiose project will materialize in their lifetimes. As a local shop owner told us:

"We are still waiting to receive reliable information about the Railway. Nobody is sure where it will stop, when it will be ready, what impacts it will have and whether any compensation will be given. We are wondering if this train is real".

Controversy over the Railway is fueled by delays in its construction and major technical difficulties and has been followed by fears that dependence on foreign loans may have unfavourable economic outcomes for Nepal. In response to such concerns, the Chinese ambassador in Nepal wrote in April 2019 that the BRI is not a debt trap but an "economic pie". The ambassador also attributed delays to the complexity of the Railway's construction⁵³ and reiterated that as "the Nepali government firmly adheres to one-China policy and does not allow any anti-China activities on its soil", China is also dedicated in "supporting Nepal's efforts to safeguard national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity".⁵⁴ Similarly to Durbar Square, a significant reason for concerns among the people we talked to comes from the fact that the Nepalese government have conceded almost the entire logistical and construction operations to the Chinese side taking little consideration of both the communities and the environment on its front (Bhushal, 2019). Important controversy also exists about the Railway's environmental impacts and potential threats to the snow leopard population in Langtang National Park. Already a prey to increasing retaliatory killings,⁵⁵ the ancillary construction of roads and workers camps would open up a Pandora's Box of illegal activities for the endangered species. As environmentalists explained to us, there is also palpable tension among local people that Shivapuri National Park, which lies to the south of the proposed Railway terminal, would fall victim to political corruption, with resource extraction justified on the pretext of *bikas*. And even though there is some optimism that nature will be saved due to the improbability of the rhetoric of progress actually mutating into a physical transport corridor, "I doubt that this railway will be completed even in half a century" as a local activist told us, the lack of transparency is constantly fueling local people's and civil society actors' worries.

Nonetheless, the Railway by acting as a symbol of a fast-approaching trans-Himalayan connectivity has already started to have tangible effects. After the declaration of Rasuwagadhi as the main international border with China in 2017, there has been speculation in real-estate and land prices along the Kathmandu-Rasuwagadhi highway and an expansion of black markets (Murton et al., 2016). Hotel owners and vendors are expecting that the Railway will boost the housing market, tourism and commercial development. Rising land prices have been also reported in Timure, the closest town to Rasuwagadhi, where in May 2019, Nepal's Intermodal Transport Development Board signed an agreement with the Chinese company Tibet Fuli Construction Group Co.

⁵⁰ <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/promises-trans-himalayan-link-china-grows-influence-nepal>.

⁵¹ <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/china-trains/nepal/>.

⁵² <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/nature/nepal-china-railway/>; <https://thewire.in/south-asia/nepal-china-railway>.

⁵³ <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/05/24/chinese-envoy-says-cross-border-railway-is-not-an-overnight-project>.

⁵⁴ <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/new-era-new-opportunities/>.

⁵⁵ <https://kathmandupost.com/climate-environment/2020/10/22/retaliatory-killing-major-challenge-for-snow-leopard-conservation>.

⁴⁶ <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/05/27/xian-kathmandu-combined-road-rail-cargo-service-launched/>.

⁴⁷ <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/new-china-nepal-rail-corridor/>.

⁴⁸ <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/bri-and-trans-himalayan-connectivity/>.

⁴⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/china-donates-483-mln-usd-nepal-post-quake-rehabilitation-reconstruction>.

Limited for the construction of a dry port.⁵⁶ The port, located at 2.5 km from the Nepal-China border, is expected to facilitate bilateral trade via land routes and has been opposed by local communities due to the inadequate compensation for the acquisition of their lands.⁵⁷ According to Nepal Monitor,⁵⁸ the Chief District Officer of Rasuwa had argued that addressing local demands was impossible since it would risk the abandonment of the project by the Chinese contractors.

Even though the quest for bikas, unequivocally promoted by Kathmandu's political elite, wishes to subsume subaltern voices and opposing views, slow progress on the constructions offers a stark contrast between reality and rhetoric.⁵⁹ As we observed during our fieldwork, Rasuwagadhi and surrounding towns are becoming places where expectations for a long due urban growth and access to basic urban infrastructures increasingly coexist with unfulfilled promises. Within this mélange of state and foreign actors, civil society organizations, and public controversy about the perennial rhetoric of bikas, the Railway has taken the role of another infrastructural myth, one among a cascade of roads to bikas that has filled Nepal's cultural imagination over the past thirty years. As a local resident put it:

"Why don't they prove themselves by building the roads they promised 15 years ago and stop speaking about dream projects?"

