NEW MOBILITIES IN ASIA

Edited by Luke Heslop and Galen Murton

Highways and Hierarchies

Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean

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New Mobilities in Asia

In the 21st century, human mobility will increasingly have an Asian face. Migration from, to, and within Asia is not new, but it is undergoing profound transformations. Unskilled labour migration from the Philippines, China, India, Burma, Indonesia, and Central Asia to the West, the Gulf, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand continues apace. Yet industrialization in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, the opening of Burma, and urbanization in China is creating massive new flows of internal migration. China is fast becoming a magnet for international migration from Asia and beyond.

Meanwhile, Asian students top study-abroad charts; Chinese and Indian managers and technicians are becoming a new mobile global elite as foreign investment from those countries grows; and Asian tourists are fast becoming the biggest travellers and the biggest spenders, both in their own countries and abroad.

These new mobilities reflect profound transformations of Asian societies and their relationship to the world, impacting national identities and creating new migration policy regimes, modes of transnational politics, consumption practices, and ideas of modernity. This series brings together studies by historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists that systematically explore these changes.

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Cover illustration: Yangtsa – Nepal road scene
Photo by Galen Murton

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 304 6
e-ISBN 978 90 4855 251 1 (pdf)
DOI 10.5117/9789463723046
NUR 740

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Acknowledgements

Putting this volume together has been a journey. In compiling a book that covers such an expansive terrain, we have amassed a great number of debts to an incredibly wide array of individuals, communities, and institutions. From the mountain plateaus of the Tibetan Himalaya to the coralline shores of Maldivian islands, all of our authors have been supported, sheltered, fed and humoured by countless individuals met on the roads we have studied so closely. And for that we are all grateful.

As co-editors, we would like to pay a special thanks to Professor Yongming Zhou, who was the first person to put us all around a table at the 2nd International 'Roadology' Workshop convened in December 2017 at Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) in Shenzhen, China. This book was finalized in an era of online conferences only, making the friendly and collegial environment in which we all initially gathered feel even more important as a catalyst for this collective work. For their mentorship, encouragement and support, we would also like to thank Ed Simpson and Katharine Rankin, who led the respective research projects on roads which brought us to work on this book together in the first place. We would also like to thank Saskia Gieling at Amsterdam University Press and the anonymous reviewers of earlier manifestations of the chapters and original manuscript. And, finally, we would like to acknowledge our authors who have stuck with us on this long and occasionally bumpy road.

There are, of course, far too many names to mention to adequately do justice – at least in any readable fashion – to all those who have had a hand in making the research possible and bringing this volume into fruition. However, as a small gesture of gratitude to our supportive networks, we would particularly like to thank:

Adam Saprinsanga, Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, Amtei, Andrea Pia, Ashok Sukumaran, Buddhika, Carolyn Charlton, Debbie Menezes, Deena Shareef, Durga Hasta, Elsie Lewison, Faree Shareef, Francesca Ratnatunga, Gaveem, Ilona Bowyer, Jakob Klein, Julia Brodacki, Kanchana Ruwanpura, Khalid Chauhan, Lagan Rai, Liz Hingley, Lubna Hawwa, M.C. Goswami, Marloes Janson, Martin Saxer, Nadine Plachta, Niamh Collard, Nicole Roughton, Pushpa Hamal, Rebecca Rotter, Rita Lalremruati, Samjhana Nepali, Sanjukta Ghosh, Sara Shneiderman, Shaina Anand, Shanta Thapa, Shyam Kunwar, Srinivas Chokkakula, Thoiba Saeedh, U Hminga Libra, Tsering Gurung, U Puia, Yaman Sardar, Yangjin Bista, Ashoka University as well as the community members of Lwangtlai, Zochachhuah, and Paletwa.

The project has been supported by numerous research grants and institutions: Marie S. Curie Individual Action Fellowship from the European Commission Horizon 2020 Programme (Grant no. 751131, 2018-2019); the Highland Asia Research Group (Remoteness and Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World, ERC Starting Grant no. 637764); the US Department of Education; and the Social Science Research Council for an International Dissertation Research Fellowship. The research leading to the results presented in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013)/ ERC Grant Agreement no. 616393. The research leading to the findings in Chapters 2 and 8 were also supported through funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC Grant no. 435-2014-1883, 2014-2020).

Preface

Thinking with roads

Penny Harvey

The anthropology of roads has flourished in recent years in tandem with the expansion of road-construction projects across the planet.[1] Confronted by the ways in which road-construction and infrastructural investments appear as instruments of economic growth, ethnographers have begun to pay close attention to diverse modes and scales of alignment that play out in specific times and places. Ethnographic research, such as is exemplified in the chapters collected here, challenges the assumptions of linear alignment and of enhanced prosperity. Looking in detail at how such large-scale infrastructure projects land in people's lives raises questions about the many different modes of engagement that emerge across the diverse scales that roads articulate.

The chapters gathered in the *Highways and Hierarchies* collection attend to the grounded effects of major road-building projects such as the Chinese state Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to promote and support infrastructural development in countries right across Asia and Eastern Europe. The mega-investments of the BRI build on the symbolism of ancient trade routes. They are promoted by the Chinese state as a gift to the region, motivated by the desire to enhance regional connectivity through the facilitation of economic exchange and the promise of economic growth. China has a unique capacity to fund infrastructural initiatives at this scale, and the source of economic possibility is also always a source of political concern. In particular, the BRI is a challenge to India's interests and influence in the region. As terrestrial trade corridors are opened up through Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan and Nepal, and maritime trade facilitated by the enhancement of the ports of the Maldives and Sri Lanka,

1 Recent anthropological monographs on the subject of roads include Beck, Klaeber, and Stasik 2017; Dalakoglou 2017; Filippello 2017; Harvey and Knox 2015; Uribe 2017; Simpson 2021.

Heslop, Luke, and Galen Murton (eds), *Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
DOI: 10.5117/9789463723046_PREFACE

the geopolitics of global circulation across both land and sea are reshaped. Borderlands are especially sensitive as physical and political proximities shift with the arrival of new and faster access routes to marginal areas and disputed territories. In these circumstances, roads appear as ambiguous and problematic gifts, technologies of development for some, of diplomatic provocation and asymmetrical integration for others. Either way, they impact on the lives of local people across the region who find themselves inextricably entangled in the materialities and the imaginaries of global expansion.

