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The Road Not Taken

Enabling and Limiting Mobility in the Eastern Pamirs

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2011, this article explores the role of roads in enabling and limiting the movement of people and goods in Tajikistan's Eastern Pamirs. The article focuses on the Pamir Highway and a newly established trade route linking Tajikistan with China. Besides materially facilitating mobility, both roads serve as trajectories for opportunities, but often also signify the lack of such to those who live along them. This article thus seeks to analyse the shifting roles of roads against the backdrop of past and present state dispensations, shifting ideologies and newly emerging economic practices. By emphasising roads as both enabling and limiting spatial entities shaped by materiality, politics and economics, this article argues, on the one hand, that roads are important factors in directing and accelerating the mobility of people and goods and, on the other, that roads are also symbols of immobility inasmuch as they set limitations on the movement of people.

Keywords

Roads, (im)mobility, state, Tajikistan, China, Pamir Highway

Introduction

At first glance, sitting and fishing on the shore of Lake Bulungköl in Tajikistan's Eastern Pamirs seems to be an activity of limited value to the discussion of mobility in the region. Yet despite its remoteness, the lake is part of the history of Soviet mobility which is still alive here today. People who live near the shore remember that in 1967 the lake (along with other bodies of water in the Eastern Pamirs) was restocked with 37,000 gibel carp from Siberia (Savvaitova / Petr 1999: 180). Tons of fish were brought in on trucks from the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, another instance of the influx of technological and biological innovations into the region after the construction of the Pamir Highway in the 1930s. Moving fish to mountain lakes in the Pamirs was part of the Soviet effort to minimise "the vast distances that separated centre from periphery" and to create an "integrated social body" (Widdis 2003: 3), as were the construction of the highway itself and the establishment of settlements that provided job opportunities along the road.

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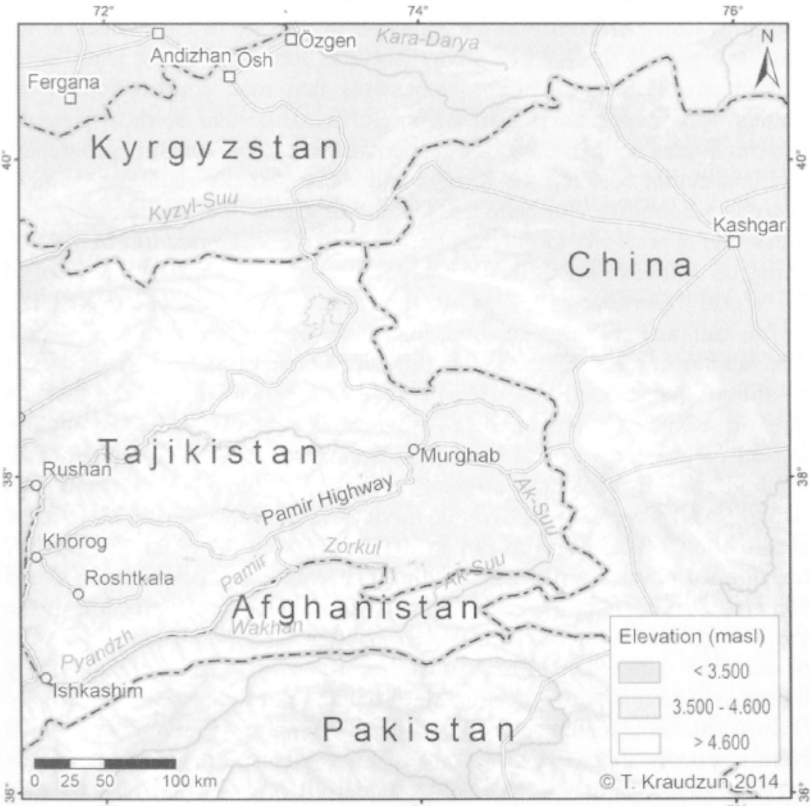
Whereas the fish in Lake Bulungköl are a reminder of historical mobility, the demise of the Soviet state has resulted in the reconfiguration of spatial coordinates in the Eastern Pamirs over the past twenty years. New roads have been constructed and old ones abandoned. Goods and people now flow along different routes in the region, and at times they do not move at all.

