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

Celebrating 25 years of the International Institute for Asian Studies
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, ideological 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. 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 surroundings, they seldom remain dormant, often giving rise to new spatial and social conglomeration, 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’. 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”. It blurs boundaries, both spatially as crumbling structures colonise their immediate surroundings and temporally as they articulate the overlaying of temporalities. 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”, 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 contexts 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 upset by a host of intersecting temporalities that collide and merge, 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.
Thus, sites of ruin and processes of ruination. The contributions focus on different countries the material and social environment, actors, both human and non-human are institutional, as dynamic nodes where sometimes even accelerate the production of ruins reminds us, it is important to see ruins not as to re-shape them by different groups of people, value that is accorded to them and the desire unexpected ways, to affect notions of in this issue). However, the ruination of as simultaneously a reminder of the past materialising collective anger and resistance. As the papers highlight, these ruins are being co-produced by human and non-human actors and becoming part of larger international supply chains of luxury commodities. Naha 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 marktings, 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. Following this same thematic line, cultural change and ruptures, Uttam Lal and Charlima Lepcha discuss the abandoned ruins of the Indian Himalayas formed as a result of modern state-building 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. Mike Vehovens redirect our focus towards the borders of the de-facto semi-recognised state of Abkhazia in Eurasia to illustrate the material, social and political afterlives of the ruins of violent conflict. Vehovens 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 outposts by the Abkhazian government and cut off from the Georgian society. The paper shows how infrastructural violence can be experienced through ruins that serve as reminders of their violent past and impossible futures. In the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of China, Max Woodworth discusses the energy 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 and economic conditions in the region. 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 these ruins become utilised to challenge the trope of urbanisation in the geographic frontier as one of creating instant ruins. Finally, Sindhumathy Hargyono looks at the geographic frontier of ruins in the dislocation of the failed promises of infrastructural development and the resultant renewed role of political agency in the borders of North Kalimantan (Indonesia). Hargyono illustrates how infrastructural development at the margins of the state, and for making the border the ‘front-yard’ of the nation towards a prosperous Malaysian state and for making the border the ‘front-yard’ of the nation and for making the border the ‘front-yard’ of the nation. Nonetheless, these ruins have also become the site of infrastructural development and the relationship between state and society. Like the case of energy boom-town of Ordos, these have been built on hope and aspirations for a better future that have led to the creation of new ruins.
When infrastructural ruins inspire political reorganization

Sindhumatra Hargyono

The Focus

Reading space, society and history
In Asia through its ruins

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.

Apar Kajan. Noticeable infrastructural development as part of the current regime’s materialization of the front yard 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 not collective management of state 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 bio-political intervention. But what happens when such a political campaign encounters the memory of infrastructural failure? For the villagers amid the production of the front yard border, the on-going infrastructural development in Long Nawang village is 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, we look at infrastructure as having a diachronic relationship with politics.2 Consequently, infrastructure is, in any of its material-temporal forms, simultaneously embodies political power and state and the possibility of political practice. The temporality of ruin, that can be judged only through its (in)felicitous material manifestations, plays a central role in appropriating 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 event in some teleological timeline.Rather, ruin should be imagined within a non-teleological temporalization of infrastructure, which is always standing on its horizon. Imagining ruin in this way enables us to go beyond the narrative of infrastructural violence, and instead look at 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 ruin inaugurates 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 are not able to make use of the village office’s diesel machine to access up to twelve hours of electricity per day. The sporadic delivery of public services in Long Nawang village in the absence of infrastructural materiality reminds the villagers on a daily basis that the state’s promise, the link between the existence of infrastructure and the availability of basic public services is not necessarily parallel. Each time the villagers’ electricity is turned off at 6 AM, the villagers receive a reminder about the state of ruination that is eating away at the infrastructural ruins 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 village watch committee. 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 appear, the new diesel power plant quickly became an infrastructural ruin. As the village cannot bear any more non-functional infrastructure, the village governance has given the development watch apparatus tasks to: (1) oversee the on-going development project and (2) solve the problem of infrastructural ruins through meetings with relevant stakeholders.

When I visited the village in 2018, I witnessed the fruit of the development through a double infrastructural ruinous telecommunication tower and solar power plant, the village governance had sent development watch apparatus to: (1) oversee the on-going development project and (2) solve the problem of infrastructural ruins through meetings with relevant stakeholders.

Notes


Reflection

Infrastructural ruins 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 infrastructural ruins fail, that is when it does not adhere to the promise that infrastructure holds in the time-space of renewal, villagers can finally have a fully working mobile signal.

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 Long Nawang village. The village office has decided to introduce a new political organization: a village watch committee. 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 appear, the new diesel power plant quickly became an infrastructural ruin. As the village cannot bear any more non-functional infrastructure, the village governance has given the development watch apparatus tasks to: (1) oversee the on-going development project and (2) solve the problem of infrastructural ruins through meetings with relevant stakeholders.

