

Positioning Landscape Architecture in a Global Context: Review on *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative*



Taro Zheming CAI*

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at University of Toronto, Toronto,
ON M5S 2J5, Canada

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Address: 165 Admiral Road, Toronto, ON M5R 2L7,
Canada

Email: taro.cai@mail.utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

Ashley Scott Kelly and Xiaoxuan Lu's recent publication *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative* emerges from their Landscape Architecture course on ecological planning at the University of Hong Kong lasted for several years. The book studies the landscape transformation along the China-Laos Railway, one of the earliest Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure projects. Targeted towards the audience of planners and allied professionals working in regional and transnational projects, the authors provide a comprehensive discussion on histories, planning pedagogies, and conceptual frameworks of global developments. Demonstrated through a series of studio proposals, the book can be seen as a provocative and ambitious experiment, in which Kelly and Lu challenge conventional epistemologies and protocols in landscape architecture research and professional practices. The review focuses on the authors' conceptual and methodological frameworks to explore "critical landscape planning" as both pedagogical and practical practices. Additionally, this review invites critical reflections on the positionality of the landscape architecture discipline.

KEYWORDS

Critical Landscape Planning;
Landscape Architecture
Pedagogy;
Positionality;
The Belt and Road Initiative;
Book Review

RECEIVED DATE

2022-12-06

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews apt reflections on landscape architectural practices and alternative pedagogical approaches in a global context
- Demonstrates a provocative and ambitious experiment toward prevailing epistemologies and protocols in the discipline of Landscape Architecture
- Argues that Landscape Architecture is inescapable from the entanglement of geopolitical, capitalist, and environmental issues

EDITED BY
Yuting GAO, Ying WANG

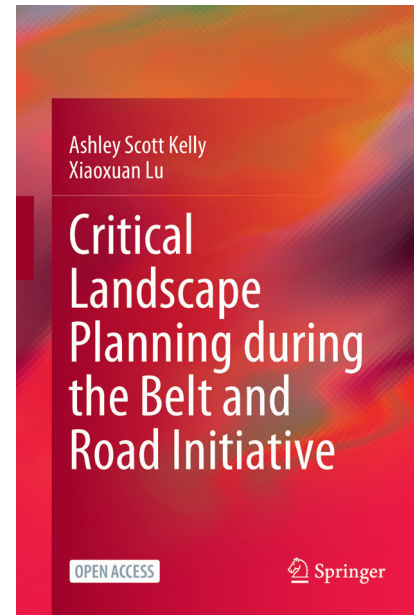
1 Introduction

Landscape planning at the regional scale has been widely discussed in Landscape Architecture education around the world since the 1950s. One may argue that Landscape Architecture as a professional discipline embraces a strong interdisciplinarity. For instance, many large-scale landscape projects require a multidisciplinary team including architects, planners, landscape architects, engineers, ecologists, horticulturists, and specialized contractors. However, the collaborations tend to emphasize the professional scope delineation, legal liability, and insurance, rather than examine or reflect on the disciplinary frameworks of knowledge systems, technologies, and practices.

In traditional Landscape Architecture education, the curriculums remain largely influenced by Ian McHarg, in which the teachings (should) integrate with natural sciences, arts, and planning. As a result, McHarg's analytical methods (e.g., using GIS for the layer-cake analysis), emphasis on landscape ecology, and functionalist approach to designing and managing ecosystems are still the core elements in many landscape planning studios^{[1]~[3]}. Most importantly, McHarg's framing of the professional discipline—considering nature and the public, instead of real estate developers, as clients—created a narrative to set it “free from the tethers of unchecked capitalist development.”^[4] In turn, few discussions consider landscape planning as a political and economic practice or the designer's critical positionality in socio-political and socio-economic contexts.