In this article I explore these ambiguities of mobility by focusing on two roads that connect the Eastern Pamirs with Kyrgyzstan and China. In doing so, I attempt to establish their social impact between the "sweeping narratives of globalisation" and the "specific, tangible materialities of particular times and places" (Dalakoglou / Harvey 2012: 459) in which they are embedded. To this end I use the concept of "process geographies" of borderlands (Van Schendel 2002: 663; 2005: 1–24), taking into account Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry's (2006: 14) reference to "material stuff" that "makes up places" and "is always in motion, being assembled and reassembled in changing configurations".

In the following, I first focus on the Soviet construction of the Pamir Highway and the resulting transformations of physical and social landscapes. Then, I discuss the decay of the highway after the demise of the Soviet Union and the drawing of an international border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Finally, I explore the effects of the construction of the road link to China via the Kulma Pass and the emergence of new economic practices in the region.

From periphery to economic whole

Nuraly is an elderly man; he is retired now, but used to work for various road construction agencies that were active in the Eastern Pamirs during the Soviet era. This explains why many events in his life are closely associated with paving the way between Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and Khorog on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. Murghab, Nuraly's hometown, is capital of Murghab District and the administrative centre in the Eastern Pamirs. It lies halfway between Osh and Khorog at an altitude of roughly 3,600 metres above sea level. According to local administrative data (2008), Murghab District covers roughly 38,000 square kilometres, i.e. most of the Eastern Pamirs. Yet, despite its size, Murghab's population is small. According to the 2011 census, about 7,000 of the district's 14,000 inhabitants live in the administrative centre. All other settlements and villages have only a few inhabitants and often consist of no more than a handful of houses.


72°
74°
76°
40°
38°
36°
Özgen
Kara-Darya
Andizhan
Osh
Fergana
N
Kyrgyzstan
Kyzyl-Suu
Kashgar
China
Tajikistan
Murghab
Rushan
Pamir Highway
Ak-Suu
Khorog
Zorkul
Roshtkala
Pamir
Ak-Suu
Afghanistan
Wakhan
Pyandzh
Ishkashim
Pakistan
Elevation (masl)
< 3.500
3.500 - 4.600
> 4.600
0 25 50 100 km

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Like many elderly people in the town of Murghab, Nuraly experienced the Soviet "fight for the road" (Russ.: *bor'ba za dorogu*) since the 1930s as an endeavour which has permanently transformed the region. During one of my visits to his house between 2008 and 2011, Nuraly showed me a book that bears the proud title "The Osh-Khorog Highway, 1974" (Avtomagistral' 1974) and on the title page the Soviet emblem in gold. When Nuraly opened the book and let me read the first couple of pages it became clear that he wanted me to learn about his friends and relatives who had helped to construct the highway. The road that linked his birthplace Murghab to other places in Central Asia and beyond was bound up with the people, and, as the book's subtitle "Accomplishments and People" (Russ.: *dela i liudi*) indicates, its aim was to remember those who had contributed to this undertaking.

The carefully designed red book was published in 1974 by the All-Union Ministry of Transport Construction in the city of Osh, which at the time was part of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. In the short introduction an anonymous author emphasises that road construction in the Pamirs is an important part of economic, scientific and political progress and highlights in particular the materialisation of a specific geographic interconnection between the Kyrgyz and Tajik "brother republics" (Russ.: *bratskie respubliki*). Furthermore, the author argues that the highway provides "the opportunity to fully exploit the high mountain pastures of the Alai valley as well as to scientifically study the natural resources of the 'Roof of the World'" (Avtomagistral' 1974). In order to achieve the economic goals and to facilitate scientific research, the forces of nature had to be defeated. The author argues that "under difficult climatic and hydrogeological conditions" (Avtomagistral' 1974) a road project was undertaken that not only served specific economic and scientific goals, but also had an obvious impact on the lives of the local population. On a par with monumental, superhuman infrastructure projects such as dams, power stations and factories that were built all over the Soviet Union (Féaux 2011: 77–83), the construction of the highway up to the Pamirs, the "Roof of the World", transformed physical and social landscapes. Mentioning people from towns and settlements along the road, the book describes the construction of the Pamir Highway as a Soviet initiative that resulted in the creation of a modernised landscape. This landscape of paved roads, multi-storey buildings, Lenin statues, construction machines and villages with electricity is illustrated as complementary to the beauty of nature. The red book which Nuraly proudly showed me as proof of his career and those of his friends suggests an idealistic notion of Soviet modernity in which there is a balance between tamed nature and reorganised modern space.

