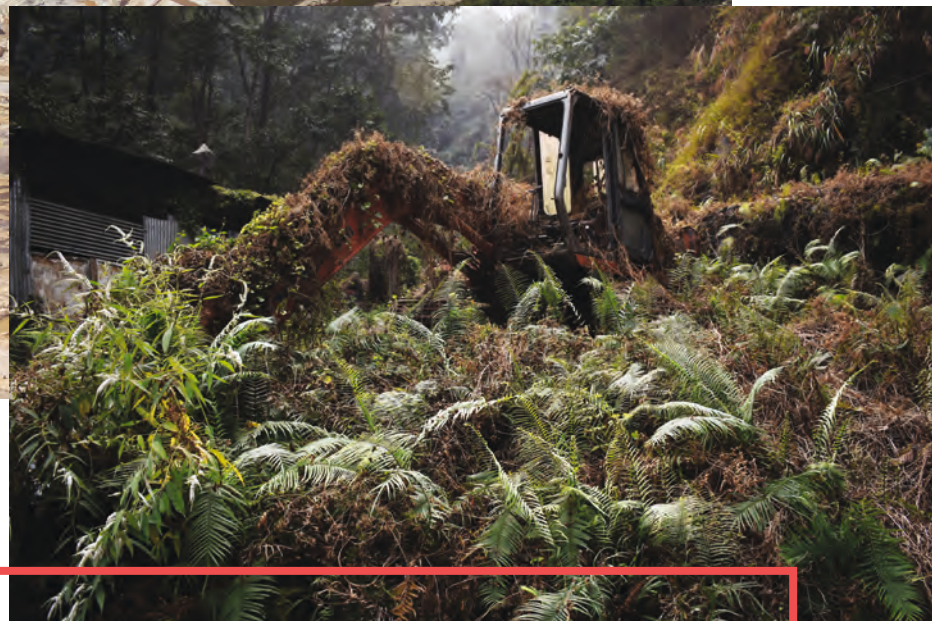




Above: Abandoned gold mining site in West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Photo by Michael Eilenberg, 2017).

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



# Reading space, society and history in Asia through its ruins

Mona Chettri and Michael Eilenberg

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

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

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

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

## Agency of ruins

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

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

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

*Continued overleaf on page 30*





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

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

Continued from page 29

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

### Hope and hubris

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

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

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

### The contributions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mona Chettri Postdoc,  
Aarhus University, Denmark  
mona.chettri@cas.au.dk

Michael Eilenberg Associate Professor,  
Aarhus University, Denmark  
etnome@cas.au.dk

This Focus is part of the RISEAsia Project funded by a Starting Grant from Aarhus University Research Foundation, Denmark. <http://projects.au.dk/riseasia/about-riseasia/>

### Notes

- DeSilvey, C. 2006. ‘Observed decay: telling stories with mutable things’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 11(3):318-338.
- DeSilvey, C. & Edensor, T. 2012. ‘Reckoning with ruins’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(4):465-485, see p.468.
- Edensor, T. 2005. ‘Waste matter- the debris of industrial ruins and the disordering of the material world’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 10(3):311-332, see p.311.
- Hell, J. & Schonle, A. 2010. ‘Introduction’, in Hell, J. & Schonle, A. (eds) *Ruins of Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp.1-14, see p.8.
- ibid. Edensor, p.318
- Martin, D. 2014. ‘Introduction: Towards a political understanding of new ruins’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(3):1037-46.
- Stoler, A. 2013. ‘Introduction’, in Stoler, A. (ed.) *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, pp.1-34.
- Huyssen, A. 2006. ‘Nostalgia for Ruins’, *Grey Room*, 23:6-21; Mah, A. 2010. ‘Memory, Uncertainty and Industrial Ruination: Walker Riverside, Newcastle upon Tyne’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34(2):398-413.
- Gordillo, G. R. 2014. *Rubble: the afterlife of destruction*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Smithson, R. 1996. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Works*. Edited by J. Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press; p.72.
- Schwenkel, C. 2013. ‘Post/Socialist affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the nation in urban Vietnam’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(2):252-277.
- Buck-Morss, S. 2002. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Boston, MIT Press, p.209.
- Cons, J. & Eilenberg, M. 2019. *Frontier Assemblages: the emergent politics of resource frontier in Asia*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lucas, G., Harrison, R. & Piccini, A. 2013. ‘Ruins’, in Graves-Brown, P. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.192-203.