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Ruined pondscapes in North Kalimantan, Indonesia

Thomas Mikkelsen

The Focus

Ruined pondscapes

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, eagletwood and gold dust from land; halothanum and prized shells from the bottom of the sea. Each resource frontier produced its own ruined landscapes, unique where I had based myself and my family during fieldwork, has grown and contracted accordingly. A hub for shrimp aquaculture is no different, 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 trawls. Caws grass under rustly oil jacks, farmer 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 wastes. 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 labyrinthe 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 brokers, who finance their ponds, the machinery needed, the shrimp fry, their nets, the ice, the gasoline. In turn, the broker will have exclusive rights to the catch – part of which he will take as reparation of the loan. Which is why we have the situation where the price of shrimp is controlled by the owners, the price is discounted by the broker, the shrimp is bought by the retailer and sold at the market price. The price of shrimp is critical to the shift from non-capitalist systems of production, from the former feudal system of landlords, where the manorial lord owned the land and the workers were serfs, to shrimp aquaculture, thereby enforcing the eradication of the feudal/bas dynasties so visible in city geography.

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 chafe 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 many or too little of a certain kind of algae; other 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 a huge 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. 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: herbicides, antibiotics and an assortment of unleaded...
what is actually at least four different species selling mangrove crab, the common name for supplemented their income by collecting and struggling ponds, all caretakers I met failed harvests equal no pay. The value of the catch, however, one has to be careful. Not only crabs but saltwater crocodiles are too attracted by the abandoned ponds, only visited occasionally by a caretaker on the hunt for crabs. 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 labu 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. The countless caretakers, many of whom have labelled them ecosystem engineers. 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, 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, 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. 

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.) prized delicacy, sold alive in the metropolitan of Asia. Naturally occurring in the brackish waters of estuaries and mangroves in the Indo-Pacific, the crabs have adapted and proliferated in the pondscape. 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, 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. 

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

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.

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 (Choach) 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 adapted a combination of occupations for livelihood and survival. For instance, the Maghris, Nalkis, 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 pear milk 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 tanks by digging a hole of up to 300 feet deep, then plastering the opening with a layer of gypsum and ash (nakli) 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, and this was mixed with brackish well water for the animals. Throughout pre-independence, even crops (like bajra, gujar) 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 drought (drought), they migrated to the village Gogada (presently named ROD RI after the canal distributed water through it), a settlement near the main canal and lived there for a year with their entire family and livestock. Anyone in Mankasar without livestock would migrate, and only a few elderly people were left to look after the animals. These migrations could be up to 70-80 km towards the western and northwestern Bikaner as water was always in those areas. For instance, during the seven year long drought, the farmers would exchange their cattle with shop owners, to meet their needs for money.

**Note:**
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 historical practices of the pastoral communities. For instance, in the folktales of Panjir, Gogada, Tepji and Pabuji of Bikaner, the summer who are also worshipped as local deities have been identified as the protectors of cattle (cow in the case of Gogada and camel by Pabuji), a saviour of mankind and pastoral livestock. Pabuji, a saviour of mankind and pastoral livelihood, is a well-known example of the role of camels in the desert regions.

2. In Barodur village, there were two saltwater wells, the water of which was used for livestock on a rotational basis. The village elders along with Barodur Dav (Thakuri) would organise a meeting in the village and the members of the village were assigned a day for using the well water as per their total number of animals. Likewise, the number of animals who would visit the well was decided by the village elders and would be followed by the next day.

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4. Men would carry water in huge bags known as 'bagh' (bag) loaded on their back. The bag was made of sheep’s wool and was worn on the shoulder, while the bag was replaced with iron water tanks.

5. There were many saltwater wells in the region, the water of which was transported in big plastic bags. These plastic bags were later replaced with iron water tanks.

6. Some members of Meghwal community would make cow’s milk into jaggery, sugar, oil, and other household items. The shop owners would sell these to the pastoralists in the villages in return for money.

7. The village elders along with Barodur Dav (Thakuri) would organise a meeting in the village and the members of the village were assigned a day for using the well water as per their total number of animals. Likewise, the number of animals who would visit the well was decided by the village elders and would be followed by the next day. The village elders along with Barodur Dav (Thakuri) would organise a meeting in the village and the members of the village were assigned a day for using the well water as per their total number of animals. Likewise, the number of animals who would visit the well was decided by the village elders and would be followed by the next day.

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A s one moves along Runang-Kanda, a high-altitude pasture above the tree-line in Kinnaur district of Indian Western Himalayas, one is almost certain to be startled by the sheer scale of the remains of cattle carcasses strewn amidst abandoned and dilapidated stone houses in this area. What is even more astonishing is the addition of new 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 conditions during 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.

Ruins of living and dead in the Himalayan borderlands

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).
Corridor of death

Roghi-Kanda and Runang-Kanda are contiguous alpine grasslands overlooking the majestie Kinnuar-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 pastureslands, 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 villagers would collect them. Households were aligned to the rhythm of nature; they would make a journey up to these pastures to herd the younger animals down before the onset of winter. However, since agricultural practices have been forced to come to terms with the contemporary border realities of India and China, villages and rajas of the Mishmis have been fragmented, constituting an intangible ruin of Mishmi cultural landscape.

