

The Newsletter



Africa-Asia:
A New Axis
of Knowledge

The Focus

Reading space,
society and
history in Asia
through its ruins



Living with and
in the forest in
northern Thailand



Above: Abandoned gold mining site in West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Photo by Michael Eilenberg, 2017).

Right: Abandoned construction equipment near a hydro-project in Sikkim, India (Photo by Mona Chettri, 2018).



Reading space, society and history in Asia through its ruins

Mona Chettri and Michael Eilenberg

Ruins are everywhere. In Asia, aspirations for socio-economic development have led to the rapid transformation of the environmental, social and economic landscape. Led by a diverse range of local, national and international actors these transformations have informed the creation of new forms of ruins and ruinations, the disintegration of recognizable forms whether they be material, ideational or institutional. From ruined environmental landscapes, abandoned industrial estates, derelict housing estates, failed infrastructural projects to political disruptions, economic breakdowns and cultural disintegration, ruins are ubiquitous and varied in their manifestations. Ruins produce long-term effects and affect societies and individuals in expected and, often, unexpected ways. Therefore, these ruptures and their afterlife call for a wider conceptualisation of ruins that locates their materiality within wider social, political and economic contexts.

Objects and institutions generate social effect in their preservation as well as in their destruction and disposal.¹ Thus, what we allow to disintegrate, to fall into ruin, is as powerful an assessment of our collective lives and histories as those objects and institutions we preserve and allow to flourish. Although sites of ruin and ruination can be ambiguous, unmoored from their present surrounding, they seldom remain dormant, often giving rise to new spatial and social conglomerations, new networks and infrastructures, or creating yet another ruin. Despite the apparent inertia around ruins, they are dynamic and act as metaphors for the ruptures and transitions at different stages of the socio-political history of a place or a people. Relegating ruins and historical processes of ruination to the past, therefore limits ways of engaging with and understanding the world.

Ruins can tell us much about the present, as they can of the past. In the Focus of this issue of the Newsletter we concentrate on

the social, political and economic 'afterlife of ruins' that have emerged from the structural fallout of rapid cycles of industrialisation and abandonment, urban growth, infrastructural development, modern state-building and conflict in Asia where the "present has not moved too far from the past and the future is at best uncertain".² Through an engagement with ruins of the past as well as the present, the processes of ruination and their impacts on people living amidst these ruins, we aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of development and change underway in Asia.

Agency of ruins

Ruins can be both objects and/or processes and a deeper understanding of the afterlife of ruins necessitates an interrogation of the wider entanglements and the actors that produce them. This in turn makes ruins and ruinations an important, albeit often neglected, vantage point through which to explore the various temporal and spatial interconnections

between political/economic institutions, the cultural/historical structures that enable its proliferation and the people living and sometimes, creating these ruins. In ruins, the processes of decay and the obscure agencies of intrusive humans and non-humans transform the familiar material order disturbing the orderly, "purification of space".³ It blurs boundaries, both spatially as crumbling structures colonise their immediate surroundings and temporally as they articulate the overlaying of temporalities.⁴ While it is important to consider the function of these ruins prior to the decay and eventual disintegration, the impact of ruins goes beyond the "mulch of matter which profanes the order of things and their separate individuality",⁵ to affect people, their lives and their interactions in the world. The afterlife of ruins draws our attention towards the changed socio-economic realities that groups and individuals are suddenly faced with, the different contestations that emerge as a result of scarcity of resources, the new aspirations

for the future that sometimes fuel ruinations (see Woodworth in this issue) and the aftermath of abandoned futures. In understanding ruins, the linearity of the past or events is upstaged by a host of intersecting temporalities that collide and merge,⁶ enabling the emergence of different or conflictual narratives. Thus, while ruins may be a way of reflecting on the past, the failure of political institutions or the breakdown of economic systems, they can also be used to challenge and/or re-consider the ways of engaging with the dominant narrative. Focussing on the afterlife of ruins and ruinations, therefore offers different perspectives into the conditions, negotiations, challenges and vulnerabilities that have emerged as a result of accelerated development in Asia. Furthermore, these introspections can offer insights and can act as either critical counterpoints to complicate and critique received historical narratives or as a platform for alternative, marginalised histories.

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Above: Dirt road running through palm oil plantation in West Kalimantan along the Indonesian-Malaysian border (Photo by Michael Eilenberg, 2017).

Inset: Rusting petrol pump in the middle of a border boom-town in Sikkim, India (Photo by Mona Chettri, 2016).

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Ruins are ruins precisely because they are considered without meaning, value or importance in the present. They become relevant only when their disintegration affects some aspect of our lives. While some ruins are preserved and reified for their spatial form and/or history of suffering and resistance, others are abandoned, allowed to decay as simultaneously a reminder of the past and of the impossible future (see Venhovens in this issue). However, the ruination of landscape, culture, livelihoods or identity usually reverberates in different, sometimes unexpected ways, to affect notions of belonging, history and identity. Ruins can prove especially contentious in terms of the value that is accorded to them and the desire to re-shape them by different groups of people, at different points in time. As Ann Laura Stoler reminds us,⁷ it is important to see ruins not as memorized monumental leftovers, but as sites that condense alternative senses of history. Ruination is an ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future. The critical power of ruins is not fixed but alters with time and while ruins may be reminders of loss and a crucial point for locating nostalgia for a certain past, they may also become the loci for mobilising and materialising collective anger and resistance.⁸ Thus, sites of ruin and processes of ruination often become objects or experiences in which space, history, decay and memory coalesce in powerful ways.⁹ These sites of abandoned materiality are often permeated with their latent potential as important sources of marginalised histories which carry “memory traces of an abandoned set of futures”¹⁰ and thus have the potential to challenge dominant ways of understanding contemporary changes in Asia. Therefore, sites of ruin and ruination need not always be objects or experiences that are detached from society and devoid of local history and meaning but can come to acquire importance as centres of cultural, religious or political significance and emerge as important sites for galvanising collective action (Hargyono in this issue).¹¹

Hope and hubris

This collection of articles focuses on the ‘vital re-configurations’ of the institutions, politics and people that produce, and sometimes even accelerate the production of new ruins and ruination in different ways. It positions ruins, material, ideational and institutional, as dynamic nodes where actors, both human and non-human are powerful actants in the production of new landscapes, histories and politics, which then continue the cyclical production of new ruins. The papers illustrate different manifestations of the relationships between the material and social environment, and how ruins continue to produce affect over different scales and temporalities. The contributions focus on different countries

and contexts in Asia to illustrate how rapid urbanisation, new extractive industries, infrastructural development, increased mobility and aspirations for a modern lifestyle, state-building and globalisation, have led to the emergence of modern ruins that lie between the “utopian promises and dystopian actualities”.¹² However, modernity can also be understood as a repetitive cycle of ruination and renewal, which usually takes on different forms at different periods of history.

Ruins are always ruins of something and thus, the sites of modern ruins and ruinations discussed here are imbued with histories of former ruination through the assemblage of colonisation, frontier making, capitalist resource extraction and exploitation, war and state-building.¹³ As the papers highlight, modern ruins in Asia are often built on the structural and political re-configuration of pre-existing cultural, political and economic dynamics under conditions of globalisation and state-led neo-liberalisation policies. Ruins can be both ‘fast’ (created through abrupt transitions like war, natural disaster or economic crisis) or ‘slow’ (slipping into ruination more gradually, side-lined by socio-economic transitions or incrementally abandoned).¹⁴ In Asia, ruins and ruinations exemplify how both these conditions can often co-produce one another. Thus, for example, the Partition of India in 1947 led to the creation of a ‘fast’ ruin through war and border-making practices, this in turn led to the ‘slow’ ruin of traditional cultural and livelihood patterns of border communities (see Meena, and Lal & Lepcha in this issue).

The contributions

Spanning across different borderlands from Indonesia to Abkhazia in Eurasia, the contributors to this Focus investigate the diversity of ruins in Asia and show how the materiality of ruins also eventually become borders themselves; signposts that separate the past from the present; tangible markers between nation-states, cultures and people. The contributions are all the result of extensive fieldwork and focus on modern ruins where agencies of decay and deterioration are still active and formative, and thus bring to light the experiences of ruin and rupture, the aspirations and eventual abandonment and, finally, how people make peace, albeit an uneasy peace, with the ruins amidst which they live.

Thomas Mikkelsen analyses the booming shrimp-farming industry and the active creation of new ruined ponds by both human and non-human actors (mud crabs, in this context) in the frontier landscape of coastal North Kalimantan, Indonesia. The success of the shrimp-farming industry has transformed large swathes of these low-lying coastlines from mangrove forests to a dense network of shrimp ponds. However, the creation of these ponds has led to new forms of economic transactions, demographic

changes and the unexpected interaction between people and the salt-water crabs, who too are active participants in the creation of this ruinous landscape. Through these ruined ponds and the role of the salt-water crabs, Mikkelsen weaves colonial history of Indonesia with the cyclical nature of ruins and new forms of resource extractions and inequality. He shows how “productive ruins” are being co-produced by human and non-human actors and becoming part of larger international supply chains of luxury commodities.

Neha Meena focusses on the changes in the livelihood and cultural identity of nomadic groups in western Rajasthan (India), post the Partition in 1947, the subsequent India-Pakistan wars and the developmental strategies of the Indian state in the early 1980s. The end of cross-border mobility and introduction of settled agriculture has completely re-shaped the identity of these groups and Meena traces these ruins of pastoralism through discarded wells and camel markings, which symbolised a culture and a lifestyle that is now on the decline. Like Mikkelsen, Meena illustrates how these new ruins are a by-product of colonial history, state-building and the adaptive abilities of those living amidst these ruins. Focussing on a similar theme of environment, cultural change and ruptures, Uttam Lal and Charisma Lepcha discuss the abandoned ruins of the Indian Himalayas formed as a result of modern state-building practices and/or environmental changes. Their contribution encourages an alternative reading of the landscape and its history, how ruins are potent sources of marginalised histories and how abandoned materiality can come to represent the cultures and traditions that have come to be abandoned with them. Navigating between different sites in the eastern and western Himalaya, this paper looks at tangible and intangible ruins and how the ruination of one, more often than not, heralds the ruination of the other.

