

Trapped in No Man's Land: Chinese Migrant Workers Along the Belt and Road Initiative

Lungani Hlongwa

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Chiao Tung University

The Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious project launched by the Chinese government in 2013, aims to promote economic development for both China and participating member states through the construction of infrastructure to facilitate land, sea, and digital trade. Much of this construction is carried out by Chinese companies, who often hire local labor but also rely on a significant portion of the labor force coming from China. As a result, the Initiative has become a major conduit for Chinese migrant workers. This article examines the migration challenges faced by the Initiative, with a focus on the experiences of Chinese migrant workers building projects in Asia and Africa. The author argues that the struggle of Chinese migrant workers along the Belt and Road Initiative is an under-researched issue that will require more scholarly engagements as the Initiative expands. The article draws on media and government reports, publications by activist groups, academic papers, and governmental reports to explore the issues faced by these workers and suggests ways to improve their experiences.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Asia, Africa, migration, labor, infrastructure



Header image “[Construction](#)” by [Mussi Katz](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#).

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as the One Belt One Road, is a regional and transcontinental project launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping. The Initiative aims to promote trade and economic growth for China and participating countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Europe (Zeng, 2019). The BRI includes land, sea, and digital dimensions, known respectively as the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), and the Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSRI). Additionally, there is an Arctic route, referred to as the Polar Silk Road, which connects China to Europe via the Eurasian landmass. As of 2021, the BRI directly involves over sixty percent of the global population and approximately thirty percent of global GDP. Chinese leaders view the BRI as a project of the century that will greatly benefit humankind (Xi, 2017).

A significant aspect of the BRI includes the construction of land, sea, and digital infrastructure in China and around the world. This infrastructure includes roads, railways, ports, bridges, dams, and fiber optic cables, among others. Chinese companies and financial organizations are the most active investors and builders of the BRI. While Chinese companies hire local labor in the areas where they operate, a significant portion of the BRI labor force comes from China. Some observers of the BRI

have criticized this, arguing that the Initiative is not achieving its full potential in terms of job creation and skills transfer (Russel & Berger, 2019).

According to some estimates, the number of Chinese migrant workers building BRI projects is in the millions (China Labor Watch, 2022). Some of these workers have reported harsh working conditions and violations of their human rights (Halegua & Cohen, 2019). "These people [Chinese migrant workers]," according to China Labor Watch (2022), "hired via convoluted chains of subcontracting, isolated in their host societies with or without a legal status, and unfamiliar with local legal resources, experience exploitative and dangerous working conditions" (p. 2). The experiences of Chinese migrant workers along the BRI is an under-researched issue. This article explores some of these experiences as presented in media and government reports, publications by activist groups, and academic papers. Specifically, the article focuses on the experiences of Chinese migrant workers in Asia and Africa. The article concludes with suggestions on how BRI stakeholders can improve the working conditions of migrant workers.

Workers' Experiences in Asia

Asia is a key destination for Chinese investments and BRI projects. Some argue that many Asian countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia, lack the infrastructure needed for economic growth and industrial development (Freeman & Oba, 2019). While infrastructure can promote economic development when carefully planned, some potential stakeholders are left out of decision-making processes. As a result, local communities, indigenous groups, and workers sometimes become victims rather than beneficiaries of infrastructure projects. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the experiences of Chinese migrant workers in Asian countries, focusing specifically on Indonesia and Cambodia. These are among the countries that have received the most media attention regarding issues related to BRI migrant workers.

Indonesia hosts many BRI infrastructure projects at various stages of construction. One example of such a project is the Delong Industrial Park, a ferronickel and stainless-steel industrial park developed by China's Jiangsu Delong Nickel Co., Ltd. The stated aim of the park is to promote industrial upgrading in Indonesia (Wang, 2022). However, the park has become embroiled in allegations of worker abuse and has been the subject of resistance from local communities (see EJAtlas for more information on the conflict related to the project). Workers at the park alleged that they have been subjected to forced labor, overwork, and restricted movement within the local community (Kuo & Chen, 2021). Other workers say that their passports were taken away upon their arrival in Indonesia, making it impossible for them to return to China legally if the working conditions did not meet their expectations. It must be pointed out that the struggles of Chinese migrant workers are multifaceted and not only against their employers. For example, Chinese migrant workers may also struggle with language and cultural differences with local communities (Trisno, 2023).