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China abolished Landscape Architecture as a “first-level discipline” in the latest *Catalogue of Disciplines and Specialties in Postgraduate Education* (2022) released on September 14, 2022.^[5] This decision thus raised questions and concerns about Landscape Architecture's academic values and prospects in China. Within this context, I find the new book written by Ashley Scott Kelly and Xiaoxuan Lu, *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative* (Fig. 1), a timely publication providing apt reflections on landscape architecture practices and alternative pedagogical approaches to landscape planning in a global context^[6].

This publication is the result of a Landscape Architecture course on ecological planning which was offered for several years at the University of Hong Kong. The book investigates critical landscape planning as both pedagogical and practical issues through their studio teaching, utilizing historical studies, institutional critique, and interdisciplinary methodologies. The studio's primary focus was on the development of the Belt and



1. Book cover of *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative*

Road Initiative between China and Laos, during which a series of policies and practices transformed the local physical environment, living experiences, and socio-economic conditions. The China-Laos Railway is one of the first infrastructure projects completed under the Belt and Road Initiative and was used as a case study in the studio. The construction and impacted areas became the focused sites for exploration and investigation. The studio further explored the role of Landscape Architecture in planning and infrastructure development, where the profession contributes to mediating the conflict among different stakeholders and promoting exchange of knowledge, technologies and labor at the international, national, and local levels.

The book mainly consists of two parts. Part One *Framing* lays out the conceptual and methodological frameworks for the design studio in three chapters, each focusing on a thematic topic with an introduction of a synthesized landscape history, social and political conditions, and interdisciplinary literature review. Part Two *Strategies* exhibits specific studio proposals exploring four different themes, each containing two or more proposals.

2 Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks

Part One provides an overview on landscape planning issues through the lens of development and urban history. As the authors emphatically point out in the preface, “seldom do the planning and design professions engage post-development theory, and hence, they lack critical and tractable scholarly reflection on their

socio-environmental impact and lack adequate methodologies in the academy and professional practice for mitigating that impact”.[6] Therefore, this book contributes to the growing discourse on the critical studies of Landscape Architecture and landscape ecology, such as highlighting both the historical significances and limitations of McHarg’s landscape ecology and planning.[3][7][8] The critical and reflective thinking is particularly evident in this part of the book, which “offers a significant break with the ecological planning and landscape ecology literature”.[6]

In the chapter *A Pedagogy of Critical Landscape Planning*, the authors frame landscape planning as a critical research practice through the struggles of maintaining cultural-technological positions, transdisciplinary approaches, and process-oriented development. The chapter *From Land-Locked to Land-Linked* focuses on Laos’s history through planning and infrastructure projects while situating it in neoliberalism and global development context. The authors break down Laos’s recent urban history in three main periods: the colonial period, the Cold War period, and the Post-Cold War period, which exhibit Laos’s urbanization as a nonlinear process that involves transnational exchanges of ideologies, technologies, money, and materials. The next chapter *Locating Discourses and Narratives for Intervention* provides an interdisciplinary methodological approach to critical landscape planning, drawing from post-development theory, cultural anthropology, sociology, political sciences, and political ecology. Lastly, the authors call for a rigorous and reflective approach to assembling the discourse at multiple spatial scales.

One of the essential pedagogical contributions of this book is the exercise that exposed students simultaneously to development-related positivist research and critical studies in humanities. The Belt and Road Initiative and the areas around the China-Laos Railway thus become suitable mediums to examine and study the exchange and transformation of landscape-building knowledge, and the impact of relative practices between Laos, China, and other international organizations. As Kelly and Lu state, this exercise “has enabled these students’ rapid introduction into and awareness of both place-specific narratives and the dominant non-design disciplines operating there”.[6] Subsequently, primary materials such as planning codes and regulations are no longer the mere references for design solutions but archival materials for critical analysis.

This new perspective becomes instrumental when dealing with international policies, heightening the geopolitics and the potential intellectual colonization in globalization. In other words, this exercise makes students aware and even questioning their positionality as landscape architects, that the practices of landscape

planning and design are not politically neutral. Moreover, this realization enables critical reflection an underlined practice in Kelly and Lu’s studios.