Mikel Venhovens redirects our focus towards the borderlands of the de-facto/semi-recognised state of Abkhazia in Eurasia to illustrate the material, social and political afterlife of the ruins of violent conflict. Venhovens looks at the impact of the ‘hardening’ of the border and the everyday negotiations of the local ethnic Georgian/Mingrelian population living among the literal ruins of a lingering conflict, treated as outcasts by the Abkhazian government and cut off from the Georgian society. The paper shows how infrastructural violence can be expressed and experienced through ruins that serve as reminders of their violent past and impossible futures.

In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, Max Woodworth discusses the energy

resource boom-town of Ordos, which has emerged in recent years as the geography of production has shifted to new locations to take advantage of newly discovered reserves, new extraction techniques, and more favourable social conditions for larger-scale production systems. At such sites, bursts of speculative real estate investments have produced vast landscapes of newly-built structures that await habitation and use – and that may never ultimately be sold or used. Stuck between the speed of investment and construction and the slower pace of settlement and usage, this paper shows how sparsely utilized urban spaces raise the prospect of urbanization in the resource frontier as one of creating instant ruins.

Finally, Sindhunata Hargyono looks at the galvanising power of ruins in his discussion of the failed promises of infrastructural development and the resultant renewal of political agency in the borderlands of North Kalimantan (Indonesia). Hargyono illustrates how aspirations for infrastructural development at the margins of the state, and for making the border the ‘front-yard’ of the nation towards a prosperous Malaysian neighbour, has led to the proliferation of infrastructural ruins. Nonetheless, these ruins have also generated newer understandings of development and the relationship between state and society. Like the case of energy boom-towns in Ordos, these ruins are built on hope and aspirations for a better future that have led to the creation of new ruins.

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Notes

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When infrastructural ruins inspire political reorganization

Sindhunata Hargyono



The Indonesian border became central to the national political discourse in 2014. The newly elected president, Joko Widodo, identified the border as one of the central issues of his administration. Widodo argued that the state had been absent for people on the territorial margins, and that citizens on the border had less access to welfare than those located closer to urban centers. In a bid to change the fate of the marginalized citizens on the border, Widodo campaigned for “developing Indonesia from the margins”. In so doing, Widodo utilized a developmentalist paradigm that predated his regime. The paradigm is an invitation to alter the gaze toward the border, from seeing it as the *backyard* to seeing it as the *front yard* of the nation.

Altering the gaze toward the border: producing the state's front yard

This development paradigm, originally conceived by the Indonesian National Planning Agency of the previous regime, imagines the state space as a house, where the border functions as the front yard or the front porch. In a culturally-specific logic, this paradigm carries the idea that an ideal house owner should prioritize spending resources and time to assuring the propriety of the appearance of the front yard rather than dealing with the backyard, as the latter is invisible to the eyes of outsiders. Here, the front yard is understood to be representative of the quality of the people who inhabit the house. Just like this ideal house, Widodo

sees the border as representing the quality of Indonesia as a nation. The current condition of the Indonesian border area is problematic for the regime, however, because despite ideally serving as the front yard, it looks more like a backyard in that, in the regime's judgment, it is characterized by impoverishment, rurality, isolation from the domestic space, and illicit cross-border dependency.

In a bid to materialize the front yard border, Widodo's administration designed development planning that centers on the idea of designating new growth poles on the border. Border villages are handpicked by state officials to be these future growth centers. State officials expect these rural growth centers, through territorial infrastructural development projects, to flourish as prosperous border cities in the future. This article focuses on the experience of one such border village: Long Nawang village. The village is undergoing a district-splitting process and is projected to become the capital of a new border district called

Apau Kayan. Noticeable infrastructural development as part of the current regime's materialization of the front yard border has started in the village. While the regime often marks the infrastructural development at the margins as a point of differentiation from the previous regime, the reinvigoration of state power in the form of infrastructural development is not new for the village's inhabitants. In fact, behind the existing infrastructure in Long Nawang rest collective memories of the state's failure in delivering its promises.

The generative effect of failure

The construction of infrastructure always carries political significance. In the context of border governance, it carries the imposition of the state's territoriality—as both the marker of sovereign space and as biopolitical intervention. But what happens when such a political campaign encounters the memory of failure? In this section I will look at the way infrastructural ruins in the village become associated with failure and the way that failure becomes politically generative for the villagers amid the production of the front yard border.

As I have indicated, the on-going infrastructure development in Long Nawang village is just another layer on the palimpsest of infrastructural development. The landscape of the village has already been decorated with infrastructural ruins. These infrastructures are ruinous because, despite their completion, they have never fully and felicitously performed their function. In other words, these material structures are ruinous because they fail to comply with their objectification.¹ Infrastructural ruins, however, are everything but material superfluity. Here, I look at infrastructure as having a dialectical relationship with politics.² Consequently, infrastructure, in any of its material-temporal forms, simultaneously embodies political power of the state and the possibility of political practice. The temporality of ruin, that can be judged only through its (in)felicitous material expression, plays a central role in inaugurating spaces for political action. Such an understanding is possible only when we realize that infrastructure is never built for eternity, and each time an infrastructural project is carried out, the materiality of infrastructure oscillates between the time-space of ruination and that of renewal.³ Thus, ruin is not merely an autonomous temporal phase in some teleological timeline. Rather, ruin should be imagined within a non-teleological temporality of infrastructure, where renewal is always standing within its horizon. Imagining ruin in this way enables us to go beyond the narrative of infrastructural violence—the absence of public service as a form of violence—and instead look at the moment of infrastructural failure as generative to political action.⁴ That is, when ruins inaugurate a space for political actions.

The materiality of infrastructural ruins in Long Nawang village preserves the memory of the state's incapacity in fulfilling its promises. Villagers experience this failure on a daily basis. For instance, despite a tall base transceiver tower having been erected in 2013, four years later a mobile signal still appears only sporadically in the village due to the dearth of gas supply. In spite of having solar and hydro power plants, villagers still rely on the village office's diesel machine to access up to twelve hours of electricity per day. The sporadicity of public service in juxtaposition with the visibility of infrastructural materiality reminds the villagers on a daily basis that the relationship between the enactment of infrastructure and the availability of basic public services is not necessarily parallel. Each time the village's electricity is turned off at 6 AM, the villagers receive a reminder about the state of ruination that is eating away the infrastructures in their village.

It is within the time-space of ruin that the experiencing of failed objectification of infrastructural promises becomes politically generative for the villagers amid the reinstatement of infrastructural development on the border. Caught between the memory of failure and the desire to take part in the front

yard future, the village office has decided to introduce a new political organization: a development watch apparatus. This apparatus was created by a newly elected village head in 2017. At the time, the Widodo administration had built a diesel power plant in the village. Nevertheless, a familiar story unfolded as the electrical poles to distribute electrical power failed to arrive. Thus, the new diesel power plant quickly became an infrastructural ruin. As the village cannot bear any more non-functioning infrastructures, the village governance has given the development watch apparatus tasks to: (1) monitor the on-going development project and (2) solve the problem of infrastructural ruins through meeting with relevant stakeholders.

When I visited the village in 2018, I witnessed the fruit of the development watch apparatus. Troubled by the ruinous telecommunication tower and solar power plant, the village governance had sent development watch officials to negotiate with district-level and province-level state officials. The village officials proposed to power the telecommunication tower through the non-functioning solar power plant built by the province-level state institution. All this time, the solar power plant could not function because no official handover had taken place after the completion of its construction. The proposal was approved, and just before I left the village, a state technician and some villagers were working collectively to connect cables from the power plant to the telecommunication tower. Today, as both the telecommunication tower and the solar power plant have been moved to the time-space of renewal, villagers can finally have a fully working mobile signal.

Reflection

Infrastructure fails all the time, and the failure can take many forms. Sometimes it occurs before a structure is completed. Other times, like in this case, it fails despite its material completion. When infrastructure fails, that is when it does not adhere to the promise that it embodies, infrastructure becomes a ruin. In parallel with the special issue theme, however, I have illustrated how ruin is anything but the end of history. Far from being dormant, ruin is experienceable and inaugurates spaces for political reorganization that centers on the act of renewal.

Understanding the generative effect of infrastructural ruin is important in the current moment. The utilization of infrastructural development as a means to unlock the promise of a better future is not an isolated case from insular Southeast Asia. We need look no further than to the Chinese state's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative that seeks to use cross-border infrastructure development to add a modern layer to the Silk Road palimpsest. This grand initiative promises fertile ground for investigations into the entanglement of infrastructure and politics. As ruination always seems to be on the horizon of infrastructural development of whichever scale, the question that we may prepare to answer pertaining to OBOR is, what kind of political space will that infrastructure evoke when it enters the ruin time-space?

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Notes

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Top: The non-functional Pembangkit Listrik Tenaga Diesel (Diesel Electrical Power Plant), Long Nawang, Indonesia.

Above: Smaller voltage transformers assuming new function for the PLTD keeper, Long Nawang, Indonesia (Photos by Sindhunata Hargyono, 2018).

Ruined pondscapes in North Kalimantan, Indonesia

Thomas Mikkelsen



Abandoned oil well in Tarakan, Indonesia (Photo by Thomas Mikkelsen, 2017).

The frontier of large-scale shrimp aquaculture arrived in North Kalimantan in the early 1990s, boomed during the Asian Financial crisis of 1998-1999 when the rupiah was weak, and expanded in the years afterwards. Since then things have changed, as ponds have started dying off. Today, as especially downriver ponds are abandoned, caretakers and businessmen find new ways to extract resources in the ruins, maintaining debt-based patronage relationships that often stretch back generations and span several waves of different resource frontiers and territorializations. Resource frontiers created tension and conflict over land, but so did the following ruination, and struggle for control over new resources.

Shrimp aquaculture is not the first resource frontier to wax and wane on the northeast coast of Borneo, what is now the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan, and it is not the first one to produce ruined, altered landscapes either. For hundreds if not thousands of years, commodities have been extracted, traded and shipped off from forests and coastal reefs, reaching distant destinations. Slaves, rattans, eaglewood and gold dust from land; holothurians and prized shells from the bottom of the sea. Each resource frontier produced its own ruined landscapes, and Tarakan, the city where I had based myself and my family during fieldwork, has grown and contracted accordingly. A hub for slave trade until oil was found, and for a period of time home to some of the richest oil wells in Indonesia. Today, the ruins of yesterday's resource frontiers are an integrated part of everyday life of the city. The coral reefs have been dynamited, the seafloor scarred by trawl. Cows graze under rusty oil jacks, former sawmills have become storehouses while fishermen tether their boats at derelict gas rigs, protruding from the shallow brown water.