The chapters in this volume follow the unexpected ways in which roads change lives. They explore the notion of asymmetrical connectivity and the effects of differential inclusion. They look at how roads act as liberal modes of governance, channelling and filtering circulation, regulating movement. The ethnographic focus on how local people struggle to find ways to negotiate, resist and profit from these infrastructural projects suggest that 'enhanced connectivity' is far from straightforward. On the ground the BRI appears less monumental and more piecemeal. Every road has its own strategic implications for the territories it touches, connecting diverse local, regional and national interests. Close up we find less of a network and more of a meshwork of complex and incomplete alignments, many of which were already underway, while others address interests that diverge, often in significant ways, from the major geopolitical narratives of the wider 'project'. Indeed, the image of the BRI as a singular project is itself a rhetorical technology of alignment, an example of an idea that might help to build a road, as Rankin and Simpson suggest (this volume). More broadly still, this collection raises the question of how exactly road construction brings prosperity, and to whom, at a time when so many places are experiencing the fragility of environmental change, and the need for a carbon politics that does not simply aim to connect people and places but also to protect them.

In his recent book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018), Bruno Latour argues that human beings need to find new ways to inhabit the Earth in order to survive. The challenge, he suggests, is to rethink and to redescribe what 'belonging to a territory' entails. The hope is that such thinking will produce a new awareness of the material conditions of human lives at a time when relentless modernization, deregulated extraction and the ever more frantic demands for globalized economic growth have deprived so many people of a secure 'place to land' as he puts it (Latour 2018: 5). With so many people and things on the move, as migrants, as refugees or as components of vast intersecting supply chains,

the fundamental social and political challenge of our time is to find ways to conceive a common world, where connection to the Earth includes a commitment to the grounded relations of place *and* to the extensive relations through which places, ecologies and climates are brought into being. In this short essay, and as a preface to the essays that follow, I want to propose that thinking through infrastructures in general, and through roads in particular, offers one useful starting point for this latest inflection of political anthropology. What place do roads have in a world that has already exceeded its capacity to sustain continued economic growth? As massive infrastructure programmes are projected for roll out across the planet, the abrupt stalling of circulation that the 2020 global pandemic produced offers us a timely reminder of how current modes of connectivity, long taken for granted by those able to travel without a second thought, are also overwhelming the capacity to provide sufficient ground for settled ways of life.

Roads are perhaps unlikely focal points for attempting to think in positive ways about how to address the relationship between human beings and the material conditions of their lives. In terms of environmental futures, roads are generally seen as harmful technologies, and for good reason. Major road-construction projects – and indeed many minor road-building initiatives – are associated with the invasion of territories for extractive purposes, the securing of territories for military or administrative control, and the destruction of fragile ecologies as aspirations for connectivity cut into spaces where other established life worlds are not valued, or even recognized. Once built, roads invariably produce an intensified circulation of vehicles, for such is their purpose. Increased circulation brings environmental pollution, a surge in accidents and fatalities, and the displacement or destruction of the life forms, and forms of life that stand in the way. Their histories are testimony to the effects of globalization, the explosion of inequalities, and the scope and rapidity of deregulation designed to speed up extraction, circulation, and accumulation of wealth for the few.

But roads are also, and perhaps almost always, built in the name of a greater good, supported by calculations that demonstrate possibilities for development, social inclusion and well-being – across all scales, local, regional, national and international. As these possibilities are questioned, roads offer important vantage points from which to investigate the histories of how we got to where we are, and from which to think with others (of many kinds) about viable alternatives in fuller awareness of what is at stake. It is the specific spatio-temporal quality of roads that affords these possibilities for thought.

Roads draw together multiple relational systems. They both comprise the ground of specific places and extend beyond through the open-ended possibilities that arise from connectivity to elsewhere. To invest in road construction is to speculate on these possibilities in the process of seeking to bring new relational dynamics into play. The contributors to this volume look in detail at how such transformations can lead to the disruption of established social, political and economic relations but also frequently reinforce existing hierarchies. In every case, however, the intention is to transform existing social possibilities by reconfiguring the material ground of relationality. These projects of transformation are intrinsically experimental. The outcome is always unpredictable, because the instigators and promoters of the transformation can never be fully aware of the multiple relations in play at the complex intersections of engineered systems and non-engineered, emergent ecologies.[2] Engineers manage such complications by limiting their focus to specific material challenges, as they work to specify the problem and articulate potential solutions. Contracted to build a stable surface, they focus first and foremost on the terrain, the instability of seismic zones, the demands of steep elevations, heavy rainfall, or perpetual drought. The contract with the client further narrows the scope and the quality of the material interventions. They rely on the political authority of their client to manage the social complications that arise. In this way, despite the huge popularity of road-construction projects, it is ultimately the powerful who are best placed to leverage the futures that they desire, with little or no interest in the desires and expectations of those who have other plans, or who do not plan at scale at all, but day by day seek to make a living from the world that takes form around them. The erasure of alternatives matters, and provokes further questions about the significance of what emerges at these sites of convergence where a specific infrastructural form becomes both the material condition of possibility for lives lived in specific places, and for connective networks that pay no heed to place.

State politics and infrastructural transformation on the ground

My starting point for conducting ethnographic research on roads grew from an attempt to think about the presence of the state in a small Andean town, where people consistently complained that they had been abandoned and

2 These ideas are drawn from 'Introduction: Infrastructural Complications' in Harvey et al. 2017.

forgotten by successive governments (see Harvey 2005). Here connectivity was not taken for granted, and the road was a focal point for local disquiet. The traffic from the highland city of Cusco to the lowlands of the Amazon basin was relatively frequent. The road had become an important regional trade route, and it gave some of the larger roadside settlements the status of market towns, able to provision both a wider hinterland and the steady stream of passengers who broke their journeys in need of food and accommodation. However, the compacted earth road was also quite lethal. Accidents were common as were the small roadside crosses and shrines that marked where travellers had died. Journeys were always unpredictable. Landslides and floods frequently left people stranded, sometimes unable to continue for days on end. Local people longed for an improved road and campaigned hard. Eventually, diverse interests aligned sufficiently for funds to be forthcoming. This forgotten corner of Peru was to receive a new highway. The parameters of connectivity and circulation expanded. No longer limited to the link between highlands and lowlands within a national territory, the road had been incorporated into a more extensive international imaginary. It was set to become a section of an international 'Interoceanic Highway', built to foster the flow of goods from the booming economy of Brazil to the growing markets of Asia (see Harvey and Knox 2015). This imaginary of transoceanic connection was expressed in a surprising road sign that went up at the junction where the new road forked off the existing paved highway just outside Cusco, high in the Peruvian Andes. Among other more local destinations the sign indicated that the city of São Paulo was 4601 kilometres away! São Paulo, one of the largest cities in the world is a place that nobody was ever going to travel to via this route – except perhaps the occasional backpacker with the time to spare. The Brazilian engineers working on the project frequently travelled back to their homes and offices on the east coast of Brazil, but they would always fly. The sign suggested a link to a destination that bore no relevance to the experience or the aspirations of travellers who passed by on their journeys. It marked a claim to an imaginary connection. It could just as well have marked the distance to Paris or London.