6. Conclusion: cities of ruins and contested urban futures

"Here, in the new town, boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealized possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away. It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar. This is the realm of freedom. It is an empty realm."

Lefebvre (1995).

Among the frenzy of actual and promised infrastructure projects in Nepal, one can clearly identify some of the key characteristics of Silk Road urbanization, most notably the synchronized assemblage of specific urban spatial components consisting of a combination of major transport infrastructure projects with SEZs, smart cities, hydropower projects, and industrial parks (Apostolopoulou, 2021a, 2021b; 2021c; Apostolopoulou et al, 2022). This involves the extended acquisition of land as a means to enable and leverage urban development, a key determinant of fast-tracking urbanization within China (Hsing, 2010) that has been "exported" in several countries along the New Silk Road. Nonetheless, one will also see that Silk Road Urbanization is nothing but straightforward. The materialization of the majority of BRI projects, despite official statements from the governments of Nepal and China, and expectations for a fast-approaching urban growth that will end rural poverty, depends on and is affected by geopolitical rivalries, particularly between Nepal, China and India⁶⁰, endless negotiations, unstable local coalitions (Mayer & Zhang, 2020), and escalating social contestation. This underlines the need to conceptualize Silk Road urbanization as a relational and contested process that is subject to the spatial

embeddedness of each project and the complexity of the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions that dominate in each city/country (Han & Webber, 2020; Joniak-Lüthi, 2020), as recent calls for grounded analyses of the BRI emphasize.⁶¹

In the case of Nepal, the BRI has already served as a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and cultural metaphor (Sidaway & Woon, 2017) to frame controversial urban infrastructural interventions as projects of "national pride" and "liberation" that promise to revitalize and redefine long-due governmental plans. The fact that some projects have not yet materialized, or have been marked by persisting controversies over their scope and impacts, has not affected the governmental rhetoric, at least not significantly. This is not surprising though. Flagship projects, like the Railway, have become new vehicles towards Naya [new] Nepal, along with many other infrastructural myths that preceded and defined the country's modern history (Manchanda, 2008).

Myth-making has been a central apparatus of the Nepali state's arsenal against political discord and discontent. Children in school have been constantly told to be proud of Nepal's bountiful water resources and its hydropower potential. Projects long before the BRI, such as Melamchi Water Supply project (Rest, 2019), have been delayed by a year, every year, with the population's thirst appeased by the prospect of imagining the endless supply of drinking water that is sure to reach each home once it is completed ... next year. In the latest update to the Melamchi myth, Kathmandu's residents were finally treated to three weeks of water supply from the project, only to be told that it would be indefinitely cut off due to "problems" that have yet to be concretely defined. Beyond Melamchi, one of us remembers the constant refrain from politicians and educators that Nepal would one day surpass the material wealth of Switzerland; that Nepal would reclaim the region of Kalapani, which the government claims was illegally annexed by India; and that the country's rivers will be fully exploited to relinquish the dependency on energy imports and finally turn the country into a model of self-sufficiency, not unlike the small battalion of Nepali soldiers whose bravery managed to hold off the British East India Company and convinced them to stay on the other side of the border.

These deeply embedded national myths are now perceiving new meaning in the context of an emerging BRI myth that exceeds the national borders and imagination of Nepal and promises a fast-approaching urban transformation that will profoundly change the future of the country. And even though the latter is being systematically used to curve potential discomfort and discontent for the frenzy of constructions across the country, the effects of these newly blended infrastructural myths are not only ideological but they also have significant material impacts on places, sociomaterialities and livelihoods. Most notably, they increasingly show a different, but not less detrimental, aspect of infrastructural violence (Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012). What we mean by that is that in the case of BRI projects that actually materialize, the belated arrival of long-desired urban infrastructures does not succeed in addressing the chronic lack of access to essential infrastructures, like water supply, that has characterised everyday life in Nepal. The material and affective precarity (Datta & Ahmed, 2020) and deprivation that exclusion without infrastructure has created for decades on Nepali people, and that has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, is being exacerbated by the arrival of controversial infrastructural projects that instead of actually providing prosperous urban lives and being enriching, as the hegemonic rhetoric claims, remain exclusionary and have detrimental effects for the majority of local people. Indeed, in the post-disaster era and following the signing of the BRI MoU, the capital-intensive BRI-driven urban transformation of Nepal has intensified the structural exclusion from avenues of social-economic

⁵⁶ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2019/05/13/chinese-firm-signs-contract-to-build-dry-port-in-timure>; <https://www.recordnepal.com/wire/nepal-new-trade-route-with-china-via-rasuwigadhi/>.