The infrastructure and ruins of today's resource frontier, extensive shrimp aquaculture, is impossible to miss when arriving by plane. From the air, these pondscapes, mosaics of greens, browns and blues, have an eerie likeness to those cross sections of cells found in biology textbooks. In order to maximize the productive surface, ponds are shaped to fit each other, while following the twisting and curling streams they depend on for fresh water and for disposal of waste. Streams that run into rivulets, that run into rivers, that run into the sea during low tide, and reverse during high tide, create long stretches of labyrinthine brackish waterways. Once meandering freely through mangrove forests, the streams are now held in place by the floodgates, the dikes and the embankments characteristic of shrimp aquaculture; some abandoned ruins, others still producing.

On debt-based patronage

The political economies of the pondscapes follow a similar logic as the ever-branching rivers. Many thousand men are hired as caretakers, responsible for doing all the manual work. They are employed by thousands of owners, most of whom live in the city. The owners are indebted to a class of buyers, often called *bos*, who finance their ponds, the machinery needed, the shrimp fry, their nets, the ice, the gasoline. In turn, the *bos* will have exclusive rights to the catch – part of which he will take as repayment of the loan, part of which he will buy at a discounted rate. The *bos* himself is often indebted too, to richer men known as *bos besar*, who manage a portfolio of minor *bos* on behalf of cold storages, factories owned by Chinese or Japanese conglomerates, who ultimately buy, process, freeze and export all quality shrimp farmed in the area.

Towering above the seaside slum are enormous concrete mansions, dazzling in color and architectural eclecticism, indicative of where the successful *bos* live. Many of them are members of families who came to Tarakan alongside the Dutch, during the days when oil was the commodity. Sitting in the office of one such Bugis *bos* in Tarakan, I was guided through the paperwork necessary for making a new pond. Compared with the sheer amount of paperwork you normally need to do anything in Indonesia, this was nothing. "It is very simple. You go to the Tidung village who owns the land, and ask the leader [Kepala Desa], and pay him maybe 10 million to make you a claim letter. This gives you 10 ha for the pond, and you can get several if you want. This is what most people do [...]. You don't have to go to the government

offices, only if you wish to get ownership, but this is expensive, it is not worth it".¹ Asked why it is only Bugis who build and own ponds he said, "The Tidung are too lazy, they are too poor. They cannot afford the machines needed. They are fishermen and they work at our ponds, although I prefer family [here meaning other Bugis] as workers".

Many Tidung disagree. One leader of a Tidung ethnic organization explained how the Bugis, through connections in the government, were systematically stealing their land. "They have people in all the offices and in the police. They are better educated. We need to be united against them to stand a chance". Tension has erupted into violence from time to time. Tension between some Bugis groups and the now minority Tidung peaked in 2010, when a fight between youngsters resulted in a man being killed. Hours later, crowds from both groups assembled and clashed at several locations on the island, leaving at least seven people dead, while more than 40,000 fled their homes. Cautious national police blockaded the island for weeks, hoping to prevent the warring groups

from obtaining outside assistance. The clashes escalated because of grievances between the opposing groups over access to land and lucrative government contracts.²

Anna Tsing uses the term 'salvage accumulation' to describe the

processes through which capital is extracted from non-capitalist systems of production, such as the dispossession of the indigenous Tidung, and the debt relationships in which pond owners are forced to sell below market price to the *bos*, and buy household necessities from him on credit.³ The supply-chains which connect the destitute worker squatting on the embankment of the pond with the consumer in the supermarket, is founded on such heterogeneities and even strengthens them.⁴ The cold storages maintain the debt-networks, through providing capital for the *bos* class. They entertain special prices for the *bos*, with whom they have long

relationships (in some cases, even prior to shrimp aquaculture), thereby enforcing the hereditary *bos* dynasties so visible in city geography.

Ruined pondscapes

In recent times, older ponds have started to fall into disuse, and are quickly deteriorating. The mud embankments that encircle them, once laboriously maintained by hard-working men, crumble and leak while the abandoned sheds that once held families are scavenged for building materials. The ponds themselves choke with fast-growing palms and the brightly-leaved saplings of mangrove trees sprout around the stumps of trees cut down years ago.

Around these ruins are clusters of ponds that are still maintained, restocked and harvested as in the old days, but production is erratic and harvests frequently fail. Sometimes failure can be predicted with the help of subtle signs, such as an overrepresentation of a certain kind of freshwater snail, too much or too little of a certain kind of algae; other times the signs are obvious even to the untrained eye: the water smells rotten, has an unusual color or might be covered by an oily film. But mostly, failure is not evident before the pond is emptied through the otherwise net into the river at low tide. Anticipation turns into disappointment in a matter of hours. These ponds are in a process of continual ruination that ties the choices of the past together with the possibilities of tomorrow.⁵ Explanations for these failures vary. Most of the owners and caretakers I spoke with blame the expanding palm-oil plantations upstream. Their herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers foul the water, and the clearing of forests changes drainage dynamics, leading to surges of fresh water through the otherwise brackish river systems during heavy rainfall, which are deadly to the farmed shrimp. Others blame the upstream hydraulic mining, where riverbanks are washed away with high-pressure hoses, and mercury is used in the process of extracting the precious flakes of gold. But take a look at the shelves of any well-stocked pond owner and you will find a collection of products to match the chemical shelf of any plantation: pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics and an assortment of unlabeled

... crabs are also active
co-creators of ruin,
presenting opportunity in
the ruins [...] for the people
working at the bottom
of the supply chain.



Mangrove crab, soon to be exported to Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, North Kalimantan, Indonesia (Photo by Thomas Mikkelsen, 2017).

powders and mixtures, all extensively used. Others again point to bacterial or viral epidemics that spread through the monocrop shrimp ponds, where the accumulated buildup of waste from billions of shrimp form a hotbed of infection, which easily spreads from pond to pond through the waterways connecting them all. Ruination is an active process co-created by many actors, human and non-human alike. It is not something than is solely thrust upon affected pond-owners from the outside, although that is what pond owners and workers will tell you.

Ruination leads to downriver ponds being abandoned every season. In the remaining ones, owners maintain production. Some because of sheer stubbornness, others because of mounting debts that desperately need repaying (by that windfall harvest that grows ever more unlikely as the ponds further deteriorate). For the owners of the ponds this is critical, as they repay their loans with the value of the catch. Caretakers, many of whom are landless immigrants from neighboring Sulawesi, are paid in percentages, and so failed harvests equal no pay.

Productive ruins

In the downriver patchwork of ruins and struggling ponds, all caretakers I met supplemented their income by collecting and selling mangrove crab, the common name for what is actually at least four different species

(*Scylla spp.*) A prized delicacy, sold alive in the metropolises of Asia. Naturally occurring in the brackish waters of estuaries and mangroves in the Indo-Pacific, the crabs have adapted and proliferated in the pondscapes. The sheltered ponds, stocked with feed and free of some of their natural predators, are near perfect environments for the crabs, who can better tolerate variations in salinity, and levels of ammonia and oxygen than farmed shrimp can. They even thrive in some of the ruined ponds where the shrimp have died off from pollution. Productive ruins in ruins.

Mangrove crabs hide during the day in tunnels dug in the intertidal zone, and forage during night. In the wild, this helps soil aeration and increases soil turnover rate in the mangrove to the extent that biologists have labelled them ecosystem engineers. However, in the ponds the burrowing crabs undermine the embankments, leading to leaks and accelerating the ruination. Sometimes a serious leak caused by burrowing crabs will be the final straw if reconstruction of the embankment is unfeasible, and thus they are considered pests by pond owners. Maintaining embankments is backbreaking work, done with hoe and shovel; but repairing a collapsed embankment is expensive and requires heavy machinery, something the owner would consider twice in an already degraded pond. For the caretakers, however, the mangrove crabs constitute an opportunity for a relatively stable income; in struggling

ponds the sale of crabs often exceeds the salaries they are paid by the owners, and in failed ponds crabs are their only source of revenue. At night when the crabs are active, caretakers don headlights and rubber boots, and stalk the pond embankments with large nets. The presence of ruined and abandoned ponds increases the area the caretaker can cover at night and the number of crabs he can catch. Among the overgrown ruins, however, one has to be careful. Not only crabs but saltwater crocodiles too are attracted by the abandoned ponds, only visited occasionally by a caretaker on the hunt for crab. Downstream the large majority of them are juvenile, but occasionally a caretaker goes missing, save for a foot or disgorged sandal. I am told, as long as you don't swear or throw things at them, the *ibu ibu* [grandmothers], as they are called, will not attack you, but in the ruined landscapes you never know.

Several times a week, a speedboat with a collector of crabs will visit the caretaker's shack, buying any live crabs he might have to offer. Collectors also peddle in everyday items such as cigarettes and instant noodles, and some in more clandestine wares such as methamphetamine, a relatively common drug among the young men working in the isolated ponds for months at a time. The countless rivers and streams, nooks and crannies of North Kalimantan, are some of the main entry points of Filipino and Cambodian drugs into Indonesia. Some collectors also bring crab larvae, which daring or desperate caretakers plant in the ponds, to further increase the number of crabs they can collect, to the benefit of both collector and caretaker. This is not without any risk though, as the crabs feed on the valuable shrimp larvae and their burrowing undermines the pond. If the owner learns of this practice, the caretaker in question will surely be fired.

Thus, the crabs thrive in pondscapes, even in those that are ruined and abandoned. But the crabs are also active co-creators of ruin, presenting opportunity in the ruins of monocrop pond aquaculture for the people working at the bottom of the supply chain. When the crab ends up on the plate in a Singaporean restaurant, it has become an object of luxury, of desire. Its past as a pest in a contaminated pond is forgotten and it is now used as treats for business contacts,

officials or senior colleagues, people from whom you want favors. They are offered on big plates, whole in their carapaces. It is said that crabmeat is an aphrodisiac, and eating it definitely is a multi-sensory experience. Breaking the tough shell, dismantling the claws, sucking the meat and juice out of hard-to-get places, is a messy business. Both crab and shrimp are not only shredded from their carapaces when they reach their destinations. They are also shredded from the history, the ethnic conflict, the ruined landscapes and the unequal and destitute lives of the people handling them along the supply chain of luxury commodities. The cycle repeats itself, but the commodity changes according to taste and availability. Finding new objects of desire in the ruins of old extractions, retaining and solidifying systems of immense inequality that sometimes span centuries, but also presenting possibilities for the astute worker, and thus the cycle begins anew.