This process of spatial reorganisation in the Eastern Pamirs dates to the first half of the twentieth century. The Pamir Highway was completed in 1932 (Kreutzmann 2004: 198; 2009: 14) and replaced the established trade route between Murghab and the city of Kashgar, which lies across the border in China.[1] Optimistic Soviet planners chose southern Kyrgyzstan, specifically Osh, as their base for reshaping the Eastern Pamirs (Mostowlansky 2011). A collection of essays on the construction of the Pamir Highway published in 1935 (Slavinskii 1935: 3) provides an insight into the early process of paving the road between Osh and Khorog. In the preface, the editor defines "the fight for the road" as an essential part of establishing socialism on the "periphery" (Russ.: *okraina*) of the country:

> The recent years have put an end to the roadlessness of Kyrgyzia. We now have highways instead of mountain paths in many districts. Instead of camel and ox the Soviet car now speeds up on these roads. And instead of isolated districts there is now one connected and unified economic whole where, until recently there used to be inaccessible periphery (Slavinskii 1935: 3).

As Emma Widdis (2003: 191) shows, the integration of the periphery into a unified whole was a central aspect of spatial organisation in the Soviet Union. "Exploration and conquest", Widdis (2003: 191) states, "were, ultimately, part of a single project". However, such processes of integration did not take place without contradictions. The ideal of unification had to face a paradoxical focus on localness that "lurked" within "the emphasis on interconnection and participation" (Widdis 2003: 191). In this decentralised vision of territory, citizenship "was mediated via the local space, as part of a network (*set*) of interconnected spaces" (Widdis 2003: 191). Thus, constructing a road between Osh and Murghab and cutting off the connection to Kashgar meant not only integrating the region into the Soviet economy, but also reorganising trajectories of political and cultural influence. As a result of improving the connection to Osh and subsequently to Bishkek and Moscow, Murghab was transformed into part of a "loyal and secure frontier" (Kassymbekova 2011: 362) and began to play the role of a border region that served a particular purpose in a larger framework.

The importance of the highway grew when the Soviets cut ties to China and Afghanistan in the 1930s (Kraudzun 2011: 175). The Soviet strategy to keep the border to both countries "under lock and key", as Charles Shaw (2011: 332) puts it, was inspired by the idea of "separating the sacred socialist world from the profanity of capitalism" and establishing a contrast to “the loose flows of people, goods and money under the tsar” (Shaw 2011: 332). The people of the Eastern Pamirs thus became members of the category of “border societies” (Shaw 2011: 331), such as were found all over the Soviet Union. In an attempt to prevent inhabitants of such “border societies” from feeling oppressed, the Soviet state tried to create feelings of “friendship and trust” (Shaw 2011: 331); the Eastern Pamirs were no exception. For the inhabitants of the region, closing the borders severed economic opportunities and emotional ties with relatives across the border. New perspectives were needed to create a sense of homogeneity in a radically transforming border region.

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[1] Before Murghab was transformed from a Russian army outpost into a district town in the first decade of Soviet rule, it had strong ties with western China and northern Afghanistan (see Dor / Naumann 1978; Shahrani 2002; Kreutzmann 2003, 2012; Callahan 2007, 2012; Kraudzun 2011).

Nurturing and starving the road

Returning to Nuraly’s memory – a road worker’s view – of the highway in the twentieth century, snow and the lack of technology played a crucial role. Between the 1930s and 1960s the road was periodically closed. Only at some point after 1965 “[was] there […] enough technology; bulldozers, snowploughs and motor-driven graders were available throughout the year”, as Nuraly remembers. “Then military personnel and army technology arrived in Murghab”, he continues. “They kept the road in good shape. Control was good. Moscow developed the road.”