In an article published by China Labor Watch, a labor activist group based in New York, five Chinese workers escaped from the Delong Industrial Park in October 2021 (China Labor Watch, 2021). These workers wanted to return to China from Indonesia via Malaysia. However, their journey was cut short as they were detained by Malaysian immigration authorities. The Malaysian government

decided not to press charges against the five workers, opting instead to deport them to China (Lin, Wang & Emont, 2021).



“Real Work” by [Dennis Sylvester Hurd](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#).

The struggles of Chinese migrant workers in Cambodia are also receiving increasing attention. For example, Franceschini (2020) interviewed Chinese migrant workers at various sites hosting BRI projects in the Cambodian city of Sihanoukville. The experiences of Chinese workers in Cambodia were not very different from those working in Indonesia. According to Franceschini, workers in Cambodia also had their passports taken upon their arrival and were forced to live in horrid conditions despite promises of furnished and air-conditioned accommodation. They also did not have access to clean water, toilets, and laundry facilities. Some workers also revealed that they had to pay deposits ranging from 4,000 yuan (US\$571) to 10,000 yuan (US\$1,428) to ensure that they fulfilled their full term of employment. What makes matters worse for some Chinese migrant workers in Cambodia is that they cannot protest against their employers or companies (Calabrese, Borodyna & Nadin, 2022). Most also cannot afford to hire lawyers to press their claims or get the Chinese embassy to intervene on their behalf (Calabrese et al., 2022). More needs to be done by both Cambodian (and other BRI countries at large) and Chinese governments to ensure that labor laws are in place to protect migrant workers. This is especially crucial since many Asian countries, including Cambodia, have sounded the alarm on human traffickers running job scams (BBC, 2022). Without proper labor laws and other regulations in place, Chinese migrant workers could very easily fall prey into these scams under the BRI label.

Workers' Experiences in Africa

According to China's official BRI website, 52 African countries are officially participating in the Initiative. Like Southeast Asia, Africa is considered a key part of the BRI, given its need for infrastructure and China's need for investment opportunities and market expansion (Simelane & Managa, 2018). As part of the BRI, Chinese companies have been constructing and upgrading various forms of infrastructure, including seaports, railways, roads, and telecommunications technology across the continent. Chinese workers also make up a significant portion of the BRI workforce in Africa.

In an article published by Radio Free Asia, Guo (2022) writes about the experiences of some Chinese workers in the North African country of Algeria as part of the BRI. According to Guo, many Chinese workers signed up at job fairs in China to work as carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, and painters, among other jobs. Many of these workers were from relatively poor inland Chinese provinces such as Henan, Sichuan, Gansu, Hebei, and Shaanxi. They were promised round-trip airfare, accommodation, and better wages compared to what they were earning in China. However, upon arrival in Algeria, these workers found themselves living in substandard accommodation. They also faced other issues, such as having their wages withheld, being charged exorbitant recruitment fees, and having their passports taken away by their employers. Some workers interviewed revealed that they wanted to return to China but could not do so because of contractual obligations.

Algeria is not the only African country where Chinese migrant workers have been exploited by their employers. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is another case (China Labor Watch, 2022), and there are likely many others. The precarious nature of BRI labor is indeed an under-studied phenomenon that scholars, activists, policymakers, and other groups should pay more attention to as the BRI continues to expand.

Factors Contributing to the Exploitation of Chinese Migrant Workers

There are various factors contributing to the exploitation of Chinese migrant workers along the BRI. One significant factor is a lack of regulation and oversight on the part of Chinese and BRI governments. The Chinese government does not seem to have a grip on the hiring practices of companies participating in the BRI. Furthermore, in many BRI countries, labor laws and regulations are weak or not effectively enforced (China Labor Watch, 2022), which allows companies to exploit workers with little fear of repercussions. Additionally, the supply chains in BRI projects are often opaque, making it difficult to identify and hold companies accountable for exploitative practices.

Another factor contributing to the exploitation of Chinese migrant workers is the power imbalance between workers and employers. Migrant workers, particularly those from China, may be unfamiliar with the laws and customs of the country in which they are working, making them more vulnerable to exploitation (Franceschini, 2020). The language barrier and lack of support networks can also make it challenging for workers to advocate for their rights or seek help when they face exploitative employers.