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Notes

- 1 Technically, this only gives three years of usage, until you apply for ownership with the district government, but in practice it lasts indefinitely. The man I spoke with had inherited 15 ponds from his father, who had migrated to Tarakan in the 1970s, and the sole document showing his ownership was a *surat garapan* for each.
- 2 Wilson, C. 2013. "Ethnic outbidding" for patronage: the 2010 riots in Tarakan, Indonesia', *South East Asia Research* 21(1):105-129, doi:10.5367/sear.2013.0135
- 3 Tsing, A. 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world : on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- 4 Tsing, A. 2016. 'What Is Emerging? Supply Chains and the Remaking of Asia', *The Professional Geographer* 68(2):330-337, doi:10.1080/00330124.2015.1099186
- 5 Paprocki, K. 2019. 'All that is solid melts into the bay: Anticipatory ruination on Bangladesh's climate frontier', in M. Eilenberg & J. Cons (eds) *Frontier Assemblages: The emergent politics of resource frontiers in Asia*. Wiley Blackwell, pp.25-39.



Thousands of Tambaks, freshwater ponds for farming tiger-shrimps proliferate steadily up the waters of North Kalimantan, Indonesia (Photo by Thomas Mikkelsen, 2017).



30 year old tanka in Tawarwala ki dhaani
(Photo credits: Neha Meena, 2017).

Ruins of pastoralism in the Western Rajasthan borderland

Neha Meena

The Thar Desert has a rich history of the circulation of people, commodities, cattle, ideas, and services. The mobile communities of the desert had close connections and associations across the regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Sindh, and even Afghanistan, prior to Partition. However, in 1947 the India-Pakistan international border was demarcated and it passed right through the Thar Desert, separating these well-connected areas (in terms of trade and socio-economic exchange) of present-day Rajasthan, Kutch, Sindh, and Bahawalpur. The Thar frontier, a crossroads of geographical, environmental, social, cultural and economic relations, was thus suddenly split between two nation-states: India and Pakistan. The demarcation of the border, along with the associated security practices, heavy militarisation, and checkpoints, has severely impacted the traditional lifestyles of the inhabitants in these areas. The ensuing regulations on varied forms of previously unregulated mobilities, and irrigation-based developmental initiatives through canal extension, aimed to encourage a settled lifestyle and agrarian expansion. Consequently, many semi-nomadic pastoral communities like the Raikas established themselves in *dhanis* (small settlements) near the western border areas of Bikaner with agriculture as their prime source of income. The modern Indian state's encouragement of a sedentary lifestyle, and the enhancement of agricultural practices through the development of the Indira Gandhi Canal, transformed western Rajasthan and the lives of people who live there. The ruination

On the western border of Rajasthan (India), adjacent to Pakistan, pastoralist communities like the Raikas sustain themselves these days primarily with canal-based agriculture. Prior to Indian independence in 1947 their way of life was generally characterised by livestock (mainly camels and sheep), and movements associated with animals in search of grazing and water. The changes in the traditional lives of the inhabitants are a result of significant political events, such as the Partition of India (1947), the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, irrigation-based development (such as the land settlement schemes of the 1950s-1980s and the extension of the Indira Gandhi Canal in the 1980s), and the complete sealing of the India-Pakistan border in the 1990s. Against this background, this article explores the social, political, and environmental entanglements that have led to the (social) ruination of pastoralism, and focuses on the implications those ruins have had on the pastoral way of life and the pastoralists' notions of belonging, history, and identity.

of the pastoral lifestyle is observable in the memories and experiences of the pastoralists, and in the decline of pastoral practices, such as the traditional branding of the community's livestock (*daag*) and the underground rainwater storage tanks littered throughout the desert (*tanka*).

Ruins of social, cultural and economic pastoral life

The Thar Desert comprises mainly vast barren lands, but for the occasional variation of grasses, and in some parts continuously moving sand dunes. The villagers of western Bikaner live in extreme arid conditions with frequent food shortages. However, for many generations, the mobile communities adapted to the desert environment, reflected in their way of life (such as their special relationship with animals). For semi-nomadic pastoralists and tribes of the Thar, mobility was not only an important means of survival, but also their socio-cultural identity. Tradition, custom, livelihood, religion, and socio-political position in society may differ between the various groups, but the idea of 'mobility' was central to their ways of life and still remains ingrained.¹

According to the popular narrative of groups within the region, pastoralists followed the semi-nomadic lifestyle of moving livestock during the dry season and a settled life of cultivating crops in the rainy season. Irrigation was only possible during the rainy season (termed as *berani-kheti* by the villagers), and so subsistence relied on livestock products for the rest of the year. Villagers learned to depend less on water and more on buttermilk (*Chaaach*) and milk (i.e., camel milk). The natural vegetation of the region such as *sewan* grass, *phog*, *khejri* tree, and wild grasses, sustained the animals. During the drought and dry season, people survived on animal products, such as wool, meat, milk, and dung; either for self-consumption, sale, or exchange for other household goods.² Depending on the environmental conditions many communities even adopted a combination of occupations for livelihood and survival. For instance, the Meghwals, Naiks, and Kumhars were involved in agricultural labour, along with the rearing of livestock.

The western Thar region contained mainly brackish-water wells that were used primarily for watering livestock or consumed by villagers during the dry season and in times of drought, after mixing it with buttermilk and pearl millet flour/*bajra*.³ Given the scarcity

of water and arid conditions, rainwater was stored in the underground water-tanks (locally termed as *tanka/kund*) for drinking and other household purposes. The villagers built these *tankas* by digging a hole of up to 300 feet deep, then plastering the opening with a layer of gypsum and ash (*rakh*) and covering with a wooden lid; water was stored for at least seven months in these *tankas*. During periods of water shortage, women and men would collect water from the *tankas*,⁴ and this was mixed with brackish well water for the animals. Throughout pre-independence, even crops (like *bajra*, *guar*) were cultivated on the sandy tracts of the desert with the usage of camels for tilling and sowing seeds. In addition, camels were essential for migration and transportation to distant locations of the desert.

With the system of rainwater tanks the people were able to meet their drinking water needs to some extent, but for the requirements of their large herds of livestock they would seasonally migrate to other, more humid, areas. Depending on the intensity of the dry conditions, the movements ranged from days to months, to even a year. For these migrations, most of the communities maintained cordial socio-economic relations.

Remembering a migratory experience, an elderly Bishnoi man from Mankasar narrated that during one of the periods of *akaal* (drought), they migrated to the village Gegda (presently named 400 RD after the canal distributory crossing through it), a settlement near the main canal and lived there for a year with their entire family and livestock. Anyone in Mankasar with livestock would migrate, and only a few

elderly people were left behind. These migrations could be up to 70-80 km towards the western and north-western Bikaner as water in those areas was favourable for drinking. Also, based on the good socio-economic relations between the Bishnois and the inhabitants of

Poogal village, they were provided with land for temporary settlement, and were allowed to graze their livestock on the village pastures. Such associations maintained by communities during their migrations and exchanges across the desert have been completely destroyed in the present.

Before the Partition, the entire border region was open. There was a continuous flow of goods and people across the desert, including the states of Sindh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Punjab. These movements in the dry or drought periods were mainly towards humid and rain-fed areas with an aim to access the markets as well as grazing areas for livestock. The social, economic, and cultural life of the inhabitants was dependent on animals—cows for milk, goats for milk and meat, sheep for wool, and camels for transportation and milk. The elderly generations of Raika, Bishnoi, Meghwal, Kumhar and Rajput communities, residing in the desert for decades, narrated their subsistence on seasonal agriculture with predominant dependence on livestock products, such as milk, wool, and dung.⁵ For instance, during the seven year long *Satkali* famine sheep wool was sold to the *baniyas* (merchants) who would sell it further in the nearby markets. In return, villagers received money which sustained them for at least 4-6 months. This pastoral relationship between animals and human beings in the desert areas of Thar is still remembered in the folkloric traditions, myths and memories of the elderly generations.

Caste-based distinctions between communities are an essential part of the pastoral lifestyle in these rural areas, visible in the daily lives of the communities as well

as their narratives of the past.⁶ The camel, an essential part of Thar lifestyle, has also been symbolically used to maintain caste-based distinctions and social boundaries between communities. Since many of the communities, irrespective of their socio-cultural identity, bred camels and moved during the dry season, *daag* (branding) was used on the body of the camel to represent caste and

ownership. As narrated by Raika pastoralists, the unique mark on the body of a camel could be used to identify the community and village to which that camel belonged. This mark even helped people in tracing misplaced camels to their owners.

Rainwater tanks (*tankas*) and the symbolic marks on a camel body (*daag*) were the material representations of the pastoral culture/lifestyle of the Thar region. However, political, social, economic and environmental changes have led to the decline of dependency on these practices, leading to an identity crisis for pastoral communities. The crucial event which decimated the pastoral culture of the Thar-desert was the legal demarcation of India-Pakistan border in 1947 and the subsequent wire-fencing and militarisation of the border. This transformed the desert into the geo-politically sensitive border in western India. Such practices to maintain territorial security were accompanied by developmental policies, like the extension of irrigation canals in the region. With the construction of canal lines through the barren desert of Bikaner in the late 1980s, the Rajasthan state government aimed to encourage settled agriculture on the lands distributed to the people. However, with the restrictions on free movement of people and decline of pasture lands, settled agriculture emerged as the only source of livelihood for the pastoral communities. To encourage canal-based agriculture, the government allotted land to lower caste groups,⁷ provided agriculture-related monetary subsidies for the construction of water-tanks in the fields and establishment of new markets for the sale of farm produce. Therefore, the restrictions on pastoral movements in search of pastures to nearby areas, militarisation of the region, and development of canal system, gradually led to the ruination of pastoralism, visible in the unused rainwater tanks in the fields and decline in the usage of caste-based symbols on the bodies of camels.