Despite the existence of this and other unlikely claims, local people were delighted by the prospect of this road, and in many ways it met their expectations. The construction process was disruptive but there were good employment possibilities. It was clear that some stood to gain more than others and there were anxious struggles over routing, and competition for access to jobs, and to the money distributed across the provisioning supply chain. The macroeconomic promise of the road was

not delivered. A limited budget had compromised the choices of route and the quality of the surface. The road that emerged was too slow, steep and winding to serve the needs of major international traders. It was also not sufficiently robust to withstand the harsh climate of the high altitudes, the shifting watery ecologies of the Amazon basin, or the seismic activity of the eastern slops of the Andes. Furthermore, major corruption scandals subsequently revealed that this road had primarily served as a source of financial extraction. It was not surprising that the rhetorical promise of modernization through the facilitation of international connectivity was never materialized.

Nevertheless, the road did produce significant social transformation that came about through the changing proximity of rural settlements to urban centres. The new asphalt surface made it possible to travel in cars rather than trucks or SUVs. Transport ownership changed and collective taxis and buses began to shuttle people between the city and the rural areas. With journey times dramatically reduced people became more oriented to urban services, particularly the medical and educational possibilities. These movements redistributed populations and reoriented lifestyles. In the 1980s the large landowners with good connections to regional centres of power still controlled the local economy and the political offices. With the arrival of this new asphalted road they began to move away from the rural towns to live in the cities. They kept their lands but ceded local administrative power to a newly educated generation, familiar with urban institutions and keen to exploit the new economic opportunities that the road afforded. Electricity and mobile telephony had accompanied the road, and people from across the wider hinterland were drawn to the attractions of engineered environments. The town of Ocongate where I had lived over many years expanded rapidly and people joked that it had become 'Hong Kongate'. For many, however, life became more precarious. The changing spatial and temporal dynamics rearranged the relative advantage of different settlements. Small producers struggled to compete with the wholesale prices of urban markets. Small traders found that passengers no longer needed the services of a roadside town as journey times shrank. Roads offered possibilities, particularly for those who had capital to invest in vehicles, in stock for smarter shops, restaurants or petrol stations. Otherwise opportunities were haphazard and unevenly distributed. Livelihoods were realigned to urban values at a time when climate change further amplified the precarity of the rural poor. Are these inevitable outcomes? Perhaps. But they are not the only outcomes. There are many ways in which roads produce modes of engagement that can lead to the erasure of a sense of place, but it is also important to attend

to the ways in which roads can also provide a degree of common ground for social life and social organization.

On territory and circulation

As I began to explore roads as sites from which to think ethnographically about the nature of state presence, I recalled the centrality of Radcliffe-Brown's insistence that while states do not exist in the phenomenal world (1948: xxiii), territorial structures are of critical significance to the study of political organization.

> Every human society has some sort of territorial structure. We can find clearly-defined local communities the smallest of which are linked together in a larger society, of which they are segments. This territorial structure provides the framework, not only for the political organisation, whatever it may be, but for other forms of social organisation also, such as the economic, for example. [...] In studying political organisation, we have to deal with the maintenance or establishment of social order, within a territorial framework, by the organised exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force. (Radcliffe-Brown. 1948: xiv)

Both the Belt and Road Initiative and the Interoceanic Highway can clearly be understood as emerging from and thus reproducing dominant forms of political organization – national states, regional administrations, local towns. At the same time, roads also reveal the effort it takes to sustain the integrity of territorial structures, because they do not stop at the borders. This visible effort suggests that such territorial structures only ever operate as partial and permeable frameworks. Roads are indeed frequently built in an attempt to integrate territory but they are also simultaneously used to disrupt and transform existing lines of political influence and control. In this respect roads both order and disorder territorial structures, as many of the contributions to this volume emphasize. Indeed, under conditions of neoliberal financing that exploit public assets for private accumulation in the name of 'progress', roads are key instruments of modes of governance that reference territory but are not bound by territory.

In our ethnographic study of the Interoceanic Highway (Harvey and Knox 2015), we learned of the multiple agendas that brought this road into being. We also unearthed the diverse forms that a long-held ideological

commitment to the creation of trade routes with global reach had taken over the years. Alongside the territorializing rhetoric that conjured the image of roads as the means to enhance a national capacity to trade effectively with other nations, the road was also clearly a site of diverse speculative investments. These investments reframed territories as either more local, or far more extensive, than the national framework acknowledged. For example, there were squatter settlements where people gathered in the hope of finding work, of establishing eligibility for compensation, or best of all, for rehousing once the road appeared. These modes of speculative investment in anticipation of displacement and subsequent compensation have been beautifully described by Jeremy Campbell in his work on a highway yet to be built in the Brazilian Amazon (Campbell 2015). Widespread falsification of land titles here has led to a situation where far more land is 'legally' registered than actually exists. The possibility of a road has granted some the space to settle, for a while at least. But it is not only the poor who speculate on roads. Large construction companies aligned to ministries of state pay handsomely for lucrative contracts. Roads are built with public money, ostensibly to serve the public good. They are also the means to secure personal fortunes and private gain at all levels of the construction process. People commonly assumed that transactions in the shadow economy of large construction projects shaped access to decision makers, to materials and machinery, and to legal permissions. The rumours of endemic corruption are occasionally substantiated in high profile court cases. The fall out from the Interoceanic Highway project included the aftershocks of the indictment of the lead construction company, Odebrecht, a Brazilian organization that was found guilty of corruption and collusion with officials at the highest level of government in both Brazil and Peru.

The bordering effects of roads

The ethnography of roads had led us to an understanding of state power as both personal and institutional, with both territorializing and deterritorializing ambitions, materialized in a complex meshwork of local, national and international relations. This tension between the containment of territory and the encouragement of flow brings the importance of borders to the fore. Roads are used to produce a huge range of bordering effects, as a consequence of the ways in which they cut through otherwise continuous territory (marking a differentiated physical space) and create corridors

of differentiated movement through the enforcement of exclusionary mechanisms.