The improvement of the road goes hand in hand with the general feeling of development and stability, which, according to Nuraly, began in the late 1960s and lasted until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Nuraly is a veteran of Soviet road construction and he misses the network of people, supply stations and the bustling atmosphere of lorry parks. “It was good between 1970 and 1990”, he said, emphasising that “starting in 1991 everyone was given to separate republics”. Furthermore:

> Now the road isn’t that good. […] The Kyrgyz say they control their own part and Tajikistan controls its own. […] Earlier cars worked day and night; between 200 and 250 cars passed every day. Now there is little movement, now businessmen come from Osh and they leave. Now technology is used for Kulma and the China road that goes to Khorog. That’s fine, but in comparison to earlier times there’s little technology here.

Nuraly’s reference to the existence of “little technology” points to the lack of a central authority which, were it to exist, could pool strengths to maintain and repair the highway. He also mentions the absence of bulldozers and snowploughs, thereby drawing attention to the fact that the road is in need of regular maintenance. Regular repair and maintenance of the Pamir Highway is an important precondition for everyday activities in the settlements along the road.

During the Soviet era numerous road constructors were on duty to prevent the disintegration of the road's surface. As Kamal, a Murghabi state official, told me during one of the many afternoons we spent in his office discussing the effects of "Moscow provisioning" (Russ.: *Moskovskoe obespechenie*)[2], "back then the main thing was that goods arrived on time". The road "was built for that" (Kyrg.: *oshol üchün salyngan*) and its role was to prevent a "blockade" of the socio-economic field that had arisen along the highway.

As Nuraly's mention of the re-routing of connections from Kashgar to Osh in the 1930s indicated, the definition of such a socio-economic field can quickly shift with changing political conditions – both the beginning of Soviet rule and the independence of Tajikistan were marked by the construction of new roads. As the tangible sign of a new political context, in recent years the road link via the Kulma Pass to Tashkurgan and Kashgar has created an alternative trajectory for a range of influences, including differing visions of trade, the role of the state and modernity.

Forward and backward

In 2004 Tajikistan's border with China was reopened (Kraudzun 2011: 182), and for people in the Eastern Pamirs a stretch of newly paved road seemed to provide opportunities for re-establishing links to nearby Kashgar. Thus, when the Tajikistani and Chinese governments declared the road between Murghab and the Chinese border open, more than economic issues were at stake. While official speeches emphasised the importance of the economic relationship between the two nations, locals discussed other spheres of innovation, including their concerns about opening a previously closed and stable border and a general civilisational reorientation away from demarcation from a hostile China. In a public letter of gratitude to the representative of the local Murghabi government (printed on the front page of Sary Kol, the regional Kyrgyz-Russian newspaper, in June 2004), Alimamad Niyozmamadov, the then governor of Gorno-Badakhshan, addressed these concerns as follows:

> The Murghab-Kulma motorway has been built and put into operation for the people of Gorno-Badakhshan, but especially for the inhabitants of

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[2] "Moscow provisioning" colloquially describes the rich provisioning with consumer goods in the Eastern Pamirs during the Soviet era (Kraudzun 2012: 95).

> your district [i.e. Murghab]. This was made possible through the joint efforts of the leaders of the two brother nations and the will and the feat of strength of the workers and engineers of the organisation 'Badakhshanroh', who worked under incredibly difficult climatic and environmental circumstances.
> The prime minister of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Honourable Mr Okil Gaibullaevich Okilov, participated in the opening ceremony of the Kulma checkpoint and mentioned there that this event was not only of great political and international, but also of strategic importance. Henceforth and forever, Gorno-Badakhshan has left its geographical isolation (Blagodarnost' 2004).