Ruins of pastoralism: loss of culture and traditional livelihood

Conversations with elderly Raika pastoralists living near the India-Pakistan border, revealed that even after the Partition pastoralists attempted and struggled to maintain their traditional pastoral routes across the region. For instance, villagers who were unaware of the new cross-border legalities after Partition tried to move across the newly formed border to graze their animals and search for water resources. Some pastoralists were even able to develop close associations with the Indian Army on the border check-posts and were able to move across the border with their animals through permits issued by the Army. However, as told by elderly Raikas, this soon came to an end with the arrest of pastoralists by the Pakistani Army and eventually, the wars between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 led to the complete fencing of the western border in the late 1990s, thereby restricting all cross-border movements. The pastoralists responded to these restrictions by altering their migratory routes to fertile areas within India. However, even these movements declined with the decrease in pasture areas as a result of land settlement policies of the Rajasthan government, extension of the Indira Gandhi Canal, and a prolonged series of droughts and famines within the region. Also, since the 1980s, the grazers (now confined to a few pastoral groups) were required to obtain permits from the *panchayat* (local civic bodies) and police to cross regional state borders with their animals. Gradually, all kinds of mobilities and cross-border interactions of the people across the desert came to an end. Meanwhile, between 1960 and 1980, there occurred a series of droughts and famines in western Rajasthan. During this period, the government provided necessities like food, water and medicines, however, no such measures were taken for animals which decimated the livestock population of the pastoralists and the villagers alike (as narrated by pastoralists residing in western Bikaner). In addition, road construction and the canal development project was initiated by the government with an objective to provide employment and means of livelihood to the inhabitants through settled agriculture. Indira Gandhi Canal, one of the most significant development projects, was extended from Ganganagar district in the north-west to three western border districts of Rajasthan, i.e., Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Barmer, and by the late 1980s canal water was supplied to the villages of western Bikaner.⁸ With such initiatives, villagers with a pastoral lifestyle were encouraged towards canal-based agriculture

and a sedentary way of life. They were encouraged to work either as labourers or practice agriculture with the canal water. The construction of the canal and people's dependence on it has transformed the traditional pastoral lifestyle and the culture of livestock-keeping in the region.

Today, the majority of the population is dependent on agriculture in the fields allotted through summary settlement by the Rajasthan government.⁹ Movements with animals remain confined to some pastoralist families, and only for shorter distances. With social, political and economic changes, pastoralists are forced to keep very small groups of animals only within the range of their village area. Instead, all communities irrespective of their socio-cultural identity as pastoral groups are engaged in agriculture. While reminiscing about their movements across the desert with large flocks of animals and livestock production, many of the elderly Raika pastoralists narrated that, due to the shortage of canal water and rainfall, agriculture in the desert was not as successful compared to their former practices of migratory livestock rearing. However, with no other livelihood alternative, they can only remember their past life and live amidst the ruins of pastoralism. The old empty rainwater tanks in their fields continuously remind them of their mobility and socio-cultural pastoral relations. The remembrance of a past life illustrates the emotional and psychological forms of ruin ingrained in their daily and cultural life, which will have a long-lasting impact even on their future generations.

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Notes

- 1 Dependency on camels and sheep has been associated with their socio-cultural identity. The claims on traditional identity are often observed in the oral narratives, and folkloric histories of the Rajasthan state. For instance, in the folklores of Panjir, Gogaji, Tejaji and Pabuji of Rajasthan, the saints who are also worshipped as local deities have been presented as the protectors of cattle (cow in the case of Gogaji and camel by Pabuji), a saviour of mankind and pastoral wealth, and as one who sacrificed life for protection of livestock; see Kumar, M. 2014. 'Adaptations to Climatic Variability: Irrigation and Settlement Patterns in Early Medieval Rajasthan', *The Medieval History Journal* 17(1):57-86.
- 2 For instance, villagers would exchange wool, ghee (butter), and pearl millet with shop owners, to meet their needs of alternative goods such as clothes, jaggery, sugar, oil, and other household items. The shop owners would then sell those exchanged goods in the market for money.
- 3 In Barsalpur village, there were two saltwater wells, the water of which was used for livestock on a rotational basis. The village elders along with Barsalpur Rav (Thakur) would organise a meeting in which villagers who owned animals were assigned a day for using the well water as per their total number of animals. According to the system, villagers who moved with their animals in the nearby areas (termed as *khod* by locals) would return to the village wells every 2-3 days to water their animals on their assigned day.
- 4 Men would carry water in huge bags loaded on the back of a camel. With the coming of the wooden cart in the 1950s, water was transported in big plastic water tanks. Those plastic tanks were later replaced with iron water tanks.
- 5 The dung of animals was used as fertilizer.
- 6 Some members of Meghwal community mentioned caste based hierarchies in the usage of water from the *tankas*.
- 7 Stanbury, P.C. 1987. *Processes of village community formation in an agricultural settlement scheme: The Indira Gandhi Nahar Project, India*. PhD diss., University of Arizona.
- 8 Idem.
- 9 Land of twenty-five *bigha* was allotted to each household.



Daag on a camel's body (Photo credits: Neha Meena, 2017).

Ruins of living and dead in the Himalayan borderlands

Uttam Lal and Charisma K. Lepcha

While ruins might appear to be mere physical sights of decay and disintegration, they are much more than that. Every ruin is a witness to its own cycle of life and death and the entire gamut of processes which encompass socio-political and economic events in an area. Ruins can be unique yet interconnected and share commonalities; tangible as well as intangible through the passage of time. As humans are in a continuous state of movement, societies have been in a contiguous pursuit of constructing and deserting the signs of their cultural traits. Thus, the formation of ruins is unceasing and revealing of the past. This essay looks at the tangible and intangible ruins of the Western and Eastern Himalayas.



Memorial cairns above Roghi Village in Kinnaur (photo by Uttam Lal, 2019).

As one moves along Runang-Kanda, a high-altitude pasture above the tree-line in Kinnaur district of Indian Western Himalaya, one is almost certain to be startled by the sheer scale of the remains of cattle carcasses strewn amid abandoned and dilapidated stone houses in this area. What is even more astonishing is the addition of newer skeletal remains of domestic animals every year. A closer look suggests that the carcasses are mostly of younger animals. Naturally one would wonder why there are so many deaths at one place and what happened to the stone houses and agricultural terraces present there? Is it some kind of peculiar site or is it just what ruins look like?

The harsh environmental conditions of the Himalayas have resulted in a fragile ecology in which seasonal upkeep of man-made structures, such as houses, animal sheds, temples, monasteries, agricultural fields, and so forth, is required on a regular basis. As people move away from the area, due to either social, political or environmental factors, or even a combination of all of these, such physical structures are destroyed by environmental events like avalanches, flash-floods, landslides, and incrementally by seasonal and diurnal freeze and thaw, which acts upon these structures with variable degrees depending upon the location.

Temperature and precipitation patterns have undergone considerable changes in the last few hundred years, and have directly influenced the growing season, thereby limiting

the carrying capacity of the area. The impact of climate change is magnified manifold in the fragile Himalayan highlands. Throughout history, since its creation 50 million years ago, this mountain system has undergone periods of cooling and warming. Warming led to the retreat of Himalayan glaciers, which exposed newer and higher areas suitable for human activities, while cooling led to glaciers advancing down to lower levels impacting the growing seasons and rendering higher human settlements largely untenable. Thus, the climatic fluctuations in the area's geological history shepherded human migration across different passes and valleys, from higher to relatively lower altitudes. As people responded to the rhythms of the climatic events, newer villages were created, and older ones were abandoned.

Mental maps as intangible ruins

When people moved they transmitted ideas, imaginations, technologies, rituals and habits from one place to another. Across this journey of time and space, people preserved

and remembered these changes through rituals and legends associated with certain areas and places; while at many other such sites, signs of human inhabitation simply got lost in the passage of time. Ruins are not mere residuals of man-made structures; they also include narratives and histories, which

Ruins are not mere residuals of man-made structures; they also include narratives and histories ...

continue to exist as legends and folktales in an area. These oral histories often stitch together trails, rituals, lifestyle and space-relations of societies, which underwent cartographic readjustments. With the passage of time many trails, rituals,

stories of linkages and flow become few. With every passing generation certain details of the legend get lost, while some tales about a place and the people who lived there survive despite the trail being abandoned long ago.

Narratives about societies and linkages can be considered intangible aspects of ruins. Nearly every highland village talks of certain routes that earlier generations traversed, but have since been abandoned owing to the changing socio-economic and environmental conditions leading to the gradual dissipation of local knowledge, history and belief systems. While material traces of the existence of a place might disappear over time, spatial

information is not a requisite for the mental map of a place; it is sufficient to just 'know of' the place and not where it is. A mental map is an intangible aspect of a culture; the passage of time often produces intangible ruins of physical and non-physical institutions that cannot be seen or touched.

With the emergence of newer nation states in the 19th century, the contiguous geographical landscape of the Himalayas was fragmented by different political borders. The partition of India in 1947 and the India-China war in 1962 limited the movement of people, animals and materials across the Himalaya. Concerns around border security brought roads to remote parts of the Himalayas which in turn led to the rapid socio-economic transformation of these areas. Nonetheless, people still remember and reminisce of forests, lakes, pastures, rocks of trails and certain rituals their ancestors followed. As an old man in his late 80s from Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) stated, "as a young boy, I never knew of borders. Then suddenly all sorts of people started showing up on our land and created strange boundaries in the name of district, states and nation, forcing us to live a fragmented life amid ruins of our heritage". Not all generations could adapt to the newer socio-political realities; those who witnessed sudden transformations to their lives and livelihoods remain haunted by it, while for the rest, it has become a mere part of some shared past that might someday be used as a rallying point for political mileage.

Corridor of death

Roghi-Kanda and Runang-Kanda are contiguous alpine grasslands overlooking the majestic Kinnaur-Kailash range across the Satluj valley in Himachal Pradesh, India. These pastures are located along the mountain ridge that formed a part of the old Hindustan-Tibet road, a pony trail suturing numerous high-altitude villages and pasturelands, which used to enjoy bustling seasonal foot-fall of shepherds, pilgrims, traders, etc. However, with the coming of roads the cross-border trade eventually came to a near halt and the mountainous trails were no longer frequented as the pastoral lifestyle was traded off for more sedentary livelihoods. Occasionally villagers would make a journey up to these pastures along with their domestic animals and leave them there on their own for a few months to graze and roam the pastures and nearby forests. Towards the end of autumn, adult animals would begin their journey down to the valley and the village on their own. Households were aligned to the rhythm of nature; they would carve out agricultural terraces, tend to their herds and raise a single crop of buckwheat, potato, peas, etc. during their high-altitude summer sojourn, for a few weeks to a few months every year. However, as their dependence on animal husbandry decreased so did the relevance of these animals.