The geopolitical landscapes of South Asia are dominated by the powerful territorial state influence of India and China. But these states invest in competing vectors of circulation, with the effect that a peripheral Chinese settlement might find itself more oriented to Indian centres than to Chinese ones (see Yi Huang, this volume). Imperial histories randomly produced the borders that now ground everyday life in important respects, shaping the direction that goods and taxes flow, the languages that people speak, the source of engineering expertise and the intersection of diverse modes of authority. So too in Latin America where the circulations of goods and persons also respond to wider geopolitical arrangements, with the US looming large not only in the financing arrangements, but in the bordering practices that open and close the flow of money, of labour, of drugs, of migrants, under a fluctuating and partial regime of international surveillance. The histories of roads register these fluctuations of bordering and of marginalization and the intersections of global, national, and local forces, of human design and ecological response. On the ground, at the local scale, they are also concrete sites of differentiation. Contributors to this volume describe the uneven distribution of risk, the varied experiences and modes of travel that equate to differences of status even within a single vehicle, the punctuated rhythms of journeys, the differentiations that determine who gets to stop where and why, and who chooses to continue. These are the complex intersecting rhythms of movement and stasis, of progress and delay.

The notion that modern road networks facilitate trade, by enhancing the flow of goods and money, pays insufficient attention to the ways that roads depend on 'friction' beyond that of the vehicles on the tarmac surface.[3] Borders are the foundational expression of a managed territory. Roads are used to strengthen borders because they channel flows, they make the circulation of persons and goods more legible, and they can be policed. Nevertheless, borders are also always porous, even those that are highly militarized. The ways in which roads support and/or subvert border regimes are a key dimension of territorial politics in spaces of neoliberal governance. They are the valves that open and close the flow. Bordering devices accompany most claims to territory and the counterclaims that challenge the authority of political control. Thus, while agents of the state

3 A point that Anna Tsing (2004) emphasizes in her work on conceptual productivity of 'friction' as a generative force.

control populations by the use of many different kinds of roadblocks (from traffic lights to physical barriers), those who seek to challenge or question the authority of state agents also turn to roadblocks as an effective means of appropriating the capacity to control the flow. Whether deployed as modes of legal protest, or as criminal acts of intimidation or theft, these unofficial bordering devices reveal the importance of the ability to display the capacity to control the flows of goods and persons. Crucially, it is not only state forces that have this capacity.

Given the ubiquity of bordering devices, most road users expect friction, and there are skills to travelling acquired when needed by those who have learned how to circumvent barriers and checkpoints. Roads are experienced as sites of encounter and circumvention, as well as dangerous spaces. In the years of the war with Shining Path (from 1980 to the mid-1990s), journeys in Peru involved running a terrifying gauntlet of army checkpoints. Those without documents were always in danger of being arrested and detained as terrorists. The drivers would anticipate the checkpoints and stop to let people jump off the trucks and run around behind the police posts to join again further along the road. Those with papers would stay aboard. Attention to bordering devices matters because they shed light on the fluctuating rhythms of politics and capitalism as registered in the bodies of those who travel, in the state of the surfaces, in the speed of movement, in the periods of waiting.

Thinking with roads

This volume invites us to think with roads in order to attend to the hierarchies that are both reproduced and challenged as large construction projects arrive and inevitably reconfigure the places through which they pass. Ethnographic analysis allows for a focus on the diverse qualities and dynamics of specific places, perhaps allowing a glimpse of the possibilities as well as the constraints that a focus on roads brings into view. Attention to relational histories also allows for an expansive investigation about what belonging to a territory entails.

Roads produce unlikely collaborations, of engineering, finance, politics, manual labour, machinery, materials and all manner of 'disruptions' as the common purpose of a contained construction 'project', at whatever scale, will also bring forth specific and incompatible interests. But even as they emerge and fail in so many ways to deliver the promised future, roads also and always become the ground on which people, machines and animals

move, or simply wait as others come and go. A road, like any track, is a space that is differentiated from its surroundings in underdetermined ways. A road is a marker of difference. What matters are the differences that are marked, and what people make of that difference. For example, a stretch of tarmac can mark the change from a rough to a smooth surface, making it possible to move at more accelerated speeds. But roads can be travelled slowly, too; they can become spaces of stillness for those who are watching, or waiting, or finding themselves left behind. What these engineered spaces become and for whom is integral to their fascination.

Whether surfaces are repaired or not, modified by design or by neglect, they are also always 'unfinished' sites. In the world of the pandemic, of climate change, and the Anthropocene, where the category of the human is unsettled by other intelligences and other grounds for existence, might there be reconciliations that particular kinds of roads can provide? Highways as demarcated surfaces also produce the verges, the places ignored and left behind by those who rush by.

In Latin America roads excite passion and have what appears to be an almost unique capacity to draw people together in the expectation of a particular mode of connectivity from which everybody can benefit. Unlike a railway, a tram, underground pipes or overground cables, the road remakes the ground on which anybody can tread. The ground may or may not be policed but it can, at times, be appropriated even as it reveals the highly uneven terms of such inclusion. I am particularly drawn to the spaces that roads become when circulation stops. Projects in suspension become intriguing sites to visit, resonant with memories of past promises. Closed roads produce accessible public spaces for marches, rituals and ceremonies.

Latour refers to the 'critical zone' of the Earth, to draw attention to the fragile and threatened material relations that are the uncared-for source of life on this planet. His plea is also a call for awareness of the urgent need to create more 'common ground'. Belonging to a territory in this respect is not primarily a political ordering – although political action is desperately needed. Belonging is an affective relationship to the ground, an acknowledgement of its value. In Peru rural people make offerings to forces of the Earth as they set off on journeys. They also draw these forces into their lives when they build the foundations of a house, and when they construct roads. A curiosity as to what roads make possible and what they prevent, what they make flourish and what they kill, is a curiosity about the relational capacities of infrastructural formations, a move to further understanding of how relational possibilities can support the redescription of what 'belonging to a territory' entails.

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1 Why highways remake hierarchies

Luke Heslop and Galen Murton

Abstract
This chapter lays out the volume's documentation of many of the uneven – and unexpected – experiences of mobility transformation as it unfolds as a developmental imperative across vast and complex landscapes of South Asia. Whether journeys become shorter, faster, more treacherous, cheaper, or more costly, questions about ownership, management, access to 'public goods', responsibility, and other critical concerns consistently take new shape when expressed through the coming of a new road or transportation network. We posit that roads are fragile political achievements. In response to the sweeping state promises about new mobilities and modernization that highways are purported to deliver, the stories comprising this volume, and outlined in this chapter, speak from other perspectives, such as how political opportunity is routinely met with a measure of public scepticism and at times efficacious protest.

