

## Connections and disconnections

Xiaolan Lin



Some of the participants at the UKNA symposium.

## UKNA 'Ambivalent Infrastructures' symposium Dimapur, Nagaland, India 28-30 November 2019

Set in Dimapur in northeastern India, this international symposium looked at large-scale infrastructure developments and their functions, meanings, and wide-ranging implications for cities and their hinterlands. The symposium's location was appropriately chosen; residents of this urban center who until recently moved around on unpaved roads will soon find themselves situated on one of Asia's East-West economic corridors. Dimapur was formerly a tertiary city, very much on the periphery, but this is about to change as there are advanced plans to connect this region to the rest of India and Southeast Asia.

The symposium was an initiative of the IIAS' Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) and Ambedkar University Delhi's Center for Community Knowledge (CCK) and the School of Global Affairs (SGA). It was co-organised with Hong Kong University's Faculty of Architecture, New York University Shanghai, and the Kohima Institute, Nagaland, India.

The event started on an inauspicious note that highlighted the geopolitics and remaining 'disconnections' in Asia, which stand in stark contrast to the discourse of 'connections' emphasized by governments and development banks planning infrastructure networks in the region. Our Chinese colleagues Zhe Ren, Xiaoxuan Lu and Ye Liu were promptly deported from Nagaland for unclear political reasons (see the personal account below, entitled "An 8 hour stay in Nagaland" by Zhen Ren). Another Chinese colleague, Yifei Li from New York University Shanghai, was notified mid-travel about the ongoing developments and had to abort his itinerary, not making it further than Delhi. So, unfortunately, the symposium had to take place without them, robbing our Chinese colleagues of the opportunity to present their research in person, and depriving them and the other researchers of an intensive exchange of views and debates, which is, of course, one of the main purposes of conferences such as this one.

The meeting started with a guided excursion led by the Heritage Publishing House in Dimapur, who introduced all remaining participants to local places of interest, including a series of mushroom domed pillars, the Rajbari ruins. The excursion continued with visits to some of the major infrastructure projects around Dimapur. During the lunch break, the group visited the Bamboo Emporium, a research center and retail outlet for bamboo, which also offers bamboo workshops and a craft museum—a good place to learn about the various uses of bamboo in, among others, construction, furniture making, foodstuffs, and textiles.

The next day, Dr Kekhrie Yhome of the Kohima Institute gave a very inspiring opening keynote speech about the historical 'connectedness' and 'disconnectedness' of the Northeast Indian states vis-à-vis the rest of India and Asia. This was followed by five panels on the following topics: Experiencing Infrastructure (organized by Ambedkar

University Delhi Center for Community Knowledge); Transnational Approaches to Infrastructure (organized by Hong Kong University Faculty of Architecture); Rethinking Himalayan Infrastructures (organized by Ambedkar University Delhi School of Global Affairs); Infrastructure in the Age of Global China (organized by NYU Shanghai); and Infrastructure in the Future City (organized by IIAS). The papers of the absent Chinese participants were read out loud by the panel chairs.

The symposium concluded with a roundtable session on Saturday, leading most of the participants to express their keen interest in publishing the papers and the keynote speech, preferably both in the form of journal articles and an edited book. It was agreed that an editorial committee would be assembled to work on the production of an introductory chapter, based on the papers, for an edited book.

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## An 8-hour stay in Nagaland

Zhe Ren

On 27 November 2019, I landed at Dimapur Airport in Nagaland, in northeastern India, to participate in UKNA's symposium 'Ambivalent Infrastructures'. There were many others attending the conference, and the small airport was buzzing with foreigners from across the world. We were excited to have arrived, but that is when our strange experience began.

### Dimapur airport

Foreigners visiting three of India's north-eastern states (Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram) are required to register at the local police station upon arrival. In recent years it has become easier for foreigners to travel to this region, with the exception of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese nationals; they still need special permission. Therefore, as a Chinese national living in Japan, I contacted the Indian consulate in Tokyo before travelling, and they advised me of all the necessary documents. Then, during my layover at Kolkata airport, I mentioned my destination to the immigration officer, but he waved me through without comment. At this point, I was confident that all my documents were in order, and I would have no trouble reaching Dimapur.

