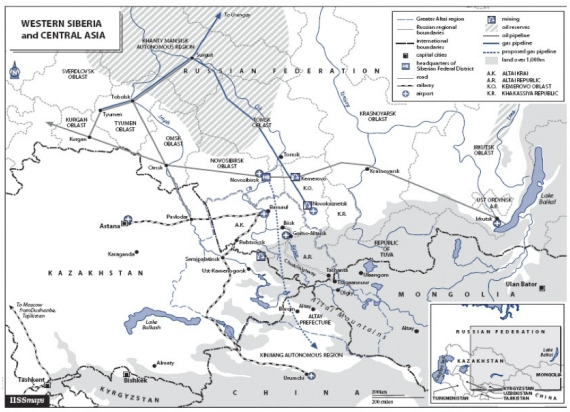
The Missing Road: Clashing Visions of Development across the Russian-Chinese Border

Pal Nyiri, Joana Breidenbach

The Missing Road: Clashing Visions of Development across the Russian-Chinese Border

Pal Nyiri and Joana Breidenbach

In 2004, we visited the Altai Republic, a remote mountainous region in Southern Siberia, bordering on Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China. For some time, the republic had been supposedly involved in an international collaboration called "Altai: Our Common Home," supported by the German government. The project focused on economic development, tourism, and — somewhat contradictorily — environmental protection. One of the plan's central elements was a road linking the Altai Republic and China: currently, traffic between them has to detour via Kazakhstan or Mongolia. By the end of 2004, a 140 km road on the Chinese side had been completed, but no progress had been made on the Russian side.



A map of the Altai Republic and its surroundings.
Source: Russia's New Southern Border: Western Siberia — Central Asia. The IISS Russian Regional Perspectives Journal for Foreign and Security Policy, **Issue 2, 2003.**
Enlarge this image (/data/map a.jpg)

The Altai Republic's budget almost entirely relied on federal subsidies; the unemployment rate was 47 percent; and per capita monthly income was under $50. We expected that trade with China, Chinese investment in the timber sector, and tourism would be welcome as a new revenue source, but surprisingly, many of our interlocutors in Russia expressed strong opposition to the road.

"Want to Get Rich? Build a Road First!" — The Chinese Model

Xinjiang, on the Chinese side of the border, lies the Altay Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, home to the Lake Khanas National Scenic Area. Like the Altai Republic, it is largely inhabited by a Turkic-speaking population. In recent years, Lake Khanas has become the most popular tourism destination in Xinjiang, and the Chinese government has favoured a road that would connect the lake to the Russian border at the Khanas Pass, facilitating cross-border tourism. Burqin County, where the lake lies, received nearly three-quarters of its income from tourism; its airport has more than 20 flights a day in peak season. The government renovated buildings in the county town's main street in a "European style," developed a pedestrian shopping and entertainment street "in Russian style," and a neighbourhood of "European-style villas." The Chinese government declared Lake Khanas a nature reserve, and—ostensibly for

environmental protection, but no doubt also not to disturb the investors—the nomadic Kazak and Mongol herder population has been resettled outside. All tourist accommodation is removed from the shore, and swimming in the lake is forbidden. Nearly two thousand private enterprises operate in Burqin County, and the government claims that locals' incomes, which only a few years ago had to be supplemented by emergency food aid, had risen dramatically because of tourism-related services.

This development has been linked to the marketing of local mythology — "real" or invented — as much as to nature. According to the Burqin County Tourism Office's head, reported sightings of the "Lake God," a Nessie-like creature that snatches goats and cows that graze around the lake, and the Sea of Clouds and Buddha Halo that manifest after rain, have been instrumental in attracting tourists. Performances of Tuvan, Kazak, and Russian customs are part of most visitors' programme.

All levels of the Chinese government unquestionably aim to develop the economy. Since 1978, the interchangeable notions of modernization (xiandaihua) and development (fazhan) have consistently been the Chinese state's central mantra. While these notions have always reflected a linear vision of development shared with the post-Bretton Woods Western discourse, after the Chinese Communist Party's 1992 decision to create a "socialist market economy," mainstream Chinese modernization theorists essentially accepted the idea of a single path of development pioneered by Western Europe and North America, accepting that it results in the same type of sociocultural change and denying only that it necessarily leads to "Western-style" social and political institutions. [1] Particularly in the early twenty-first century the Chinese have highly prioritized and rapidly implemented infrastructural development, especially road construction. The slogan: "Want to get rich? Build a road first!" (Yao zhifu, xian xiu lu) is a common sight in the countryside. According to official data, from 1990 to 2003, China invested 2 trillion yuan (about U.S. $ 241.5 billion) in road construction. Much of this construction goes on in China's poorer northwest, which the government vowed to help catch up.

An Australian writer for Frommers China dismisses the Lake Khanas's development as a "tacky Switzerland with . . . dancing and karaoke, where land and hunting have been taken away from the locals." But Wei Xiaoan, a former top official in the National Tourism Administration and one of China's most sought-after tourism planners, considers the Western model of ecotourism — tightly limited numbers of visitors, high prices, and limited infrastructure — unsuitable as a general model for China:

> In a way, rich people and foreigners want to see places as Nature-made zoos: don't touch your environment, don't touch your culture; leave it for us to go and peek at it at our leisure. If so, are we still to have local development?