Keywords: South Asia, roads, hierarchy, economic transformation, geopolitics

Introduction

There is an old joke told in various configurations throughout South Asia that goes like this:

> On a diplomatic mission to the US, a cabinet minister from (insert whichever South Asian country you like here) has some issue with a hotel booking and is offered hospitality at the home of his American political counterpart. In the evening they drink whisky at the American's home and look out over the city. 'What a beautiful home you have,' comments the guest. 'How did you afford such a place on a public servant's salary?'

Heslop, Luke, and Galen Murton (eds), *Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
DOI: 10.5117/9789463723046_CH01

> The American politician points towards a bridge in the near distance and says, 'You see that bridge?' His guest nods. 'Well, you are looking at 1% of the deal.' Years later the opportunity arises for the cabinet minister to return the hospitality and host the American. In the evening, over more whisky, the American comments on the palatial home of his host and returns the question put to him years before: 'How did you afford such a place on a public servant's salary?' At this point, the politician invites the American to look out over the cityscape and observe the bridge across the river. 'You see that bridge?,' the politician asks. The American strains his eyes in the dark and says, 'No, I can't see anything.' At this point the host smiles, gestures towards his palatial home and says, 'You are looking at 100% of the deal.'

At one level, the punchline offers a satirical comment on the perception of political corruption in South Asia vis-à-vis America. At another, it confirms the material and political reality that infrastructure does not always achieve what it is initially proposed to accomplish; moreover, such projects can be – and often are – more profitable for some powerful actors than the originally intended recipients. Furthermore, it evinces the popular understanding that grand infrastructure projects that are billed to benefit the public, such as bridges and highways, are configured to benefit the powerful. This understanding amongst the recipients of infrastructure makes the allure of the road in South Asia as a developmental panacea an even more interesting phenomenon. It is the power relations embedded within and emerging through road development that are at the heart of this book.

Globally, a staggering 25 million kilometres of new roads are anticipated worldwide by 2050, which is enough to circle the earth some 600 times (see Rankin and Simpson, this volume). Growth in South Asia is central to this prediction; India alone currently has a road network of over 5.5 million kilometres and plans to double its annual infrastructure investment to $200 billion (Lama 2019). Infrastructure-focused sovereign wealth funds, though seemingly not as successful as first anticipated, have also facilitated a surge in road construction in Asia. In the face of economic slowdown, global capital investors such as AustralianSuper have stepped in to bolster developments and keep roads unfolding across the region.

At the same time, cross-border highways and regional projects are being funded at scale by the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which, with more than US$100 billion designated for the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), marks another significant

addition to the infrastructure investment space impacting road infrastructure across the continent (Ren 2016; Yu 2017). With an estimated US$1 trillion to be invested until 2025 (Menon 2017; Joy-Perez and Scissors 2018) a US$40 billion Silk Road Fund, a US$25 billion fund for the Maritime Silk Road, and about US$800 billion earmarked by the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China for international infrastructure investments (Oliveira et al. 2020), not even the most outwardly national(istic) programmes of development in South Asia can be considered in isolation from China's rise as an influential infrastructural global power and the globally entwined infrastructure investment space (Heslop 2020).

Foregrounding the scale of expanding highways in metric terms like kilometres paved, or the funding modalities of US dollars invested, tells only one side of a story, however. In South Asia today, road developments are far more complex and uneven, and with the highways and activities that surround them come a host of social, cultural, environmental and political upheavals; inter alia displacement, resettlement, and relocation. The current and future impacts of climate change on roads and their users – such as the risks posed to a range of infrastructures and their constituents by extreme weather events related to shifting monsoon patterns as well as environmental and ecological transformations that accompany expansive road development across South Asia – remains to be fully understood. What is clear is that the changing topography that comes with blasting rocks in mountain passes, dredging sand from the ocean floor, and paving the surface of the earth with tar and asphalt significantly impacts the everyday lives of communities across South Asia. Constructing a road, conceptually and materially, is a fragile political achievement.

This volume documents many of the uneven – and unexpected – experiences of mobility transformation as it unfolds as a developmental imperative across a vast and complex landscape. Whether journeys become shorter, faster, more treacherous, cheaper, or more costly, questions about ownership, management, access to 'public goods', responsibility, and other critical concerns consistently take new shape when expressed through the coming of a new road or transportation network. In other words, *roads change lives*, but as the following chapters emphasize across an array of South Asian places and spaces, such changes are not always for the better. In response to the sweeping state promises about new mobilities and modernization that highways are purported to deliver, the stories comprising this volume speak from other perspectives, such as how political opportunity is routinely met with a measure of public scepticism and at times efficacious protest.

The journey so far

Highways and Hierarchies: Ethnographies of Mobility from the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean examines the contemporary proliferation of road-development projects in South Asia and the Tibet-Himalaya region to show how new infrastructures simultaneously create new connections and reinforce social hierarchies across a range of spatial and political scales. While the uneven outcomes of road development have been well documented for decades (Blaikie et al. 1977), government officials, construction contractors, district leaders, and community actors continue to lobby for and commit tremendous resources to the financialization and implementation of new transport systems. And yet, in innumerable instances and across a range of landscapes and demographics, the realization of new mobilities does not have a flattening effect for all constituencies; rather, the making of new roads instead (re)inscribes particular systems of order and rank, privileging some and (re)marginalizing others. From the middle-class embrace of new and exclusive social spaces in Northeast India (Gohain, this volume) to the reproduction of risk and vulnerability for already precarious populations in rural Nepal (Murton and Sigdel, this volume), the chapters that follow bear witness to common patterns of hierarchization across South Asia. By addressing the destabilizing and reinforcing effects of hierarchy – an experience that is ubiquitous across the region but also distinct and unique to each case study – the volume contributes new insights about the ways in which road development accelerates and compounds class divisions and social disruption.

'Hierarchy', as Naomi Haynes and Jason Hickel have pointed out, is rarely deployed by Western academics in positive terms (Haynes and Hickel 2016). Our use of hierarchies does not attempt to place any sort of moral directive or injunction on hierarchy itself, but rather it is in recognition that the communities we have worked with and travel through in the pages of this book are organized hierarchically and perceive themselves to be so. Moreover, not everyone in these communities perceive hierarchy to necessarily be a bad thing per se. At stake in many of the communities discussed herein is the capacity to marshal the economic and cultural processes that emplace hierarchy in particular locations, especially in moments when these become challenged by the arrival of the road and the highway.