⁵⁷ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2016/04/30/timure-locals-protest-over-land-acquisition>.

⁵⁸ <https://nepalmonitor.org/reports/view/9985>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.recordnepal.com/wire/nepal-new-trade-route-with-china-via-rasuwigadhi/>.

⁶⁰ It is indicative that Prime Minister Oli stated that even though joining the BRI was in Nepal's national interest, the government does not want to undermine its relationship with India (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/nepal-will-carefully-weigh-use-of-funds-from-china-nepal-envoy/articleshow/58830864.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

⁶¹ See two special issues published in 2020 in Political Geography (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/political-geography/special-issue/10H61ZGZNZD>) and Environment and Planning C (<https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/epc/38/5>).

advancement on grounds of caste, ethnicity, gender and region that characterized the action of donors and NGOs before the earthquake (Hutt et al., 2021). The latter along with the lack of proper consultation and participation, the extensive acquisition of land, the displacement of the most vulnerable social groups, and the violation of workers' rights in the locales where BRI projects are materialized (see also Beazley & Lassoie, 2017; Murton & Lord, 2020), have led to the emergence of major conflicts and have fueled community resistance across the country. This not only confirms that urban infrastructures increasingly constitute a site of intense contestation, conflict and violence (Bouzarovski et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2021). It also shows that spatial visions, territorial plans and infrastructural myths, like those that guide the New Silk Road and national politics in Nepal, when they have as their primary goal to render territories accessible within global production and trade networks will most probably prioritize the creation of infrastructural hubs and free industrial zones that do not serve the needs of communities and Indigenous peoples (Enns & Bersaglio, 2020; Lesutis, 2020) but create and intensify uneven vulnerabilities.

Importantly, BRI's unfolding in Nepal denotes much more than the emergence of another controversial infrastructural myth in the endless quest for *bikas*. As Katz (2015, 299) explains, "the sedimentations of place are not just what's in place, but also our fleeting encounters with what's there and what's missing, what was, what wasn't, what we imagined, what we dreamed, what we once found and what we have lost, what we hoped to find, what we excavated and what we buried. Geography, like history, is not fixed but drawn forth and made and remade every day". For one of us, going back to Kathmandu for fieldwork brought in mind Katz's evocation that "it was our taken for granted world" (ibid, 304). The invocation of Nepal as a state impervious to foreign imposition was a common refrain in our school curriculums, and a source of national pride and Nepalese exceptionalism, particularly in comparison to the violent colonial history of India under British rule. Despite the author's critical gaze towards state propaganda, this idea of a distinct Nepali essence seems to have subconsciously mutated into a powerful way to observe the continuity of daily life in the country.

This static state was exorcised by the clash of unfamiliar languages and flags, the retreat of old buildings, the acquisition of Indigenous land, and the excavation of buried ground to construct new monuments, roads, and cities that shattered the fortress of the collectively imagined world for someone born and raised in Nepal. In infusing (and confusing) "thoughts and speculations with quotations, fragmentary thoughts, images, the drift of other temporalities, and the restless clashing spatialities of dreams, fantasy and encounter" (ibid, 301), it became possible to re-emerge out of the caverns of disbelief and recognize how a new socio-spatial and political vision is formed, fighting to become hegemonic by those who have the power, and reacted upon by those who are unfolding their memories and merging stories into a collective narrative not only of the present and the future but also of the past. Talking with shopkeepers, activists, laborers, and civil servants allowed us to recode the social construction of spaces, places and *socionatures*, the material and discursive social and cultural practices through which a new "urban" is constructed in "Naya" Nepal. It unraveled the complex ways geopolitical/geoeconomic interests struggle to render hegemonic a singular, urban development vision foreclosing alternative visions of sustainability, rejuvenation and prosperity (Karrar & Mostowlansky, 2020; Szadziwski, 2020). Post-disaster reform programmes to "Build Back Better" (Regmi, 2016) and reconstruction projects made external geo-economic forces decisive in restructuring Nepal's political economy (Chand, 2017; Paudel & Le Billon, 2020) and marked a new era characterised by the advanced role of China.

Taken together, the infrastructural myths and the actual commitments of the post-2015 era, along with the BRI's material manifestation within an organized transnational political plan, are clear indications that China's interventions in Nepal are radically different from the piecemeal development projects that it previously transplanted across the country. Whereas previous physical infrastructure projects were

largely a sign of diplomatic *bonhomie* and development aid, the state-mandated, overarching global geo-political vision embodied in the BRI indicates that Nepal has been gradually consolidated into the network of China's physical and ideological nodes. This is clear in the joint statements between the two governments and the efforts to institutionalise BRI's role in the realisation of Nepal's development agenda. This included the objective to graduate from a LDC (Least Developed Country) to a middle-income country by 2030 along the lines of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (MoFA, 2019).

