

## Reviews

HENRYK ALFF / ANDREAS BENZ (eds), *Tracing Connections. Explorations of Spaces and Places in Asian Contexts*. Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin, 2014. 201 pages, €29.80. ISBN 978-3-86573-774-8

How scholarship in and about non-“Western” regions, places and areas ought to be conducted in the twenty-first century is a topical issue in German academia. The last decade has witnessed the results of the constructivist and spatial trends in the social sciences. This and recent debates about the relationship between area studies scholarship and disciplinary social science research have highlighted the weakening of boundaries between contained places and other spatial entities (“areas”) on the one hand and defined the field of area studies vs. disciplinary identities on the other. However, “the days of territorially trapped social sciences” might be over, “whereas the days of state borders are not” (Paolo Novak, p. 34).

The stated objective of the volume edited by Henryk Alff and Andreas Benz is to explore the linkage of flows and fixities, of movement and mobility vs. situatedness, and, as the title suggests, between space and place. They argue that a relational, processual and transactional perspective of interactions across space/s enables a different understanding of “the world”. Accordingly, actors, institutions and places can be interpreted as products of social interactions among people or groups of people across space. Contrary to conventional network theory, which generally relies on depicting one-dimensional mobile practices between agents on one and the same scale, the editors aim to illustrate how “webs of interrelated and overlapping multilocal connections that span across social spaces” (p. 8) and, thus, scales redefine connections and notions of place, situatedness and fixity in Asian contexts.

The volume’s contributions largely stem from original research on mobile practices in the context of trade and migration in Nepal, India, (Western) China, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Eight of the ten essays have been authored by members and fellows of the “Crossroads Asia – Conflict, Migration, Development” research network using empirical material collected since 2011. Additionally, the conceptual article by Paolo Novak, building on his earlier work on Afghan refugees in Peshawar, enhances the volume by illustrating how the choice of tracing which connection/s in situations where persons, places and processes seem to exist simultaneously is a normative and essentially a political decision each researcher is confronted with. Reflecting then on the connected preference-setting and categorisations, and the resulting general ontological uncertainty, Paolo Novak calls upon researchers to be aware of, first, the perspectives generally adopted vs. those disregarded (and the possible implications thereof),

and, second, of the tension between bordered and connected understandings of places and identities.

The four contributions in Part One examine dynamics and transformations in cross-border trade and the role of connections in borderlands. Tina Harris' article reminds readers of the fact that even an actor-centered approach can make sense only if structural forces are considered as well. Using the example of policy shifts that resulted in new infrastructure and logistical transformations in the Indian-Tibetan borderlands, she shows that evolving new commodity flows and merchant networks led to the creation and recreation of market places. Rune Steenberg's complementary contribution on trade networks across the Xinjiang-Kyrgyzstan border highlights how translocal business relations are secured "from below", for example through marriage relations. Henryk Alff's case study on cross-border bazaar traders in Bishkek's largest market, the Dordoy Bazaar, explores the entrepreneurs' narratives regarding how they have positioned themselves over time by navigating the changing institutional, political and economic conditions in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In her study on interactions across the Line of Control separating Baltistan and Ladakh in disputed Kashmir, Antia Mato Bouzas illuminates the "bordering process", that is, how the political border functions as a separating line for everyday physical interactions across it and how these delimitations undergo imagined (re-)connections through discourse and symbolic practices and relations. The unpredictability of these socio-spatial dynamics significantly effects borderlanders' lives and mobility.

The three contributions in Part Two focus on the implications of different types of mobilities and the translocal social spaces constituted by people's interactions. While Andreas Benz' article on the Wakhi community shows how forging translocal social networks and multilocality can enhance a group's social welfare, Christoph Wenzel's analysis of suburban Mazar-i Sharif as destination of rural migrants highlights the point that there is no guarantee that movement will improve a person's socio-economic status or promote social mobility. From a historical perspective Rana Behal's case study on indentured migrant labour in colonial plantations of South and Southeast Asia re-connects with Harris' reminder of the engineering of movements and connections through policy choices and that the resulting forces then shape and re-shape social spaces and places.

In sum, the book demonstrates the fruitfulness of a relational geographic viewpoint – what Arjun Appadurai called "process geographies" – to investigate the complexity and mobile dynamics of multi- and translocal social practices. All contributions present a processual perspective and the constructedness of places and spaces in Asian contexts. However, in keeping with Paolo Novak's thoughts, one might want to scrutinize which dimension this particular perspective disregards. The (over-)emphasis on the construction of space/s, places and identities as a result of geographic mobility/movements and practices across space calls for an equal consideration of the role of non-movement/s and of other than spatial mobilities. Re-imagining space not only as geographically, but also, as

discursively constructed, draws attention to the contested positions of particular places within discourses and imaginaries. A stronger focus on positionality, which would refer first of all to social situatedness, could add an important layer to the fixity-mobility nexus when tracing connections.

Katja Mielke

MATTHIAS SCHMIDT, *Mensch und Umwelt in Kirgistan. Politische Ökologie im postkolonialen und postsozialistischen Kontext*. (Erdkundliches Wissen, 153). Stuttgart: Franz-Steiner-Verlag, 2013. 400 pages, 26 figures, 12 charts, 8 photographs, 12 maps, €52.00. ISBN 978-3-515-10478-4

The starting point of Matthias Schmidt's study on human-environmental interactions in Kyrgyzstan is his general observation that in many postmodern societies the perception is prevalent that people's immediate dependency on land and natural resources for one's own survival is an anachronism. However, for many people living in Central Asia in general, and in rural regions of Kyrgyzstan in particular, the end of the socialist project meant not only a turning point in terms of ideological beliefs and identity, but also a dramatic socio-economic marginalisation and pauperisation. Against the background of economic demise accompanied by the liquidation of numerous enterprises and the privatisation of the means of production, many employees lost their jobs and secure wages. Simultaneously, the state radically cut the provision of economic, social and legal services. The increased socio-economic uncertainty led to rising dependency on access to, and the utilisation of, natural resources for both the national economy and individual households, especially in the countryside.

In the first chapter the author postulates that the shifts and peculiarities of human-environment relations generally are determined by specific interdependencies between the respective political, social and economic system, effective management institutions and the actual usage of the natural resources. Referring mainly to Douglas North, Elinor Ostrom and Anthony Giddens, he introduces his understanding of the concepts "institution", "property regime" and "resource", and their application in his research. Based on the proposition that land and natural resources are objects of interest for different players acting within the context of enabling and restricting societal institutions, the author justifies the application of an analytical approach known as "political ecology" for his study, which focuses on institutions, interest-driven actors and their interactions at different spatial-administrative levels. Matthias Schmidt emphasises that the upheaval in the course of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 is only the latest of several radical societal breaks since the nineteenth century which have influenced the living conditions and resource appropriation practices in the walnut-fruit forest region in Jalalabad Province in the south-west of the country,