Our use of the term 'highways' indicates that the case studies comprising the volume are concerned with major and relatively large-scale transportation infrastructure projects – often, but not always, called 'highways' – situated in country-specific contexts. For example, in the Maldives, the

road dynamics under analysis are components of national development priorities complicated by geopolitical anxieties and intrigue (Heslop and Jeffery, this volume). In Pakistan, highways in Sindh are analysed because of the imagined and anticipated new middle-class 'consumer culture' they facilitate (Khan, this volume). In Tibetan borderland regions of China, the roads under examination are part of China's state-led development initiative to open up the Sichuan-Tibet Highway (Huang, this volume). Collectively, these place-based studies, while always unique analyses of particular experiences in specific localities, also reflect broader trends of capitalization, marginalization, and social transformation that resonate with other recent studies of road and infrastructure development in the social sciences (Mostowlansky 2017; Harvey and Knox 2015; Campbell 2013).

While smaller-scale roads, in both rural and urban environments, also proliferate across South Asia, this collection deliberately examines the larger-scale development of district, state-provincial, and national highways because of the significant political and social impacts they have at local, national, and international levels. According to Harvey and Knox, roads are productive for analysis because of 'what they can tell us about how infrastructural relations simultaneously make national territories, international corridors, regional circuits, and specific localities' (2015: 25). That is, road studies help to bridge macro-level analyses of international and national geopolitical and geoeconomic connections with micro-level insights about the transformations to quotidian experiences at village, household, and bodily levels both on and off of new roadways. Larkin's (2013) analyses of infrastructure further reveal the ways in which transport technologies converge into specific systems and how these systems shape fundamental dimensions of life. As 'matter that enable the movement of other matter', things like roads, rail lines, and communication technologies 'comprise the architecture of circulations […] and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life' (Larkin 2013: 328-329). While road infrastructures enable the movement of people and goods, they also control those movements, and thus they help rewrite relations between such things, as well as between a state and its populations. Therefore, the development of roads and the socioeconomic dynamics and bureaucratic responses they set in motion allow for a particular view of and into the state without looking at the state centre itself.

At the heart of any critical understanding of road and infrastructure development is the very notion of 'development' itself. As Nustad asserts, '[d]evelopment is about planned change, and development policies are therefore revealing about how authorities see the ideal relationship between

development and the state' (Nustad 2005: 80; cf. Harvey 2005). As the nation's 'development' in some machination or other across the cases elaborated here captures the raison d'etre of the politician in contemporary South Asia, the development of highways, roads, and larger transport networks make concrete particular types of state and political performance. Roads facilitate grand openings, they are invitations for politicians to come to particular places and become associated in enduring ways, and they are enticing, particularly as they provide a tangible node at which the state idea and the state apparatus meet.

In conversation with much of the social science literature on roads and mobilities, the chapters in this volume argue against authors such as Augé, who has claimed that highways lack any 'social significance' and are typical examples of 'non-places' (1995: 73-74). Employing a definition proposed by Massey (1994) and Wilson (2004), the chapters show that, 'instead of envisioning roads as neutral lines of penetration going from centre to periphery, or point a to point b, they should be visualized as stretched-out places where intersecting social relations cluster and adhere' (Wilson 2004: 529). Harvey furthermore asserts that the road itself can act 'as a key to understanding the social and physical landscape through which one is passing and also provide a concrete space for ethnographic focus' (2005: 131). In a similar vein, Dalakoglou, drawing on Lefebvre (1991: 124-125, 164), claims the road is one of the most proximate, visible and tangible consequences of otherwise abstract and distant processes (Dalakoglou 2010: 133), thus making the road an apposite site through which to analyse the more abstract notions of the state. As Fairhead's (1992) research in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) illustrated long ago, the road, as a space of social activity, brings together an otherwise disparate collection of characters: the heads of international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, local political cadres, corrupt police, non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross, religious institutions such as Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and, of course, people living along roads, as some of the specific targets of development and constituents of new road projects. Following Fairhead, this volume focuses on the planning, construction and use of the road to illuminate how intersecting social relations adhere and cluster, and where power is established, exercised, and challenged.

Leveraging a grounded and materialist analysis, *Highways and Hierarchies* contributes new conceptual, empirical, and regional insights to both recent and classic key works at the crossroads of international development, mobilities, and South Asian studies. While many excellent studies of infrastructure

take up the political power of infrastructural connections in urban political ecological contexts (e.g. Anand 2017; Björkman 2015; Carse 2014), fewer analyses attend to the scalar dimensions of infrastructural integration (Karrar 2010) across local, national, and international levels (Shell 2015), particularly in rural and mountainous environments (Flower 2004). In addition to providing new ethnographic and empirical understandings to ongoing conversations about infrastructures, place making, and territorial power, *Highways and Hierarchies* also sheds new light on perennial debates around the connections between road development, state making, and modernity. This includes updating the established political ecological critiques of the unevenness of rural road development (Blaikie et al. 1977) as well as advancing perspectives about the ways that powerful forces of modernity travel along new roads (Mostowlansky 2017). Working across scale, the book chapters also address the positionalities of transnational political economies (Harris 2013) as well as the geopolitical priorities of international road development (Rippa 2020) in South Asia today. Moreover, the vast development of roads across the region is explored against the backdrop of China's ongoing and far-reaching commitment to 'connectivity'. In particular, chapters on Tibet, Pakistan, Nepal, and the Maldives give a unique ethnographic insight into the China effect in South Asia, and the ways these dynamics are articulated and framed through increasingly widespread discourses on Beijing's BRI (Winter 2019).

The volume was inspired by a meeting at the 2nd International 'Roadology' Workshop at Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) in Shenzhen, China, in November 2017, convened by Dr. Yongming Zhou. The workshop brought together participants from three international research programmes studying roads and connective infrastructure in Asia. These projects include 'Roads and the Politics of Thought' (SOAS, University of London),[1] 'Infrastructures of Democracy' (University of Toronto), and 'Remoteness and Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World' (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich). As workshop collections so often do, the papers and discussions offered rich material for regional comparative discussion. Drawing from and building on the early conversations in Shenzhen, our aim with this volume is to engage with and better understand the impacts of the vast and ambitious projects of 'infrastructural connectivity' that are changing the shape of the South Asian subcontinent. Importantly, we do

1 Roads and the Politics of Thought: ERC Grant Agreement no. 616393; Infrastructures and Democracy SSHRCC Grant no. 435-2014-1883, 2014-2020; Remoteness and Connectivity: ERC Grant Agreement no. 637764.

this in a way that offers the reader new insights on the evolving geography and political economies of the region, particularly in light of the rapid pace and scale of road development led by the governments of the world's largest countries, India and China. While the chapters speak to specific interests of the reader (both thematically and regionally), the volume as a whole provides a wide-lens perspective of the types of challenges and changes taking place in this rapidly transforming part of the world. Furthermore, the ethnographic nature of the contributions throughout the book lends it an important quality of intimacy; that is, whilst engaging with global processes at comparative regional scales, we also present and interpret the lived experiences of those constituents whose pasts, presents, and futures are variously bound up with new roads and highways in both material and imagined ways. The book thus offers a unique focus on local perceptions of pan-South Asian road construction and draws on a broad range of sources, from village fieldwork to global media propaganda.