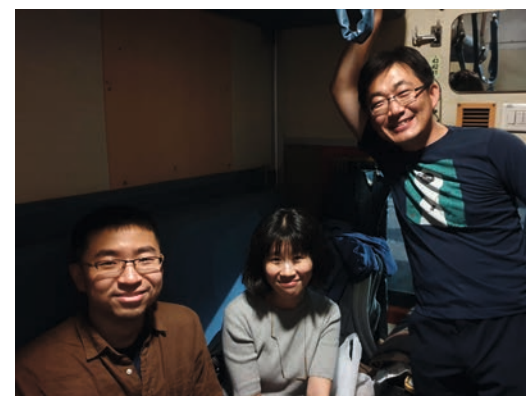
Upon arriving at Dimapur airport, everyone presented their passports to the airport police, as had been instructed. All passports were quickly returned to our group, except for the Chinese passports. There was no problem with the visa; the only problem was our nationality. Having registered with the police, further action was apparently required. The airport police were clearly uncomfortable, and were not quite sure how to proceed. The local (symposium) staff soon

started negotiating in local languages on our behalf (Nagaland is known for its diverse ethnicities and languages); they explained that we had an official invitation letter from the Chief Secretary of Nagaland, that the state government had promised freedom of activities for the participants, and that we had a visa issued by the Indian consulate. After waiting for more than an hour, a police officer informed us that they could not make a decision and that we had to go to a police station in the city. We were escorted by local staff and a policeman on a scooter.

### City police station

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at Dimapur East Police Station, which turned out to be just opposite our hotel. So we first dropped off our luggage, and then headed over to the police station, accompanied by a few Indian scholars and the local staff. Eventually, an officer returned our passports with a smile, but it was still not certain if we would be granted permission to stay. We excitedly talked about the history of China and India, appreciating that, with a history of war and many other issues, it is understandable that the police had to keep an eye on Chinese nationals. At the same time, we thought, Nagaland is far away from the conflict areas between China and India and there are no official regulations to prohibit any Chinese from coming. Otherwise, surely, we would have been stopped at Dimapur airport, or even in Kolkata. Nevertheless, soon after, the final decision came that we had to leave the state within 24 hours.

At this time, the airport had already closed and the only way to leave was by train or car, so we assumed we would stay the night and



Above: Catching the night train out of Nagaland

Right: Dimapur train station.



catch a flight the next day. Later that evening, however, the local staff explained we had to leave Nagaland by night train and that the police had already arranged our tickets. Perhaps they wanted to rid themselves of an awkward situation as soon as possible. The train would take us to Guwahati, the capital city of Assam state where foreigners can stay without registration. From there, we could easily reach Delhi or Kolkata. The police officers gracefully allowed us to wait in the hotel lobby until departure time.

After learning about our situation, the symposium organizers were furious and suggested that all participants should move to Assam. Realizing that this was impracticable, they looked into the possibility of holding the meeting in a town just across the Nagaland border. However, this might even be more troubling to the police if they knew that the three Chinese nationals would be 'active' right at the border. Moreover, although it would only be a twenty-minute drive from Dimapur, the Chinese scholars would have to travel by train from Guwahati, a further six hours away. We agreed that it was all too much and, unfortunately, we had to accept that we could not attend the conference.

### Dimapur station

A police officer accompanied us to the railway station, apologizing many times in English. His comment, "I am sorry to let you have such an experience in this corner of the world", was unforgettable. We arrived at the railway station at 20:30; a shabby train was waiting at a platform crowded with people waiting to board. It was a disheartening sight. Two police officers who awaited us handed us our train tickets, and then took a group photo as proof that we had left the state. After that, the police were so kind as to arrange a private, quiet and comfortable place for us to rest before boarding.

When we boarded our sleeper coach, many colleagues escorted us to our seats. It was heartwarming, but our feelings were otherwise mixed; we had been expecting academic discussions at the conference and instead were confronted with an unexpected expulsion. The train started moving slowly, and the police officers waved us goodbye. Three Chinese who did not know each other 8 hours previously, embarked on a journey together to a strange place. But that is a story for another time.

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