The younger animals often need a few years to learn to make the journey down the hills on their own. Until recently villagers would normally go up to the pasture to herd the younger animals down before the onset of winter. However, since agricultural practices have changed, young male cattle are left on their own as they are not required even as beasts of burden in the new economic system. As these animals are too young to learn the necessary strategies to cope with harsh Himalayan winters, every year large numbers perish to hypothermia and wild hunters like wolves and leopards. As a result of decades of disuse and lack of maintenance, agricultural terraces and houses are slowly being reclaimed by nature and what lies amid the ruins are the bones and hides of these abandoned animals. The change in the economic landscape of the area brought a considerable shift in how people frequent the valleys and higher pastures. While the remains of animals and dilapidated houses are part of tangible ruins, space relation of people through such pastures constitutes a form of intangible heritage.

Along the pastures above villages like Kalpa, Pangi, and Roghi on way to Runan-Kanda, are a series of cairns at a nearby ridge. Cairns are human-stacked piles of stones assembled as a part of burial rituals, popular across the Himalayas. These cairns are often located at about 3500 meters or above, as a memorial tomb for departed family members. Every year, during the *Dukhraini* (festival of mourning) at least one family member visits the cairn to pay their respects to their departed family members. The annual rituals of *Dukhraini* can at best be understood as intangible ruins of the tangible remains-cairns, which have become a way of acknowledging and honouring the ancestors and their history in these highlands.

These cairns were erected at vantage points on the ridge; often used as geographical markers by those who would frequent these heights and usually indicated proximity to a settlement. However, as societies have become more sedentary and changed in how they move and interact, such landscapes often present a confusing picture of a valley of ruins and death and are often not well understood. Although these ruins are often not well preserved, they nonetheless offer significant insights into how people lived, consumed and interacted centuries ago. For instance, a common practice among highlander families was to accord clan/group identities based on place of origin and direction of their movements. Thus, these tangible ruins of cairns along with their location amalgamated with intangible ruins, such as trail patterns and movements, and became socially institutionalized.

3000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the Dibang valley in the Eastern Himalayas, home of the Mishmi indigenous group. Like many other highland communities, Mishmis are trans-border people living on both sides of the India-China border. They live in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Yunnan province of China. In comparison to most other trans-border communities of the Himalayas, the Mishmi are unique as they are not connected through trade and pilgrimage but rather through death. Majority of the Mishmi still follow their own indigenous religion and, as per their belief system, a Mishmi soul travels back to their original home which is their place of origin. Incidentally, the place of their origin is believed to be across the border in TAR and Yunnan province. Their religious priests [*Igu*] still facilitate in this death ritual,

in which the journey of the departed soul is sent back to the place of origin, treading the same trails their ancestors took to reach the homes of the living. However, cross-border government policies have brought about changes that have led to the gradual decline of socio-religious institutions like the *Igu*. Nonetheless, despite the tremendous social economic transformations on either side of the border, priests on the Indian side still perform *Igu* rituals and services for Chinese Mishmi. Chinese Mishmi find ingenious ways to send money and the names of their dead relatives, mostly through locals who go hunting in areas where borders are undefined and who occasionally bump into Indian Mishmis. Owing to the contemporary border realities of India and China, valleys and ridges of the Mishmis have been fragmented, constituting an intangible ruin of Mishmi cultural landscape.

Not just what we are
left with

The geo-politics between India and China have obviously taken their toll on cross-border cultural linkages of the Mishmis. However, a prominent face from the community, Jibi Phulu, summed up the situation of his community as follows: “I am a proud Indian as long as I am alive. The day I die I am a Chinese”. Mr. Phulu is well aware of the dangers of being misunderstood by some individuals, but the trans-border Mishmis have been forced to come to terms with the contemporary political realities. Like many other highlanders, they negotiate this uncertain geo-political terrain with their social mental maps of cultural similarities on both sides of the border. These mental maps are nothing but intangible ruins of a community.

In the Western Himalayas, excavation during road-broadening works unearthed many sites of cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Accordingly, Kinnauras referred to these as *Kha-che Rom-khan*. However, scientific studies revealed that some of these graves predated Islam, and the buried bodies shared morphological and genetic proximities with Central-Asian people. This shed light on the ancient space-relation and cultural linkages of the Western Himalayas with Central-Asia. Despite being a site of tangible ruins, the cist-burials of Himachal Pradesh are also

a form of a mental-map that has been reshaped over centuries through the oral histories of different groups of communities living in the region. For instance, based on conjecture, the locals started to refer to the cist-burial sites of the central Asian people as Muslim or Kashmiri graves. Only a more nuanced scientific study of these ruins established their linkages to Central Asia beyond doubt, thereby indicating pre-existing cross-border interactions of these Himalayan highlands. Similar road construction and widening activities along Hangrang river in Himachal Pradesh have led to the further disintegration of the caves used by Buddhists monks for their retreats. Nevertheless, the ruins of the caves have been part of unequivocal mental-maps of space relation with Tibet in the context of trade and pilgrimage.

Mental-maps often contradict official maps and may or may not depend on the presence of physical ruins. In the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim and neighbouring North Bengal, the ruins of a few forts of the indigenous Lepcha group can be traced from Sikkim’s capital Gangtok. These ruins of forts were of no significance until recently when some Hindu *trishuls* [tridents] were erected and Lepchas made their “bid for entitlement”, making these ruins “epicentres of renewed claims”. Similarly, another ruin of a prominent Lepcha fort in Kalimpong district of West Bengal holds the memory and claims of the supposedly last Lepcha king in the region. These ruins, of what is supposed to be the queen’s bath, prayer room and the horse stable, are recalled through oral narratives of the Lepchas, although these specificities are not found in official historical records, which only mention the fort in the region.

There are numerous other Lepcha forts located at vantage points of ridges telling the history of a people, who despite being known as the oldest inhabitants of the region, hardly occupy a reasonable space in the written history of Sikkim. Much of Sikkim’s history revolves around the Namgyal dynasty, and therefore these ruins are a vignette into the possible histories of other ethnic groups living in the region. Interestingly, the consecration of a blood pact between Lepchas and Bhutias took place at Kabi (West Sikkim) where Mount Kanchenjunga was invoked and “stones were erected at the spot to mark the event”. These stones, as “megalthic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the “historic landmark”, which paved the way for the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim in 1642.

Across the Himalayas, we see different forms and roles of ruins – both tangible and intangible – that allow us to identify and examine the nature of ruins. The above examples from the Western to Eastern Himalayas are indicative of how ruins are not what we are left with, but that what we make of them is what aids us in our understanding of our existence today.

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Notes

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Below: Ancient Meditation caves near Tabo, Himachal Pradesh. Top right: Ruins at Kabi, Sikkim. Bottom right: Ruins at Runankanda in Himachal Pradesh. (All photos by Uttam Lal, 2019).



Hardening porousness

Borderization and abandonment among the borderland ruins of Abkhazia

Mikel Venhovens

When driving through the Abkhazian borderland region of Gal(i), one cannot help but notice the numerous ruined buildings that lay scattered throughout the green hilly landscape. Few people live in this stretch of land, as many of the former residents – ethnic Mingrelians, an ethnic Georgian subgroup – fled during the last part of the war due to the fear of repercussions by Abkhazians and fighters from the Northern Caucasus. These buildings serve as tangible reminders of the violent episodes that occurred during the 1990's, starting with the Abkhazian-Georgian war of 1992-1993, after which Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia, which was then left in a state of limbo and isolation as no other member of the international community recognized Abkhazia as a sovereign state. It was not until August 2008, just after the Russian-Georgian war, that the Russian Federation, together with Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru and since 2018 Syria, recognized the Republic of Abkhazia, while the rest of the world still sees Abkhazia as an integral part of the Republic of Georgia.



The Abkhazian border checkpoint as seen from the Inguri Bridge (Photo by Mikel Venhovens, 2018).

Since then, the contrast between the Gal(i) landscape and the surrounding borderlands has been increasingly noticeable. It seems as if time stood still in the Gal(i) district, while the Western part of Abkhazia has seen considerable improvements in regard to infrastructure and renovation of buildings, mainly thanks to the financial aid provided by the Russian Federation after 2008. However, the most eastern part of the Gal(i) district, namely the stretch of land bordering the Inguri river, which acts like the natural division between Georgia proper and Abkhazia, has seen significant changes over the last ten years. Since then, a borderization process has been underway, which has upgraded the border in both bureaucratic and material ways. Before 2008, the border regime was notably more fluid, as cross border movement of persons and goods was made possible through several formal and more informal procedures. Today the installation of barbed wire, guard posts, and the Russian Federation taking control of the borderline, have hardened the border substantially.

The contrast between the ruined hinterlands and the 'upgraded' borderline is striking. It illustrates the nation-state building efforts of the Abkhazian Republic, now strengthened by the support provided by the Russian Federation since 2008, while the Gal(i) district populated by the Georgian minority is being left behind and virtually untouched, leaving them in an abandoned and disenfranchised position. The ruined untouched landscape of the Gal(i) region together with the hardened border are

(re)constructed structures that are situated in a highly politicized landscape where the past meets both the present and future.

In the case of the Abkhazian borderlands, the Georgian minority living in the borderlands are often seen as outcasts, the losing remnants of the War of 1992-93. The Abkhaz were the victors, and the disjointed power relations that were installed after the war between the two groups continue to live on both in a social and spatial way.

Reading conflict through space: the politics of materiality and mobility

The people in the Gal(i) region live their everyday life among ruins. The burned-out buildings that scatter the landscape, the roads that have not been maintained since 1991 and other neglected infrastructures are the physical reminders of the war, but maybe even more, of the current situation in which they find themselves. When moving 10 kilometers to the east, the infrastructure changes. The road that starts at the Abkhazian-Russian border and ultimately leads all the way to the Inguri river border crossing, was renovated in 2016 and could now be considered to be one of the best roads in the region (speeding on this renovated road is considered one of the main reasons for the significant increase in traffic accidents in Abkhazia, as drivers do not have to watch out for potholes anymore). Alongside this road, which was paid for by financial aid provided

by the Russian Federation, the only well-maintained building that can be seen when driving towards the Inguri river is the newly built Russian military base. The road abruptly ends at the Abkhazian checkpoint, where numerous taxis and buses stand waiting for people coming from the other side.

The Abkhazian checkpoint/border has seen a tremendous change over the last 10 years. From being a heavily militarized checkpoint and frontline, including gun emplacements and concrete barricades, it has now been transformed into a 'proper' border. Pillboxes and turrets have been replaced by sterile metal containers from which passport control is carried out by the Russian Federation. Waiting lines have been installed and the overall feeling at the checkpoint is more 'clean' and 'official' than before 2008.