Niyozmamadov's opening letter was a skilful presentation of the state's achievement in the region and an explanation of the road's advantages to the people who lived alongside it. In creating a road link with China, the Tajikistani state made a second, similar attempt to modernise. While the construction of the Pamir Highway between Osh and Khorog in the 1930s had served as a trajectory for modernity in a Soviet context (Mostowlansky 2013), linking Murghab with western China in 2004 not only meant a repetition of modernisation, but also what one could call the re-inscription of backwardness. Shaped by state practices and the materiality of infrastructure (Humphrey 2005; Sneath 2009), modernity was presented as a condition to come (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003); at the same time, it was still perceived locally as a past condition to return to. In this context, the new motorway to China provided "tangible evidence" of the state's "technical and political capacity" (Harvey 2005: 131), i.e. as a materialisation of the state at a local level. This transformed the border region of the Eastern Pamirs into a site of "fantasy and projection for politicians, planners and local people" (Harvey 2005: 131).

In his public letter to the local Murghabi government, Niyozmamadov evoked the ending of Gorno-Badakhshan's isolation through ties with China and links with a transnational network of roads (including the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan; see Kreutzmann 2004, 2009; Khan 2006). He stated that the road to the Kulma Pass was a "road of life" (Russ.: *doroga zhizni*)[3] for people in Murghab, which would lead the Tajikistani state to "prosperity" (Russ.: *protsvetanie*) and "development" (Russ.: *razvitie*). In Niyozmamadov's letter, the road serves as a tool in an attempt to present an image of Tajikistan as a powerful state "whose ends are those of a unified society" (Thompson 2008: 321).

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[3] In Russian and Soviet contexts, the term "road of life" can be perceived as a powerful reference to a channel of supply that helped the besieged city of Leningrad to survive the blockade by the German army during World War II. In particular World War II veterans and those watching Russian coverage of the "Great Patriotic War" on TV in the Eastern Pamirs were well aware of this reference to the road that was constructed across the frozen Lake Ladoga in the 1940s.

While discussing these topics with my interlocutors during my fieldwork in the Eastern Pamirs, five years after the opening of the Kulma road, they declared the "state's" (Kyrg.: *mamleket*) disregard of the "old" road link to Osh to be as irritating as the fact that "prosperity" had not yet materialised. After all, the region had already been lifted out of its "isolation" in the 1930s and used to be well-connected with other places in the Soviet Union. In addition, the economic advantages of the link to China were a long time in coming. Thus, for my interlocutors in the Eastern Pamirs, disconnectedness, disabled mobility and exclusion from economic practices seemed to define their everyday experience more accurately than the state rhetoric of a repeated modernisation.

Fear of China

Holiknazar was not in a good mood as we walked through the bazaar in Murghab in summer 2010. He had wanted to go to Osh to sell clothes brought from southern Kyrgyzstan to Murghab to villagers from the region. But due to violent conflict in Osh (Reeves 2010a, 2010b; Liu 2012; McBrien 2013; Megoran 2013) the markets in Osh were closed and the city was in turmoil. The loan he had received from a microfinance bank was now useless and he had to pay back the first instalment with interest by the end of the month. As we walked, I listened to his tribulations regarding the failure of his first attempt at capitalism. At a market stall he bought a watermelon that had come from far distant western Tajikistan instead of from Osh, and then a box of cigarettes. Just as Holiknazar was looking for a match, a Chinese driver walked by and Holiknazar addressed him in Russian:

> Holiknazar: Eh, gook (*uzkiglaz*), you got a light?
>
> *The Chinese driver remains silent, ignores Holiknazar and turns away.*
> Till: What did you just call him?
>
> Holiknazar: Gook, that's what we call them here. Chinese are just fucked up (*khuevyi*) people.

Holiknazar's unequivocal opinion about the Chinese was clearly offensive, but not uncommon in the Eastern Pamirs. Since the opening of the road to the Kulma Pass at the Chinese border, the presence of Chinese drivers and road construction workers had increased. Chinese "land grabbing" in the border region (Kraudzun 2011: 176; Pannier 2011) as well as the fact that Chinese companies had been granted access to natural resources in the Pamirs caused unease among my interlocutors. The Chinese seemed overly powerful, and it was felt that countless numbers of them were entering Tajikistan (Laruelle et al. 2010; Pantucci et al. 2014).