Organization

In South Asia as elsewhere, road developments bridge social and spatial scales but are always political projects with uneven outcomes. Building on and contributing to an emerging body of 'roadology' literature – to borrow a phrase generated from the workshops in China and as articulated and conceptualized by the convener, Yongming Zhou (2016) – the central tenet that binds the chapters in this volume – and a point that the authors collectively make in various contexts – is the role of the highway in reinforcing and destabilizing social, political, and economic hierarchies. That is, road constructions are inherently political processes that function to territorialize space across scales for distinct, but often conflicting, governmental, economic, and community interests. It is thus useful to look at transportation infrastructure because 'a road invites us to explore its constitutive relations: the materials, the finance arrangements, the politics, the dreams of progress, the design [...] and the force of contingent events that routinely disrupt the best laid out plans' (Harvey 2016: 2-3).

The chapters herein explore South Asia's vast road-development projects and programmes of improvement at a number of intersections, training an ethnographic lens on the roads as they come to stand for development and modernity, operate as sites of encounter and social experience, and symbolize the means and the ends of a relationship with the global economy. Collectively, the book presents the combined work of this aforementioned

international network of research programmes that have maintained a critical focus on roads, road construction, road maintenance, and road use from the Himalayan mountain passes of the Tibetan Plateau, through the borderlands of India's north-east and the deserts of Pakistan, to the low-lying coralline islands of the Maldives archipelago and beyond. Furthermore, a key consideration throughout the book, encapsulated by the title, is how new roads and new horizons for 'connectivity' create new forms of hierarchy in the landscapes they traverse. The volume explores this question in multiple ways, including paying attention to international trends and the social dynamics of access to capital and vehicles' colonization of space (Gohain; Heslop and Jeffery), the threat inherent in movement across landscapes that have suffered decades of violent conflict (Sarma; Murton and Sigdel), and the effect and power of roads and their financialization as platforms for political performance and spaces of exposure and encounter (Khan; Huang). The chapters analyse such dynamics at varying levels, from that of individual subjectivity to that of the institution, as a synecdoche for the nation, and at all points en route.

From everyday life in rural villages throughout highlands and islands of the subcontinent to the grand agenda of China's international development programmes, the chapters are ordered with specific attention to thematic flow, rather than discrete sections based on geographic region, or rigid overarching themes. Composing the volume on these terms allows us to follow synergistic pathways and weave different threads through the chapters as we journey across the region, such as how road developments reproduce the aspirational ideologies of modernity while at the same time reconstituting established hierarchies across distant (but increasingly interconnected) societies. In so doing, the collection provides a grounded and localized view as well as an analysis of global patterns related to transportation infrastructure development.

The central aim of the volume is to illustrate how social transformation that comes with highways takes particular form and poses specific problems in different political and geological landscapes. The book examines geopolitical hierarchy through the expansion of infrastructural horizons in South Asia's larger economies (India and Pakistan), and also the impact of road building in smaller nations in the region (Maldives and Nepal) that face distinct geological and topological challenges. The vast development of roads in South Asia is further explored against the backdrop of China's ongoing and far-reaching commitment to connectivity. The work here does not so much engage directly with the Chinese BRI, but rather, and perhaps more productively, looks at what happens to road infrastructure projects

when they are developed in the shadow of – and in places incorporated into – China's vast international initiatives.

Public – and to a large degree state-generated – discourse around the geopolitics of India and China creates an unstable context through which to analyse events from on the ground. It is commonly and popularly thought that there are issues at stake in road building that are strategically significant, perhaps beyond the logics of neoliberalism and which in fact return to an age-old question of empire and power (Murton and Lord 2020). A perceived threat to India's historical dominance in South Asia has been widely promulgated in the press with confrontational headlines such as, 'Asian Giants China and India Flex Muscles over Tiny Maldives' (Sanjeev and Aneez 2018) and through international conferences entitled, 'China in South Asia: Friend or Foe'. Such grand (and popular) narratives (en)frame the subcontinent and its constituent parts as a particular locality (Appadurai 1996), notably one of competitive confrontation in which certain types of social, economic, and infrastructural activity have ready-made contexts in which to fit. The ethnographic material presented in this volume pays attention to this complicated backdrop.

The book challenges state-generated discourses around what roads offer, by developing an ethnographically informed evidence base for the chaotic, counterintuitive and sometimes unpredictable ways roads actually impact on geographies and livelihoods. At another level, the book questions the assumed status of roads in popular consciousness and explores why, for many years, the position of roads in the hierarchy of development needs has been interrogated so little (for exceptions, see Campbell 2012; Blaikie et al. 1977).

Drawing on long-term field research on road building in rural Nepal, Murton and Sigdel employ Marxist and post-structuralist critiques to posit that highway development in Nepal functions as a 'liberal mode of governance' whereby both private and public actors simultaneously territorialize national space, accumulate capital, and maintain power. Through close examination of several road-construction projects in two districts of western and central Nepal, Murton and Sigdel show how the purported benefits of new transport mobilities in fact reinforce longstanding social hierarchies, create conditions for the consolidation of centralized elite power and capital, and reproduce terms of marginality and precarity for vulnerable populations in Nepal today. In particular, they focus on the collusion between government officials and the private transportation syndicates who together orchestrate where roads get built, and who can travel on them, with special attention to the hazards reproduced along the way.

In Khan's work in Pakistan, as well as Heslop and Jeffery's study in the Maldives, we see the impact of Chinese investment on national road-development projects. Here, the material and imagined forms of connectivity that come with new infrastructural allies creates a sense of being networked into powerful channels of patronage, making small islands in the Indian Ocean, as well as sandy outlands in Sindh province of Pakistan, nodes of geostrategic significance in some modern infrastructural empire. For Khan's informants – businessmen, elders, real estate agents, people who live along the road, and politicians connected with it – though a historical relationship between China and Pakistan is well recognized, new roads are thought to be 'game changers' in the pursuit of Pakistani modernity. Khan's chapter engages with both the grand narrative of infrastructural rhetoric – becoming 'the new Dubai' – as well as everyday life in the area of Tharparkar, where a restaurant on the Coal Road sets the scene for a young man, Abdul, who is in search of work along the new frontier. Although Abdul, like many pastoralists in the area, is unable to capitalize on new employment opportunities arriving with the road, the road appears to sustain the dream of a modern Pakistan.