Changes can also very much be observed along the Inguri river as the material demarcation of the Abkhazian state border has increasingly changed the landscape. The riverbanks have been populated by various forms of state materiality, such as barbed wire, guard posts and radio towers that are installed with cameras in order to keep an eye on the borderlands. Furthermore, Russian military patrols along the Inguri River are frequent in order to stop people from crossing the river, which is considered illegal by the Abkhazian government.

An interesting paradox is the fact that it is the Russian Federation and not the Abkhazian government itself that has taken the responsibility for the border control; they

are providing the manpower, bureaucracy, technology and materials. The function of this 'hardening' of the border is first of all, a practical one, as it gives control to the joint Abkhazian-Russian authorities over the border. The movement of persons and goods is regulated by funneling them through the main crossing point at the Inguri bridge crossing. The main aim, besides preventing smuggling, has been the regulation of the movement of persons. The return of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to Abkhazia has been a pressing issue since the end of the war. While the actual numbers of returning IDPs have been quite limited, the issue has been used very frequently in political discourse. Many Abkhazian politicians have warned against the 'Georgianization' of Abkhazia, as this might result in "losing sovereignty and territorial integrity" that eventually would result in Abkhazia 'exploding' from within.² This stance and rhetoric have also been a significant focus of the current President of Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, during whose term the Abkhazian passports of most ethnic Georgians of the Gal(i) region were revoked as they were deemed to have illegally been handed out.

In addition to the IDPs, the enhanced borderization process also structurally limits the mobility of the current Gal(i) residents who still have very strong social/communal links with the Zugdidi district on the other side of the river. The elderly have to get their pension on Tbilisi controlled territory, several children living in the Gal(i) district take their education in the Zugdidi district, the marketplace in Zugdidi is both a considerable source of income as well as for buying products, and even family members are separated because they live either side of the border.

In the case of the Inguri border, it severs the Georgian Mingrelians living in the Gal(i) district from Georgia proper. By dissecting the Gal(i) community from the other side of the Inguri River, they are placed in a state of isolation and abandonment. Spatially isolated from Georgia, socially dissociated from the rest of Abkhazia. This state of isolation and abandonment will have significant repercussions for the near and long future; for example, the youths who take their university degrees in either Zugdidi or Tbilisi are often not open to returning to Gal(i), as the opportunities to build a life there are decreasing significantly.

Besides this practical function, the strengthening of a border both in a bureaucratic and spatial way, is also a performative act that demonstrates certain political claims. In the case of Abkhazia it portrays the sovereignty claim of the Abkhazian Republic and the end of the war that resulted in the independence of the Abkhazian state. This is further reinforced



One of the many ruined houses in the border town of Gal(i) that were abandoned after the war (Photo by Mikel Venhovens, 2018).

through the officialization and normalization of the Inguri River checkpoint by referring to it as the 'State border'.

This is in sheer contrast to the discourse of the Georgian authorities in Tbilisi. They refer to the border as the Administrative Border Line (ABL) as they still see Abkhazia as part of Georgia. They still refer to the conflict as a 'frozen conflict', indicating that conflict and war is ongoing. This is why the Georgian side of the river is heavily militarized with pillboxes, a checkpoint and a small military outpost manned by forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. This side of the river is kept as informal as possible. At the police checkpoint, there is only a passport check for foreigners while Georgian citizens can freely pass through to the Abkhazian side of the river. This is due to the fact that for the Georgian authorities, when crossing the Inguri River you are not leaving Georgian territory. Issues arise when people enter or leave Abkhazia to/from the Russian Federation, as you will have then entered/left Georgia illegally.

This manifestation of discursive and spatial discourses is not only performed at the border but also on road signs throughout Georgia. When travelling towards the west of Georgia, Sukhumi (the capital of Abkhazia) shows up on highway signs as if it is simply a city further down the road. A city that is easily accessible. This while most Georgians will never be allowed to actually travel there. What becomes evident here is how a variety of spatialities is co-implicated in complex ways. The example of the Inguri crossing point and the road signs illustrates these complexities, as authorities deploy imaginaries and practices that, while centered on place-making ('Sukhumi is home'), at the same time (re)works mobility ('Sukhumi is accessible') and scale ('Sukhumi is part of the state of Georgia'). By creating an atmosphere in which nothing has changed and by deploying a spatial politics of 'wholeness' and 'accessibility', these road signs reinforce the discourse of an Abkhazia that is still under Georgian authority.³ Materialities, such as road signs, walls, barbed wire and checkpoints are the physical facts created on the ground that convey either the narrative of partition or the wholeness of a territory. In reality, the Georgian authorities have no formal control over Abkhazia at all, and the ethnic Georgians left in the Gal(i) border region are caught between a rock and a hard place.

The physical neglect of the Gal(i) district illustrates the post-conflict power relations amidst a 'victor' and a 'losing' party.

Abandonment among ruins

The sheer scale of human displacement and dispossession during and after the war of 1991-92 radically transformed the landscape of Abkhazia. In the western regions, the Georgian population fled during an immense ethnic cleansing campaign, during which an estimated 20,000-30,0000 civilians were killed and between 200,000 and 232,000 fled across either the Caucasus mountains or the Inguri river to uncontested Georgian territory. Of these, only roughly 40,000 ethnic Georgians have found their way back to their homes in Abkhazia, primarily in the Gal(i) region.

The physical neglect of the Gal(i) district illustrates the post-conflict power relations amidst a 'victor' and a 'losing' party. Especially with the backing of the Russian Federation, which ensures the safety and sovereignty of the semi-recognized Abkhazian state, the Abkhazian authorities have been increasingly more confident in imposing limitations on the political rights and movement of the Gal(i) population. Before 2008, the Abkhazian authorities lacked a firm control over the Gal(i) district, due to lack of knowhow and manpower, but also due to the presence of several Georgian

paramilitary guerilla troops that contested the Abkhazian authorities.⁴ These often-criminal groups controlled the district firmly through violence and intimidation of not only Abkhaz residents, but also the Georgian

population. Killings and kidnappings were frequent occurrences during the 1990s and early 2000s. This unstable situation came to an end after 2008, when Georgian troops left the Kodori Gorge, north of the Gal(i) district, and the Russian Federation took full control over the Inguri border. Since then the Abkhazian government has tightened control over the Gal(i) district, without necessarily improving the living conditions of the local population. The ethnic Georgian population is not allowed to possess an Abkhazian passport. Since 2018, a process has started in which foreign nationals who reside in Abkhazia for more than one year can apply for a residence permit. This permit gives them the right to reside in Abkhazia and to move in and out of the country freely, but does not allow them to vote, buy or sell property or participate in elections on any level, including local elections.

From a material perspective, there are ruins scattered across the district, left behind by ethnic Georgians who fled the numerous violent episodes during the 1990s and 2000s. The ruins that can be found both in the urban and rural areas of Gal(i) are striking to foreign visitors, as they have heard and/or read about the war and the violent events that occurred. The 20-year-old war becomes tangible as the aftermath can be clearly seen through the ruined and abandoned buildings.

The normalization of the situation and material state of the district has had 20 years to settle in, so now most of the locals merely shrug when asked about the state in which many buildings appear. They refer to the people who used to live in the once typical Georgian two-story buildings. Their friendly neighbors, the tomatoes and cucumbers that they used to grow in the back garden, or the kids who used to play on the street. After the joyful memories comes a heavy sigh, which is almost always followed by a sentence along the lines of: "But the war made them go. They had to leave it behind. Now they live in Tbilisi/ Zugdidi and we are still here". Some people who fled the Gal(i) district have been able to temporarily return to visit their former homes, mostly on a 'tourist visa' through invitation by family members that still live in Abkhazia. The normalization of the material dereliction is striking. The local population has become used to it, has occasionally even added to the deterioration by stripping houses of certain materials, and now only the stories and the memories are left behind.

The ruination of the Gal(i) district and its material remains serve as 'phantomic' reminders of the people that fled to Georgia proper and were not able to return after the violence ended.⁵ Most of the IDPs now live in Georgia proper and are unable to move back; but those who did return to Gal(i) or who stayed in the first place, are now left behind with just the memories, not knowing what became of their neighbors, in a way trapped in the past. Pieris puts it well in her research on ruins of the Sri Lankan Civil War: "The ruination of home and its residual materialities signify a state of exile of a community alienated through violent dispossession from spaces in which they have deep ontological roots".⁶

Conclusion

The exterior territorial membrane of a national entity, its border, is being hardened through the establishment of multiple forms of material and bureaucratic division in order to create facts on the ground and therefore legitimize its existence in a material way. This is the case with internationally recognized

states, especially during certain episodes of crisis, but even more so with entities that are not internationally recognized, as creating facts on the ground is an existential need in order to legitimize its existence. The focal point for the strengthening, renovating and improvement of Abkhazian statehood therefore focuses on that border, while in the hinterland lie the ruins, the aftermath and the continuous porousness of the Abkhazian state. The situation for the Gal(i) residents seems to be at a standstill, they are in limbo because their presence in the borderlands is deemed to be the existential threat to Abkhazian nationhood. Ruins scattered throughout the landscape are 'phantomic' reminders of both the violent past, as well as the exclusivity of the Gal(i) region in the present.

Underlying this approach is an understanding of power not as something that is 'owned' by certain actors but as 'relational': as a strategic complex relation they are in. Enforced by historical narratives that are being reified through socio-spatial processes, the post-violent conflict situation in the Gal(i) borderlands is being cemented through the strengthening of a semi-recognized border and the dereliction and abandonment of the hinterlands.

This article shows how certain 'stories' and narratives materialize in concrete and tangible entities with spatial properties, which in turn have an impact on the population living in a peculiar post-conflict environment. I am interested particularly in the story of contested statehood, and an understanding of the state as an imagined entity that exists only by virtue of it being performed (statehood as practice) and spatialized (statehood as materiality) and how the established power relations can then be read throughout the hinterlands of the Abkhazian borderlands.