In Holiknazar's opinion, Tajikistan's president had been selling out the country to Beijing. In addition, he claimed that his own business attempt had failed because the state would not allow him to trade directly with China; the government would neither encourage people to trade nor show them how to establish businesses. He identified traders and businessmen from Dushanbe and China, but certainly not people from Murghab, as profiteers. Holiknazar's anger towards the Chinese and the Tajikistani government was embedded in a broader context of how people in the Eastern Pamirs related to trade, goods and the capitalist endeavour. In this context, ethnic essentialism – both self-inflicted and externally imposed – played an important role in the notion of marginality and (dis)connection.

The old, new bazaar

The importance of ethnicity surfaces in different realms of everyday life in the Eastern Pamirs. One such example is the economy and the ways in which people in the region envision their roles in trade. According to local government data, of the 14,000 people who live in the Murghab District 11,000 are ethnic "Kyrgyz" and 3,000 are defined as "Tajik," a category that includes a range of local identities based on linguistic and religious distinctions (Mostowlansky 2013: 56). In people's debates about trade, particularly when it comes to explaining economic success and failure, the ethnic particularities of the Eastern Pamirs play a significant role. For instance, Güljan, a Kyrgyz trader with whom I regularly travelled in the region, explained this to me as follows:

> They [people in the Eastern Pamirs] were embarrassed to trade. The Uzbeks' ancestors already did this in ancient times. People here have started to do so recently. Young people are learning now. We know that our bazaar was small after the Union's collapse. And only later did our people start to learn. Now there are so many traders that they cannot fit into the small bazaar. Now there are more people than last year. Have you noticed? Now anyone can sell goods. Now there are more people compared to the last few years. If we want to buy something we go to the bazaar, and we sell there, too. Now, every single one of us has started to use the bazaar.

As Güljan emphasised, bazaar trade was both a source of embarrassment and a necessity. Trading, selling goods on the bazaar and bargaining were not practices that were considered appropriate during the Soviet period,[4] as they seemed like ancient ways of making do and could only be performed by those who had learnt them from their ancestors. This is why Güljan referred to Uzbeks as those who had initiated trade between Osh and Murghab. Even though the traders in the bazaar of Murghab came from different ethnic backgrounds and geographic origins at the time of my fieldwork, it was the general opinion that trade was a practice that had been introduced from the outside. According to Güljan, neither in pre-Soviet times nor during the Soviet period was trade a practice that local people were willing to engage in.

In this regard, Kyrgyz and local Tajiks did not consider themselves especially gifted businessmen or businesswomen – this was an ability which was often attributed to Uzbeks and sometimes to Tajiks from western Tajikistan as a legacy from the past. For instance, Kamal, the Murghabi state official, explained the Kyrgyz' difficulties in overcoming their embarrassment by the fact that trade-related vocabulary originated from the Persian and Arabic tongues and could therefore not be essentially Kyrgyz:

> In Murghab, we haven't learnt issues related to trade. Did you notice? Basically, trade must be this way: there are at least two people involved in trade. For example, the first one is the buyer (*kardar*). Then there's the seller. He's the trader (*soodager*). The word *sooda* comes from *savdo* in Persian. […] And now the relationship between these two: the buyer talks to the seller about goods. The communication begins and they have something to agree on […] the price, for instance. The word nark for price also isn't a Kyrgyz word. The word is also from Persian and Tajik. There's no Kyrgyz word for this here. It's *nark* or *savdo*. It means these words came from Arabic or Persian. And this means that Kyrgyz people didn't run businesses or trade. The terms themselves prove it.

While, as Kamal emphasised, trade-related vocabulary did not exist in Kyrgyz "originally", as mountain people the local Tajiks were also not used to trade. Trade was, in Kamal's opinion, a profession that was associated with settled people from the flatlands of Central Asia, and when I asked him why Kyrgyz did not have any trade-related vocabulary, he replied that this was based on their "nomadic way of life" (Kyrg.: *köchmön turmushu*). In his opinion, the Kyrgyz in the region did not learn to trade because, when they were still nomads, traders from the Ferghana valley or Kashgar in China used to visit their pastures and exchange goods and flour for livestock. Then, in the Soviet period, people became involved in a completely new economic system that was based on the presence of the state. As Kamal explained, "We don't trade in our family […] since we buy things with the salary we get from the government; we're just not used to it."