Not just what we are left with

The socio-political history of 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 citizen. I am a proud Chinese”. Mr. Phulu is well aware of the dangers of being misunderstood by some individuals, but the cross-border relations have been forced to come to terms with the contemporary political realities. 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 Himachal 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 Mishmis are unique in that they are not connected through trade and pilgrimage but rather through death. Majorly, the Mishmis still follow their own indigenous religion and, as per their belief system, a Mishmi soul travels back to its original home which is their place of origin. Incidentally, the place of its origin is believed to be across the border in TAR and Yunnan province. Their religious priests (lpu) 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 path. In the end, their ancestors look to reach the homes of the living. However, cross-border government policies have brought about changes that have led to the creation of a line of socio-religious institutions like the lgu. Nonetheless, despite the tremendous social economic transformations on either side of the border, priests on the Indian side still perform lgu rituals and services for Chinese Mishmis. Chinese Mishmis find ingenious ways to send money and the names of their dead relatives, mostly through locals who go hunting in the area where borders are undefined and who occasionally jump into Indian Mishmis. Owing to the contemporary border realities of India and China, villages and rajas of the Mishmis have been fragmented, constituting an intangible ruin of Mishmi cultural landscape.

The Abkhazian border checkpoint as seen from the Inguri Bridge (Photo by Mikel Venhoven, 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 2006. 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 upped 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 military base on the other side of the Inguri River, they are placed in a state of isolation and abandonment. Spatially isolated from Georgia, they are socially dissociated from the other side of the Inguri 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 not open to status of IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) 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. This stance and rhetoric have also been a significant focus of the current President of Abkhazia, Raoul 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 other side of the Inguri 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.

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and ‘accessibility’, these road signs reinforce (‘Sukhumi is accessible’) and scale (‘Sukhumi is home’), at the same time (re)works mobility centered on place-making (‘Sukhumi is the Inguri crossing point and the road signs here is how a variety travel there. What Georgians will never easily accessible. A city that is simply a city 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, 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 have further 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. ‘Materialities, such as road signs, walls, barbed wire and checkpoints are the physical facts created on the ground which 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. Especially with the backing of the Russian Federation, which ensures the safety and sovereignty of the semi-recognized Abkhazia 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 small paramilitary guerrilla troops that contested the Abkhazian authorities. 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 2008, 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 ruins 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 come 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 temporally return to visit their former homes, but in most cases this was only when staying in a tourist visa. Many families still that 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 dereliction by stripmining 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 ‘phantom’ reminders of the people that fled to Georgia proper and were not able to return after the violence ended. 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”.  

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 maintenance, reinforcement, repair, and improvement of Abkhazian statehood therefore focuses on that border, while in the hinterland lie the ruins, the dispossessed and the continuous porosity of the Abkhazian state. The situation for the Gal(i) residents seems to be a bit of a stalemate, they are in limbo, too because their presence in the borderlands is deemed to be the existential threat to Abkhazian nationalism. Ruins scattered throughout the landscape are ‘phantom’ reminders of both the past as well, as the exclusivity of the Gal(i) region in the present. Underlying this approach is an understanding not only that something is owned by certain actors but also as ‘relational’: as a strategic complex relation they are in. Enforced by neutral relational spaces, these 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 entity with spatial properties, which in turn have an impact on the population living in a peculiar post-conflict environment. I am interested in how narratives are being reified through the landscape act both as scars, reminders of past events and the establishment of a new order. Yet, underneath these socio-spatial material 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 Georgia and 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.
In the 2000s, China’s economy grew at an average annual rate of nearly 7 percent. Recent talk of a ‘new normal’ foresees slightly slower growth rates closer to 6 percent extending into the medium-term future – ‘new normal’ foresees slightly slower growth rates extending into the medium-term future – (‘new normal’ foresees slightly slower growth rates closer to 6 percent extending into the medium-term future –). Yet nearly all units in completed projects 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 construction sector effectively served by all but the largest institutional investors given the scale of necessary investments and with local and commercial constraints 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-credit, pawn shops, underground banks, trusts and credit associations, and outright illegal usury. While easy access to informal financing offered different terms, all featured high interest rates and short repayment schedules. Financial schemes with marginal savings toward land and property development, the pace of growth in Ordos’ property sector was enabled 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 projects 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 formal banks to extend credit to property 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 2019, ‘there is nothing to do with all of these houses but wait until more people arrive, or see if another bubble will inflate. This sentiment, though 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 anticipations 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 development path as a ‘ruinated’ one; rules are reduced to ruins. Fault for Ordos’ ‘failures’, according to much reporting on ‘ghost cities’, is laid on the feet of greedy, naive 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. 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 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 tropes, Ordos’ abandonment thus presents object lessons in ruination. That trope thus present object lessons in ruination. The ruins of Ordos’ property development projects don’t so much narrate a linear history of ascendancy and decline but as a poetics of time and value in the production of realities. Indeed, a fixation on the absence of bubble moment index a more complicated set of realities. 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 honored) lubricants of capitalism. One need look no further than Wall Street to find a contemporar,