The memory of violent episodes is not just embedded in narratives and testimonies, but also inscribed onto space in a variety of settings. Barbed wire, checkpoints, potholes in the road and ruined homes. Through strengthening and crumbling, these forms of spatiality scattered through the landscape act both as scars, reminders of past events and the establishment of a new status quo. Yet, underneath these socio-spatial material power relations are the stories of lost friends and families of whom they are reminded every time they leave their house and walk among those ruins.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, I will use the term 'border' to address the division between Abkhazia and Georgia proper. This in order to be as neutral as possible, as the usage of 'state border' or 'Administrative Border Line' are too biased towards certain parties. By using the term 'border' I therefore refer to material division that separates the semi-recognized state of Abkhazia from the territory fully under control by the Republic of Georgia. This article does therefore not take any stance in regard to the status of Abkhazia.
- 2 Vartanyan, O. 2014. 'Thousands of Georgians in Abkhazia Facing Being Struck Off Voters List', *Civil Georgia*; <https://tinyurl.com/cgAbkhazia>
- 3 Demmers, J. & Venhovens, M. 2016. 'Bluffing the State: Spatialities of Contested Statehood in the Abkhazian-Georgian Conflict', in Björkdahl, A. & S. Buckley-Zistel (eds) 2016. *Spatializing Peace and Conflict*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.159-177.
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Boomtown in ruins: Ordos and ruination



Max Woodworth



Abandoned buildings in Ordos, China: semi-finished luxury housing estate in Kangbashi New District (left) and office buildings in downtown Dongsheng District (right). (Photos by Max Woodworth).

In the 2000s, China's economy grew at an average annual rate of nearly 7 percent.¹ Recent talk of a 'new normal' foresees slightly slower growth rates closer to 6 percent extending into the medium-term future – a rapid pace when compared with other large industrial economies historically. Within this broad growth picture, cities and their metropolitan regions have grown even faster, acting as the engines of the national economy. Central to all this metropolitan growth was a frenzy of urban construction of all types: private housing, office spaces, retail centers, roads, subways, parks, and so on. As any casual observer of Chinese cities can readily note, urban construction has been the order of the day for quite some time, and it drives local economies.

This is also borne out by the numbers: between 2003 and 2014, over 300 million square meters of housing was added across China.² In most municipalities, property development and construction has accounted for nearly 40 percent of local GDP and fixed-asset investment during this period. Correspondingly, home prices have surged astronomically. The average per-square meter cost for private housing in Beijing, for example, is now US\$6,000, roughly half of the average household annual income.³ Given the rise in property prices, the sector has become a vibrant arena of speculation for the wealthy and fortunate, with property ownership now effectively separating the haves from the have-nots in urban China.

Energy boomtowns

While the growth of mega-cities on the eastern seaboard garners the most attention, a number of less-known cities of the central and western regions grew even faster than their eastern peers. Foremost among this subset of cities are energy resource boomtowns that have thrived off intensified resource exploitation. Ordos in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region exemplifies western China's energy boomtowns. Economic expansion in the city surged on the basis of rising energy demand and national energy policy favoring expanded production in a small number of locales concentrated in Western China. The urban component of boomtown growth was driven by forces familiar across all of China's cities, specifically, local leaders' encouragement of land and property development as a way to provide a source of extra-budgetary, and therefore wholly locally retained, municipal revenue and the use of urban growth projects of all sorts to spur economic growth. Private demand for properties also played a key role in driving growth. What distinguished Ordos in the 2000s has been the volatile combination of a burgeoning resource sector and surging urban development.⁴ Investors from near and far sensed opportunities in the context of a resource boom and poured massive investments into real estate, triggering a frenzy of construction and igniting a speculative growth process

as buyers and sellers led an upward spiral of prices that decoupled supply and demand from any reasonable assessment of the use value of properties. Prices rose steadily from the early 2000s until finally coming to a halt around 2011. The causes of the sudden end to rising prices are disputed and hard to trace with certainty. However, contributing to the demise of Ordos' housing sector was a confluence of the following factors around 2011: declines in coal prices at the time, rising concerns that Beijing would soon move to aggressively attempt to reduce the growth rate in the use of fossil fuels, excess capacity in the coal sector, a roll-back of post-2008 stimulus programs, enforcement of stricter limits on property purchases, the simultaneous collapse of multiple Ponzi-type schemes funding much of the urban construction and home purchases. Whatever the causal forces of the crash, by mid-2011 Ordos' urbanized areas were dotted with empty and abandoned projects as financing and buyers and sellers disappeared from the market. In plain terms, Ordos was convulsed by enormous speculative property bubbles and suffered a severe, but localized, economic crash.

Modern ruins

The uninhabited luxury villa compounds and vacated construction sites that still litter the landscapes of Ordos nearly ten years later reverberate recent debates about modern ruins and ruination.⁵ The 'modern ruins' of capitalist development arise, Edensor notes, as waves of investment wash over places and then recede, leaving behind the detritus of industrial progress.⁶ Thus, the creative destruction of capitalism produces ruins in formerly buzzing sites like Detroit or Manchester or Fordlandia, and does so on a continual basis in new places. As such, various types of 'new ruins' provide material reminders of the perpetual reproduction of destruction that is at the center of capital accumulation. Yet unlike erstwhile thriving spaces that have fallen to ruin, the ruinous landscapes of Ordos were never fully populated; a great number of newly built homes, storefronts, and offices were never used. Yet nearly all units in completed projects had, in fact, been purchased on a speculative

basis. The ruins of urban projects in Ordos thus speak less to industrial capitalism and its precarious territorialization than to essential problems of time and value in the production of built environments through financial speculation. The city's ruins might be regarded as referents of what Stoler refers to as the temporal and material process of 'ruination'.⁷

In a variety of settings, the central role of finance has been noted in driving the speculative property bubbles of the twenty-first century. Ordos was no exception. However, the particular modes of finance that arose in the city were crucial to the specificity of its urban growth patterns – and to an understanding of how urban growth followed a decidedly ruinous course. Of special importance here were the tangled networks of informal finance that fed off rising incomes in the city and promised to mobilize savings toward high-profit sectors. As elsewhere in China, the property sector in Ordos offered abundant opportunities to see rapid returns. Moreover, with the resource sector effectively closed to all but the largest institutional investors given the scale of necessary investments and with local industry and commerce constrained by small population and geographical isolation, local residents sought outlets for savings other than bank accounts where officially set interest rates were lower than local inflation. Numerous forms of non-bank lending evolved in response, including micro-lending operations, pawn shops, underground banks, rotating savings and credit associations, and outright pyramid schemes. While each such mode of financing offered different terms, all featured high interest rates and short repayment schedules. It thus followed, that with such schemes mediating private savings toward land and property development, the pace of growth in Ordos' property sector was fueled by the supply of high-interest fast financial capital and not by demand for the ever-growing stock of new properties. It was also clear that collusion and incompetence were salient elements of the bubble, as local officials joined the fray, leaning on loan officers in formal banks to extend credit to property developments, approving project after project, and engaging in risky borrowing and lending. By the time the bubble had burst in 2011, Ordos' built-up urban area had ballooned more than tenfold from roughly 25 square kilometers to 270 square kilometers. Among the registered urban population, surveys found the average household held ten properties.

The municipal government responded to the twin crises in the local property market and informal finance in three main ways. First, it established an ad hoc office in 2012 to sort through claims by bilked lenders in informal lending networks. This entailed identifying borrowers and seizing their assets to compensate claimants. Second, municipal leaders applied pressure to local branches of state-run and commercial banks to extend loans to developers to keep the property market afloat. Neither approach restored Ordos' economic growth, which had been inflated by the property bubble. Between 2012 and 2017, Ordos was the slowest-growing municipality in Inner Mongolia. Third, municipal authorities opted to wait out the downturn. As one local official explained in an interview in 2014, "there

is nothing to do with all of these houses but wait until more people arrive, or see if another bubble will come". This sentiment was widely shared in the city, as owners of multiple homes reasoned that future children and migrants would eventually fill the thousands of unused properties. "Everyone jokes about Ordos being a 'ghost city'. But it's only just recently built. It's natural that it takes time for the people to arrive".

Imagined futures

Such articulations of defiant optimism collected during fieldwork in the post-bubble years in Ordos contained a palpable resistance to the 'ghost city' narratives that the media used to characterize the city's development. That narrative has hinged on diagnosing Ordos' urban projects as useless excess now reduced to ruins. Fault for Ordos' 'failures', according to much reporting on 'ghost cities', is laid at the feet of greedy, naïve investors and venal provincial officials who unwisely allowed supply and demand to become decoupled. Yet, as local residents' rejection of such judgments suggests, the ruins that persist in the post-bubble moment index a more complicated set of realities. Indeed, a fixation on the absence of evident use values in the uninhabited built environments underpins the commonplace negative assessments of 'ghost cities'. Moreover, it ignores how the financialization of the urbanization process brings forward in time the accumulation of surplus and is sustained by admixtures of hope and delusion, the essential and time-honored lubricants of capitalism. One need look no further than Wall Street to find a contemporary example in the so-called 'advanced industrialized countries'.

Viewed outside the frame of failure that shadows the ghost city trope, Ordos' abandoned and uninhabited cityscapes thus present object lessons in ruination *qua* accumulation. The ruins of Ordos' property development projects don't so much narrate a linear history of ascendance and decline as posit a reordering of time enabled by capitalist growth such that, as Smithson remarked, present forms "rise into ruin".⁸ For a time, fortunes were made in the creation of so much rubble. Now, in the face of crisis, people are advised to wait for the next round. In the meantime, the ruins of development sites linger as reminders, for some, of riches gained almost overnight through speculation and, for more than a few, of imagined futures that disintegrated just as suddenly.

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Notes

- 1 For official statistics on economic growth, see the National Bureau of Statistics of China public database; <https://tinyurl.com/npChinaAnnualData>
- 2 See National Bureau of Statistics of China, China Statistical Yearbook; <https://tinyurl.com/chinayearbook2014>
- 3 See 'China's Housing Market is Cooling', *Global Property Guide*, 4 April 2018; <https://tinyurl.com/gpgchina>
- 4 See Woodworth, M.D. 2015. 'Ordos: A market-era resource boomtown', *Cities* 43:115-132.
- 5 See DeSilvey, C. & Edensor, T. 2013. 'Reckoning with Ruins', *Progress in Human Geography* 37(4):465-485.
- 6 Edensor, T. 2005. 'The ghosts of industrial ruins: ordering and disordering memory in excessive space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23(6): 829-849.
- 7 See Stoler, A.L. 2008. 'Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination', *Cultural Anthropology* 23(2):191-219.
- 8 See 'The monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', in Flam, J. (ed.) 1996. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press.