The transplantation of new or speculative infrastructures is not, therefore, simply a matter of a spatial takeover of the present and the future and this is perhaps where the notion of BRI infrastructural myths takes its more specific denotation in Nepal. In a disaster's aftermath, pressing questions arise about "which futures to claim" and "which pasts to rebuild", and the outcome is "hardly ever a return to the past" since the future will be crafted "within the constraints and possibilities that unfold in the disaster's wake" (Hutt et al., 2021, p. 4). In Nepal, in the era following the earthquakes, BRI infrastructure projects have been intertwined with governmental visions leading to efforts to fast-track urban development and to re-script the past by treating places of (re) building as empty of previous life and history. This became particularly evident in the case of Durbar Square and historical settlements like Khokana, but also in the Chinese contractors' demands to "clear" all signs of human presence before starting new construction. Erasing the past of Nepal is directly related to hegemonic aspirations for its future: it denotes an attempt to legitimize a particular urban vision of multi-lateral urban development for the benefit of the poor. But given that this vision is not part of people's collective cultural memory, it leaves them struggling to make sense of the diverse interests and agendas of "those who had come from elsewhere to use the moment of shock to profit and to change the order of things" (Simpson, 2014, p. 1; see also; Campbell, 2018).

In his study near the Nepal-China Border, Campbell (2010, 276) eloquently demonstrates that "it is an old rhetoric of modernization that thinks a rural and ethnically marginal population can be brought into modern economic ways and opportunities through simply providing infrastructural connection[s]". In Nepal, the justifications for Chinese-funded projects and the discourses surrounding BRI infrastructural realities and myths even though do not deviate substantially from this line of reasoning, they also indicate a quite distinct role for promising BRI urban futures. The myth of *Naya urban* Nepal shows this well: it envisions the full realisation of long-standing national myths along with emerging BRI myths of transnational connectivity, unlimited urban growth and foreign capital investment that will follow from the unconditional inclusion to a globalised economy, all ideas that are strongly attached to the rhetoric of the New Silk Road. *Naya Nepal* promises, therefore, a prosperous future which will emerge out of the ashes of the old, least-developed, landlocked, rural Nepal. Crucially, despite the powerful effect of orchestrated efforts to colour these infrastructural myths under the pledge to "modernise" a "poor" country and a rural society, both the Nepali and Chinese states have not managed to fully dispel criticisms about the violent, material consequences of their actions. Indeed, framing the social, cultural and environmental destruction as an inevitable price for progress rather than as something that could be resisted, avoided or be done differently has been actively challenged by a significant part of Nepali people. The new urban Nepal that is emerging from the ruins of the past is thus contested and uncertain, a far cry from the days of the Panchayat regime and the civil war, when such gargantuan projects were rarely challenged by Nepali people.

As Oakes (2020) writes, destructed urban landscapes become places of contestation over history and memory with people living in a "sense of suspension" between what was there before and what is expected to come. *Naya urban Nepal* is struggling to emerge within a country where the lines between places designated as urban and those designated as rural are blurred, with the former never providing essential, life

supporting urban infrastructures and the latter never been massively depopulated. This is a key element of the unique trajectory of Silk Road urbanization in Nepal: an ultimate path to reach a long due rural-to-urban transition that is inextricably linked with decades of infrastructural violence and precarity and that is strongly shaped by people's struggles against the unequal geographies of BRI-driven urban transformation. The distinctiveness of Silk Road urbanization in Nepal reiterates the significance of conducting research that does not unequivocally reproduce western notions of urbanization and does not imagine urban futures shaped only by Northern dominance and imagination. Research on the various places where BRI projects materialize offers such a unique opportunity to provincialize urban knowledge and develop postcolonial urban theory (Lawhon et al., 2016) that would be attentive to the transforming global geographies of the urban in which China's geopolitical and geoeconomics power becomes critical. Proposing the New Silk Road as a generative site of theory building requires scholarly attention to diverse place-based histories, relational multiplicities and the situatedness of theory building and has the potential to show that any theorisation of the urban is empirically determined and historically located in conditions of ongoing emergence and thus uncertain and contestable (Robinson, 2021; Robinson & Roy, 2016). This shifts research focus on the complexities and the uneven and uncertain spatialities of the urban allowing novel concepts and typologies of urbanization to emerge that may disrupt established notions of the urban and even render existing theories obsolete to ensure 21st century relevance.

Declaration of competing interest

No conflict of interest.

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