For Heslop and Jeffery, Chinese infrastructural interest in the Maldives places even the smallest islands on the archipelago at the centre of elaborate plots of global espionage and domination. In their chapter, the built road facilitates a multitude of local encounters as people travel further and more regularly, but it is also through the road that islanders encounter the global forces of capital and construction that shape their islands. Evoking an allegorical Maldivian folk tale and anthropological literature on 'the gift' (Mauss 1954), Heslop and Jeffery illustrate how anxieties about social change endure in new forms through becoming embroiled with domestic politics and hierarchical channels of governing 'public goods', as well as hierarchies of international geopolitics.

In Huang's chapter, we see the significance of the road to a 'hidden place' (Medog) as a grand infrastructural gesture to locate Medog firmly within the Chinese side of the Tibetan-Indian borderline. Huang carves out a significant role for the highway by illustrating how national roads in rugged mountain landscapes play domestically within the Chinese national imaginary. His ethnography of the Medog Highway introduces the concepts of 'asymmetric connectivity' and the 'punctuated road' as a means to draw out the exacerbation of existing social hierarchies between Han Chinese and regional ethnic minorities, including Menba and Luoba. While Huang does a great deal to demonstrate what roads mean for people, he also shows what roads, or rather the successful construction of roads, means for the

Chinese state. Interestingly here, failure to construct a road is discussed by the state in terms of impotency and lack of health. For the Chinese state to remain 'healthy' through connection and integration afforded by road construction, it must simultaneously engage in a process of 'channelling and filtering' movement along the road. Huang argues, that channelling and filtering involves disciplining mobile citizens and is constitutive of state formation via road construction.

Continuing along this theme of state commitments to modernity and mobility but moving further south into Northeast India, Gohain's chapter extends an analysis of social hierarchy as compounded on the highway. Through a study of roadside *dhabas* and the performance of Assamese middle-classness in the spaces of 'modern' restaurants, Gohain illustrates how pervasive, intersectional and deep-rooted notions of status can be understood from the roadside; transforming projects of 'connectivity' into mechanisms for exclusion. In doing this, Gohain draws on experiences of exclusion within cosmopolitan city spaces like malls, illustrating how the roadside *dhaba* is similarly comparable as a site of distinction and identity. For the poor, the highway does not bring connection, but signifies a new site of separation and loss. Much like in Khan's example, Gohain shows that the *dhabas* and enterprise along the highways rarely provide employment for those who reside closest to them or have been most negatively impacted by the arrival of the road.

That road building enacts neoliberal, state-building ideologies, and in so doing also entrenches inequality and (re)produces the periphery, is another common thread throughout the chapters. To a degree, all of the chapters concern the ways in which the imagination, construction, management, and use of roads creates, or at least reflects, a disjuncture between statecraft and the everyday lives of citizen-subjects. At the same time, it is striking across the chapters how quickly roads lead us to borders, state enforced (e.g. India-Pakistan, China-India-Myanmar) as well as controlled borders within the nation-state (between provinces within China). This is brought into particularly sharp relief in Sarma's chapter, which focuses on the geo-political/economic logics of building roads in historically 'remote' regions of Mizoram at the borderlands of India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China. Here, the Kaladan multimodal highway is met with a great deal of suspicion, and fear, by those in the 'remote' state, as it cuts through areas of protracted conflict in search of new frontiers: Myanmar's resource-rich western borders. Sarma's chapter shows, again, how projects of connectivity and mobility 'fix' and regulate mobile populations. In the case of the Mizoram borderlands, this refers specifically to border crossers and migrants. In a similar way

to Huang's depiction of Medog by the Chinese state as a 'hidden place' on which to enact large-scale connectivity projects, Sarma suggests that the Indian state specifically targets remote spaces with flexible border regimes, like Mizoram, to promote spectacular development initiatives for connectivity and economic growth, which simultaneously shore up and securitize national boundaries.

The final chapter provides a conceptual intervention for contemporary and future road studies. Drawing from knowledge produced by two of the major international road studies projects mentioned above ('Roads and the Politics of Thought' and 'Infrastructures of Democracy'), the authors trace past and current trends along the infrastructural turn, and make a case for why roads matter and how research on roads reveals critical insights at the intersections of infrastructure and statecraft; or, the politics of development and the environment. In particular, Rankin and Simpson show how roads have become an integral part of political thought in South Asia throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, as the research programmes Rankin and Simpson discuss illustrate, there is a stark incompatibility between road-building agendas and initiatives to address catastrophic climate change through carbon consumption. In India, despite environmental implications, the positive outcomes of rural roads are so deeply embedded in political and popular consciousness that there is professed to be 'no counterfactual to building rural roads' (see Rankin and Simpson, this volume). Thus, reality is exhibited by some select phrases from villagers and road planners, respectively: 'A human being has no value without a road' and 'this [a large rural roads programme] is the most important and successful government policy since Independence'. Statements such as these about roads both underpin and pose a critical question which all of the chapters herein address: *How do people think about roads, and how have people come to think about roads in the ways that they do?* These are genealogical questions that the authors of this volume endeavour to answer ethnographically. Here, the imagined and seemingly heartfelt significance of the road is not lessened by whatever material realities may prevail.

Local perceptions of South Asian road construction must be seen, heard, and considered in order to critically understand the transformative effects of road development in twenty-first-century Asia. Attending to central and acute concerns of statecraft and infrastructural geopolitics, infrastructural imaginaries and future making, and the political economies of roads, the chapters comprising this volume pay attention to the ways in which new highways and modes of road connectivity do not present the same

vistas for all those whose lives and livelihoods they traverse. That is, the chapters examine how the creation of a highway comes with many strings attached, weaving together a complex bundle of social change in which new forms of hierarchy manifest and older forms of hierarchy can be (re) made and (re)established in creative and surprising new ways. Focused on South Asia but speaking to more global phenomena, the chapters collectively reveal how road planning, construction, and usage routinely yield a simultaneous reinforcement and disruption of social, political, and economic relations. As a dynamic that continues to accelerate around the world with the making of every new highway, it is imperative to understand local perspectives in order to make better changes for road users today and into the future.

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