3 Critical Landscape Planning Strategies

In Part One, Kelly and Lu’s design studio is structured on the basis of “multi-sited and multi-scale research, cross-disciplinary case studies, direct and diverse cross-sector stakeholder engagement, and student-led scoping of strategic landscape planning proposals”.[6] The research methods include archival research, field observation, ethnography, interview, and discourse analysis (Fig. 2). The organizational schedule employed in Kelly and Lu’s studio offers a valuable reference to other research and design courses with similar time restrictions in a semester setting. Additionally, the applied methods in the studio also contribute to an ongoing discourse of landscape research methods.[9][10]

2. Organizational schedule of the studio, during which the research would take half of the semester (Adaptation source: Ref. [6]).

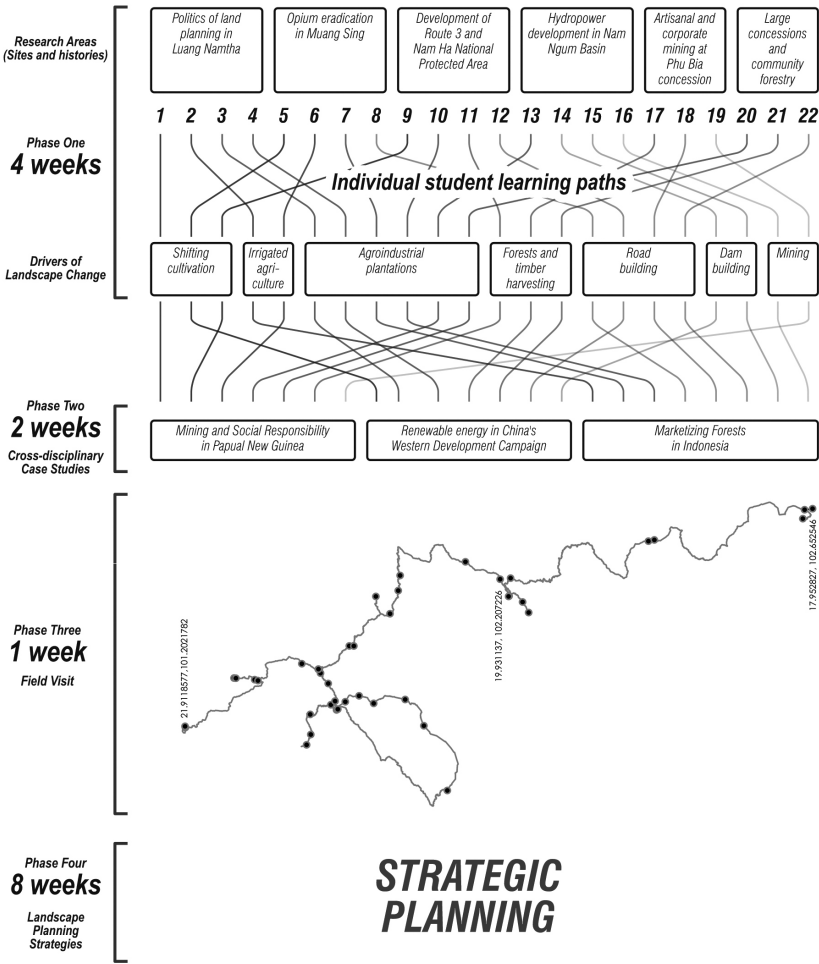


Table 1: Themes and proposals illustrated in Chapters 5 ~ 8

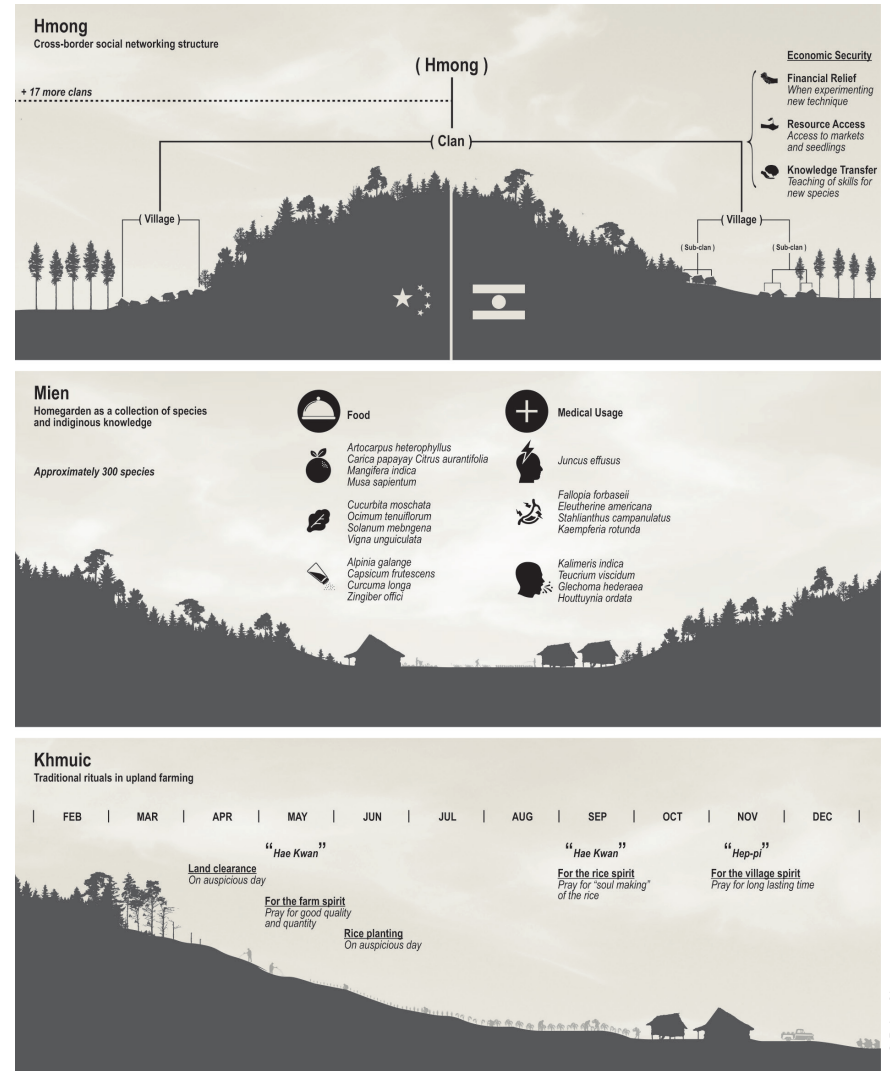
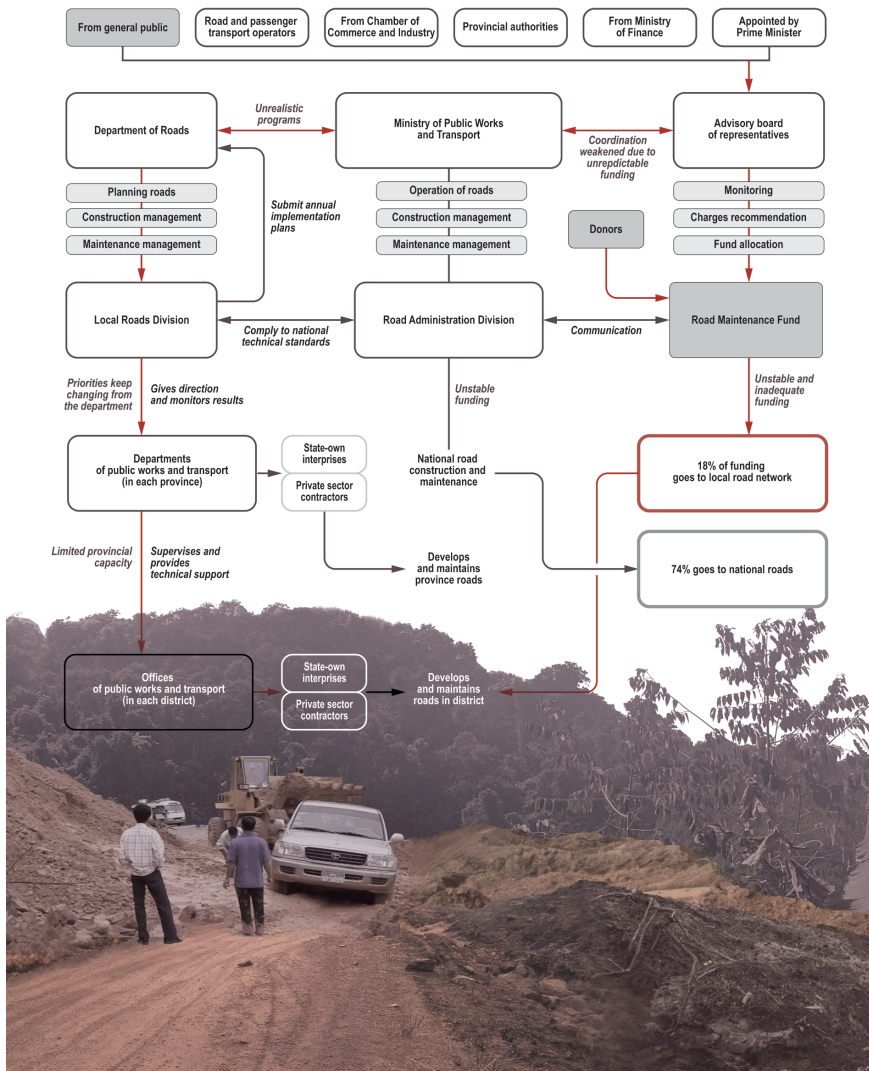
Theme	Proposals
<i>Infrastructural Connectivity and Difference</i>	Curating Rural Connectivity: Strategic Maintenance of Temporary Access Roads of the China-Laos Railway
	Before the Bulldozer: Strategic Agricultural Cooperation for an Uncertain Rail Alignment
<i>Western Alternative Development and Chinese Development</i>	Low-Labor Landscapes: An Agricultural Response to Short-Term Construction Employment on the China-Laos Railway
	Water Risk and Responsibility: A Political-Chemical Land Genealogy for the Muang Sing Valley, Laos
<i>Chinese Mass Nature Tourism and Ecotourism</i>	Negotiating with Ethno-Ecology: Landscape Management Strategies for Northern Laos’s Ecotourism Boom
	Living Heritage: Redefining Protections for Urban Expansion in Luang Prabang
<i>Northern Scientific Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge</i>	Scientific Stewardship: Indigenous and Ecosystem Territories Across the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor
	Empowering a Labor Transition During Enclosure and Securitization of Luang Prabang’s Natural Heritage
	Clean Versus Organic: Strategic Agricultural Enterprises for Vientiane Under Rural–Urban Migration