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[4] Kraudzun (2011: 178) notes that in the Soviet Union "individual trans-border trade" in the region was banned as *spekulatsiia* (profiteering).

As the situation in Murghab's bazaar during my fieldwork showed, the people of the region learnt quickly how to trade and apply the basic rules of bargaining, and at the bazaar Kyrgyz traders sold clothes and foodstuffs alongside local Tajiks and Uzbeks. In addition, Afghan traders owned a shop in the centre of the bazaar, where they sold second-hand clothes and cell phones or exchanged them for rubies found in the region. However, the essentialistic view that Kyrgyz were just not very good at trading persisted. My interlocutors found proof for this notion in various trade-related interactional details, but primarily in the lack of economic success.

Kashgar: Far away

In recent years, China's growing wealth has surely been infectious, and prospects for people along the Pamir Highway could have been excellent. It seemed, as Kamal told me once, that the Kashgar-Murghab-Khorog-Dushanbe connection could have replaced the Pamir Highway to Osh as the main artery through the Eastern Pamirs. However, in 2010, six years after the opening in 2004, the economic situation had hardly changed, and except for lines of trucks driving through Murghab, trade with China remained a rather abstract endeavour for most people.

The cross-border movement of local people with Tajikistani passports was unrestricted in the year following the opening of the road, but from 2006 onwards these regulations were changed, and a trip from Murghab to Kashgar became so expensive that not even trade generated enough profit to pay for it. To exemplify this point, Güljan, the woman trader who commuted between Osh and Murghab, had planned to start doing business with Kashgar at that time in order to shift from the testing Pamir Highway to the Chinese road. In her view, China offered the promise of a bright future for business, but the fact that she had to travel to Dushanbe (which took days and cost hundreds of dollars) and apply for a Chinese visa in person meant that her business idea was unprofitable. Güljan expressed it as follows:

> Whoever has money can go. But a lot of money is needed for the transportation to Dushanbe; money is needed for living there. It's expensive. Earlier, if I was planning to go to China I would send all of my documents with you. Let's say you're leaving for Dushanbe. I would tell you to finish up these things and would give you my passport and money. You would go and finish things. I would put all these documents in my pocket and leave. It's not this way now. Now it's done individually. For example, you have 5,000 dollars: you go and leave. Let's say I have only

> 2,000 dollars. I would have just enough money for transportation. That way my money wouldn't be enough. So, if you have money, you can go now.

In addition, at the time of my fieldwork one was not allowed to bring Tajikistani vehicles into China. As a result, people living on the Chinese border not only had to travel to Dushanbe in order to organise bureaucratic formalities, but they also had to catch an airplane to the western Chinese city of Urumchi and then enter Tajikistan overland. For Güljan, the cost of this procedure would have exceeded the profit she could have made from such a business trip. The high expenditures were also one of the reasons why traders from Khorog and western Tajikistan were much more involved in trade with China than people living in Murghab (Townsend 2005: 53).

Güljan suspected that the family of Tajikistan's President Rahmon, who owns the airline Somon Air and several transport companies, supported trade-related restrictions for their own benefit – which again seemed to her like proof that Tajiks from Dushanbe were more talented traders due to their pre-Soviet heritage. In her opinion, Rahmon's family had shaped regulations according to their business interests, so that "the law is now like this" (Kyrg.: *myizam azyr oshondoi*). A confidential cable from the US embassy in Dushanbe from 2009, published on WikiLeaks, supports Güljan's suspicion that trade between China and Tajikistan is heavily regulated by the state:

> Chinese sources put trade turnover in 2008 at $1.2 billion, dramatically higher than the official Tajik figure. According to business contacts, Tajik customs officials may not report a good deal of trade with China, especially that conducted by people closely tied to the presidential administration. President Rahmon's daughter herself is reputedly heavily involved in the China trade, bringing containers over the border at Kulma without being examined by customs agents or assessed import tariffs (US Embassy cable 2009).