Conclusion

The BRI has the potential to bring significant economic benefits to China and participating member states. However, it is important to ensure that the rights and well-being of all workers are protected. There are various steps that can be taken to prevent the exploitation of Chinese migrant workers in BRI countries. Greater oversight and enforcement of labor laws and regulations is needed, both in China and in its BRI partners. Additionally, Chinese companies operating along the BRI should be more transparent about their recruitment processes and held accountable for their treatment of workers. It is also crucial to ensure that indigenous workers are also considered for employment on BRI projects, to prevent the exploitation of Chinese workers and promote equal distribution of opportunities and benefits. There are other steps that can be taken to improve the working conditions of BRI migrant workers, and this issue merits further research.

References

- Aljazeera. (2021). *Alleged abuses linked to China's 'Belt and Road' projects: report*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/china-belt-and-road-dam-a-rights-disaster-for-cambodia-report>
- BBC. (2022). *Cambodia scams: Lured and trapped into slavery in South East Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62792875>
- Calabrese, L., Borodyna, O., & Nadin, R. (2022). *Risks along the Belt and Road: Chinese investment and infrastructure development in Cambodia*. London: Overseas Development Institute. Retrieved from www.odi.org/en/publications/risks-along-the-belt-and-road-chinese-investment-and-infrastructure-development-in-cambodia/
- China Labor Watch. (2021). *Five Chinese workers employed in Indonesia are detained by Malaysia's immigration department*. Retrieved from <https://chinalaborwatch.org/elementor-7031/>
- China Labor Watch. (2022). *Trapped: The Belt and Road Initiative's Chinese Workers*. Retrieved from https://chinalabor.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Trapped_-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiatives-Chinese-Workers-1.pdf
- Franceschini, I. (2020). As far apart as earth and sky: A survey of Chinese and Cambodian construction workers in Sihanoukville. *Critical Asian Studies*, 52(4), 512-529.
- Freeman, C. P., & Oba, M. (2019). *Bridging the Belt and Road Divide. Carnegie Alliance Policy Coordination Brief*.
- Guo, Y. (2022). *Belt and Road becomes ball and chain for Chinese construction workers*. Retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/bri-workers-07162022102818.html>
- Halegua, A., & Cohen, J. A. (2019). *The forgotten victims of China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Retrieved from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/04/23/forgotten-victims-chinas-belt-road-initiative/?noredirect=on>

- Kuo, L. & Chen, A. (2021). *Chinese workers allege forced labor, abuses in Xi's 'Belt and Road' program*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-labor-belt-road-covid/2021/04/30/f110e8de-9cd4-11eb-b2f5-7d2f0182750d_story.html
- Lin, L., Wang, Y. & Emont, J. (2021). *Chinese Workers Say They Are Lured Abroad and Exploited for Belt and Road Jobs*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-workers-say-they-are-lured-abroad-and-exploited-for-belt-and-road-jobs-11635348143>
- Lindberg, J., & Biddulph, R. (2021). China's belt and road initiative: the need for livelihood-inclusive stories. *Geoforum*, 121, 138-141.
- Russel, D. R., & Berger, B. (2019). *Navigating the belt and road initiative*. Policy File. Retrieved from https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/Navigating%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative_0.pdf
- Simelane, T., & Managa, R. (Eds.). (2018). *Belt and road initiative: alternative development path for Africa*. African Books Collective.
- Trisno, M. (2023). *TKA China di Sulut Dibunuh Sadis Pakai Ekskavator, Pelaku Ditangkap*. Retrieved from <https://www.detik.com/sulsel/hukum-dan-kriminal/d-6521419/tka-china-di-sulut-dibunuh-sadis-pakai-ekskavator-pelaku-ditangkap>
- Wang, X. (2022). *BRI Project Promotes Industrial Upgrade in Indonesia*. Retrieved from <http://www.stdaily.com/English/WorldNews/202209/9377fe8746c84bab9f99e6e2758926f8.shtml>
- Xi, J. (2017). *Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm
- Zeng, J. (2019). *Narrating China's belt and road initiative*. *Global Policy*, 10(2), 207-216.