In the second part of this book, nine proposals are selected and organized into four themes (Table 1). Although the authors’ reasons for selecting them are not immediately evident, it is not hard to speculate that they represent the most successful outcomes of the studio. In other words, the studio was most successful in recognizing the importance of global development, conservation, sustainability, and exchange of cultural knowledge. In addition, each theme provides a written statement demonstrating the associated interdisciplinary scholarships. The proposals were visualized with spatial analysis, infographic representation, and schematic renderings (Figs. 3 ~ 5), covering several significant and timely topics such as labor, heritage, resiliency, and the Indigenous communities.

Although the instructional course and studio work offer fresh perspectives, there are some aspects worth further discussing. The studio engages English-language literature, and many scholarly references perpetuate a nature and culture divide that fails to reflect Laos’s Indigenous worldviews adequately. The categorizations of “nature and culture,” “built and natural environment,” “urban and rural environment,” and the definition of “nature,” “environment,” and “ecology” are full of Western epistemologies which shaped the

concepts, receptions, and practices regarding landscape (i.e., those defined by UNESCO). Also, the conceptual framework of culture in discussions is not specified. The notion of “traditional,” “cultural,” “vernacular,” and “natural” need to be adapted, transliterated, and contextualized in Laos’s setting to avoid Western generalization that overlooks Indigenous ontologies, beliefs, and knowledge systems.

It is understandable that the non-English literature may not be readily available, but relying solely on English-language literature restricts access to local knowledge. Thus, it would be beneficial to further explain or clarify the research methods and fieldwork practices, including community engagement, meeting with stakeholders and ethnography interview questions. Additionally, the research protocols could be discussed more explicitly. For example, when conducting ethnographic research, students can be introduced to specific interview protocols, including the ethics application approval process and ethics awareness. It would help readers realize how understandings of research protocols can be integrated into design studio teachings. Similarly, whether the studio collaborated with scholars from other disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, and cultural heritage, could be mentioned. Lastly, providing a brief introduction of the cultural and educational



3. Institutional structure for road maintenance showing proportion of government road budget allocated to national versus district and local roads (Source: Ref. [6]).
4. Unique opportunities in Hmong, Mien, and Khmuic ethnic groups' agricultural practices (Source: Ref. [6]).
5. The intertwining of local spiritual and agricultural practices in generating the cultural landscape at Qingkou village of the Hani people (Source: Ref. [6]).

backgrounds of the students would help readers understand each proposal's emic and etic perspectives.

4 Conclusion: (Re)Positioning Landscape Architecture in a Global Context

Kelly and Lu rightly note that “landscape architects are not traditionally trained to be critical... (they) are mostly designers who tend toward ecologically conceptualizing their practices with varying degrees of social and natural scientific

sophistication”.^[6] At a time when quantitative methods and digital technologies dominate the current landscape architecture research and practices^{[10]~[12]}, their course and this publication demonstrate a provocative and ambitious experiment. They challenge prevailing epistemologies and protocols in the discipline of Landscape Architecture by introducing a novel pedagogical approach that engages with research methodologies of humanities and qualitative fieldwork, immersing students in the project’s (or the site’s) social, political, economic, and material contexts.^[13] Therefore, *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative* offers a critical approach that moves beyond the mere problem-identifying and -solving process in the studio setting, and most importantly, it draws attention to the positionality of landscape architects, a neglected aspect in both academia and professional practice.

International infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative reveal an ongoing trend in territorial developments involving multi-national actors and institutions, indicating that landscape architecture practices cannot be isolated from the entanglement of geopolitical, capitalist, and environmental issues at the regional and transnational level.