Unequal access to trade with China, and therefore also economic immobility, was an everyday experience in the Eastern Pamirs. What Güljan experienced as an unfair creation of regulations by the western Tajikistani presidential family (which she viewed as an effect of pre-Soviet trader heritage) is presented as fact in the US embassy cable. Nevertheless, a 2007 World Bank report on trade in Central Asia showed that trade restrictions had been introduced by both sides, i.e. by the Tajikistani as well as the Chinese governments (World Bank 2007: 24). This points to the sophisticated context of Tajikistani-Chinese relations. Far from being economically equal, the friendly relationship between the two countries is based on the flow of investments and goods from China to Tajikistan – seldom in the opposite direction.

In his studies on livelihoods and trade in the Eastern Pamirs, Tobias Kraudzun (2011; 2012) shows that local people are only loosely involved in the recently established economic connection between Tajikistan and China. In addition, since 1991 the Pamir Highway between Murghab and Osh has been intersected by a national border that includes a range of checkpoints, with side effects such as taxes, bribery and contraband (Kraudzun 2011: 178–182). Thus, drawing on the historical experience of connection and economic integration during the Soviet Union, my interlocutors in the Eastern Pamirs have lived through a specific form of disconnection which is not "simply a lack, but a loss" (Ferguson 2001: 238). The experience of being cut off is fundamentally different from that of never having been connected.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored the role of roads in enabling and limiting the movement of people and goods in Tajikistan's Eastern Pamirs. Focusing on the Pamir Highway and the newly established trade route between Tajikistan and China, I have argued that both roads serve as trajectories for opportunities, but they often also signify the lack of such to those who live along them. Under the past and present state systems, with their differing ideologies and economic approaches, the shifting roles of roads are inextricably linked to the broader contexts of spatial transformations that influence "transnational flows" (Van Schendel 2002: 662) in the region along the Tajikistan-China border.

In this regard, Foucault's (1984: 252) statement that "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" reflects Soviet attempts to integrate and control the Eastern Pamirs through a transformation of space that included the reorganisation of the landscape and its social formations. Here, the Pamir Highway served (and still serves) as a trajectory of state power and as an entrenchment of "the violent exclusion of established political and material orders" (Dalakoglou / Harvey 2012: 2). The highway used to be a prestigious Soviet project that was meant to connect and integrate the Pamir region into the broader Soviet context. From the 1930s onwards, this included the construction of infrastructure, labour migration and the establishment of a "modernised" highway space which symbolised "progress" and "change" in contradistinction to neighbouring Afghanistan and China. People in the region were provided for by the Soviet state. Under "Moscow provisioning" goods were transported from Osh to settlements along the Pamir

Highway in what seemed like a never-ending movement of goods and people. Yet, without the support of the paternal Soviet state, this once vibrant artery is now abandoned, disintegrating and traversed by an awkward international border separating Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In contrast, the road link connecting the Pamir Highway in Tajikistan with the Karakorum Highway in Xianjiang since 2004 has fostered one-way trade from China to markets all over Tajikistan. I have shown that official statements legitimising the value of the Kulma route use arguments similar to those voiced seventy years earlier during the construction of the Pamir Highway. These statements held the promise of progress and pointed to the region's bright economic future and a new form of connectedness. However, to many of my interlocutors in the Eastern Pamirs, the repeating narrative of modernisation seemed like a re-inscription of backwardness. After all, they had already been modernised from the 1930s onwards. In addition, soon after the opening of the Kulma road it became clear that trade with China would be highly regulated by the state and that only a small portion of the wealth would stay in the settlements along the highway.

Based on the historical and contemporary impact of the Pamir Highway and the Kulma road on people's lives in the region, I have explored roads in the Eastern Pamirs as (both enabling and limiting) spatial entities shaped by ideologies, materiality and economics. I have argued that such an approach allows, on the one hand, for the perception of roads as important factors in directing and accelerating the mobility of people and goods and, on the other, for their perception as symbols of immobility and as limitations on people's movements.

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