Finally, Kelly and Lu’s work highlights another overlooked aspect in the landscape architecture discourse—the recognition of pedagogy as a transnational practice. Landscape architecture practitioners and scholars have facilitated the circulation, negotiation, and institutionalization of this professional discipline across nations and cultures. As an imported discipline in China, international knowledge exchanges are necessary for its development^{[14]~[17]}. *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road* is an episode of such continuous transfer, where knowledge, techniques, and regulations adapt, negotiate, and mutate with each other in the transnational exchange.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cohen, W. J. (2019). The legacy of *Design with Nature*: From practice to education. *Socio-Ecological Practice Research*, (1), 339-345.
- [2] Douglas, I. (2019). 50 years change in urban land use and ecological planning globally in the era of design with nature. *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability*, 5(1), 185-198.
- [3] John-Alder, K. (2019). *Ian McHarg and the Search for Ideal Order* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- [4] Fleming, B. (2019, June 18). *50 years after Design with Nature, Ian McHarg’s ideas still define landscape architecture*. Metropolis.
- [5] Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. (2022). *Catalogue of Disciplines and Specialties in Postgraduate Education* (2022).
- [6] Kelly, A. S., & Lu, X. (2021). *Critical Landscape Planning During the Belt and Road Initiative*. Springer Nature.
- [7] Lystra, M. (2014). McHarg’s entropy, Halprin’s chance: Representations of cybernetic change in 1960s landscape architecture. *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 34(1), 71-84.
- [8] Lystra, M. (2017). Drawing natures: US highway location, representational techniques and the rise of ecological design. *Journal of Design History*, 30(2), 157-174.
- [9] van den Brink, A., Bruns, D., Tobi, H., & Bell, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Research in Landscape Architecture: Methods and Methodology* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- [10] Braae, E., & Steiner, H. (Eds.). (2019). *Routledge Research Companion to Landscape Architecture*. Routledge.
- [11] Mirschel, W., Terleev, V. V., & Wenkel, K. O. (Eds.). (2020). *Landscape Modelling and Decision Support* (1st ed.). Springer International Publishing.
- [12] Prominski, M. (2017). Design Guidelines. In: A. van den Brink, D. Bruns, H. Tobi, & S. Bell (Eds.), *Research in Landscape Architecture: Methods and Methodology* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- [13] Kelly, A. S., & Lu, X. (2022). A Pedagogy of critical landscape planning, as developed in and for the Greater Mekong. *Landscape Architecture*, 29(11), 104-110.
- [14] Chen, Z. (1930). *Cities and Parks*. The Commercial Press.
- [15] Zhao, J. (2013). The origin and development of the concept of ‘Lühua’ (Greening). *Chinese Landscape Architecture*, (2), 57-59.
- [16] Zhao, J., & Zhang, B. (2021). Research on the origin and construction of Chinese modern landscape architecture theory from the multidisciplinary perspectives. *Landscape Architecture*, 28(6), 10-17.
- [17] Lin, G. (2022). The founding process of Division of Landscape Architecture. *Chinese Landscape Architecture*, 38(6), 40-44.

景观设计学在全球语境中的定位

——《“一带一路”时期的批判性景观规划》评论

蔡哲铭*

加拿大多伦多大学约翰·H·丹尼尔斯建筑、景观与设计学院，多伦多 M5S2J5

*通讯作者邮箱：taro.cai@mail.utoronto.ca

摘要

新近出版的《“一带一路”时期的批判性景观规划》（以下简称《批判性景观规划》）一书，呈现了阿什利·斯科特·凯利和陆小璇两位作者过去多年在香港大学开设的生态规划方向景观设计课程的成果。该课程主要探究了“一带一路”倡议提出后早期的基础设施项目之一——中老铁路及其沿线的景观变迁、景观建造知识的交流与转变，以及相关实践对中国、老挝及相关国际组织的影响。面向从事跨国、跨区域项目的规划师及相关专业人士，《批判性景观规划》就全球发展的历史、规划教学法和概念框架展开了全面的讨论。通过一系列课程项目的展示，本书着眼于景观规划的政治和经济属性，向景观设计研究和实践中的传统教学与研究方法发起了挑战，尤其回应了伊恩·麦克哈格的景观生态学和规划方法的历史意义及局限性。

本文着重剖析了书中的“批判性景观规划”概念和方法框架，探索其在教学和实践中的应用，讨论了实证主义研究和人文科学批判研究并行的教学方法；梳理了包括档案研究、实地观察、民族志研究、访谈和话语分析的规划设计策略，并指出本书的价值在于探讨了全球发展、保护、可持续性和文化知识交流的重要性；此外，本文鼓励在全球视野中对景观设计学的学科定位进行批判性反思。

文章亮点

- 评述对象在全球背景下提供了景观设计实践和替代教学方法的示例
- 展示了一个对景观学科传统认识论和准则发起挑战的充满启发性且雄心勃勃的实验
- 景观设计学不可避免地受到地缘政治、资本主义和环境问题的影响

关键词

批判性景观规划；
景观设计教学法；
定位；
“一带一路”倡议；
书评

收稿时间

2022-12-06

编辑 高雨婷，王颖