In contrast to Russia and Eastern Europe since the late 1980s, Chinese environmentalist movements decided to work with the state rather than confront it. They focus their efforts on industrial pollution rather than tourism, whose environmental costs are relatively light. Opposition to local authorities' development plans usually comes from international organisations (and foreign tourists), instead. We found, for example, that locals in the town of Songpan, Sichuan Province, welcomed their town's 2004 touristic transformation as local authorities ordered the demolition of old houses and the construction of a "Ming-Qing Dynasty Street" to attract Chinese tourists. Kelly Dombroski, in her study of Jiuzhaigou — another

remote mountain area that has, thanks to its scenery, become one of China's top tourists destinations — found that corporate-style, top-down economic development has resulted in an increased sense of well-being for the local Tibetan population, and used that conclusion to argue against Western development studies' entrenched belief that mass tourism is always bad and that participation is a necessary component of "good" development.

State-driven tourism is a major tool of increasing domestic consumption and fits into the Chinese state's use of tourism development as a tool of both "material and spiritual civilization" that should strengthen national pride and "raise the quality" of life for the rural population and especially ethnic minorities. In the dominant view, environmentalism is primarily another tool that serves modernization and economic development, rather than a system of values opposed, or even alternative, to these.

"Only the Chinese Take Real Steps"

Even in the remote regions of the Altai Republic and the Altay Prefecture, the contrast in the speed and nature of economic development on the border's two sides is spectacular. Lake Altyn-Köl (Teletskoe in Russian) has been designated a World Natural Heritage site, a distinction Khanas does not enjoy. Visitor statistics at the two sites are similar, but whereas Khanas has nearly 2,000 hotel rooms, the "tourist bases" on Teletskoe are modest affairs consisting of a dozen log cabins with a campsite and perhaps five staff.

Lake Teletskoe

Almost all visitors arrive in their own cars, but apart from that, tourist practices have not changed much since Soviet times: they include hikes, kayaking, swimming, and an emphasis on the spiritual benefits of "pure nature." Khanas's souvenir stalls, songs, dances, buses, and tour guides are missing. The director of the reserve even forbade local villagers from selling souvenirs. Instead, visitors can contemplate drunks stretched out across Artybash's main street on their morning walks — 70 percent of the village population is unemployed.

The closed dining hall of a former state-owned tourist base in Artybash.

Chinese-style development does have its enthusiasts in the Altai. Sergey Nozhkin, foreign policy advisor to the Altai Province's governor, makes no secret of his admiration for China's growth policies. "We just sit there and do nothing," he says in German. "Only the Chinese take real steps." He sees Lake Khanas as a model for tourism development in the Russian Altai. The Chinese, he tells us approvingly, have a strong state policy. Two large companies have been given the licence to develop tourism. Tourism experts from New Zealand developed a ten-year plan, and every word of it is being implemented. Local agricultural products fetch four times the price they would otherwise because of tourist demand. According to Nozhkin, Russia also needs a strong state policy. "We have no plan, just spontaneous development." When asked whether this would include the resettlement of residents from the lakeshore — as at Khanas — Nozhkin says that the only ones to oppose this at Teletskoe are the tourist base operators. He admits that the political means for such a solution in Russia have so far been lacking. But many politicians in the Altai find the Chinese power structure, and the former Soviet Union's power structure, if not attractive, then at least useful.

Nozhkin's hopes are pinned on Chinese tourists — "they are forced to visit places like Khanas" because "the borders are closed" — and Chinese investors. But, he says, the Russian side is afraid. Nozhkin summarizes the objections: "The Chinese will come, they will take our women, they work a lot and don't drink. We don't work and drink a lot." But when asked about the road, he gets defensive: "What plans? It's just an idea." His views on its becoming reality are dim. The Kazakh population near the Chinese border, he says, are for it, because they are interested in contacts with the Kazakhs across the border. But the other local ethnic groups oppose the road, because they too are "afraid of the Chinese. . . . The Greens are against it."

Nozhkin professes himself sensitive to ecological arguments. Despite the development, he says, tourists cause less harm to the environment at Khanas than they do in Russia. At Teletskoe, they stay on the lakeshore; at Khanas, ten minutes away. The bus takes them to the lake in the morning and back in the evening. If Teletskoe were developed according to this model, "a lot of people should come to one corner of the lake and the rest would be kept free." In any case, Nozhkin says, "ecological security" is not possible without income from tourism. "Poor people are no[t] environmentalists." For him, "ecobabble" is just an excuse for a foot-dragging opposition to avoid opening the region to foreign investors.

Artybash
"What People Really Want Is Pure Nature"

Mikhail Shishin, Nozhkin's opponent, whom the latter describes as a "radical Green," is his partner in the "Altai: Our Common Home" project. Shishin heads the Fund for a Twenty-First Century Altai, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) with extensive connections to the international ecological movement that was one of the Russian Altai's nomination for the World Heritage list's initiators. According to A. V. Ivanov, the fund's vice-president, their current aims are to promote ecotourism, energy conservation, and traditional agricultural production methods. To accomplish this, the fund works with foreign NGOs such as the U.S.-based organisations Builders Without Borders and the Center for Safe Energy.

A sign declaring Lake Teletskoe's inclusion in the World Heritage list

Ivanov says the road to China, and a gas pipeline and dam that have also been discussed, would "cause gigantic damage and that would be a gigantic blow to tourism." After all, "what people really want is pure nature." Moreover, the road would cross sacred burial grounds. Ivanov believes that "the Altai should be treated like a sacred space." In 2000, the fund, along with other NGOs, signed the Spiritual-Environmental Charter of the Altai-Sayan Region, which states:

> The Altai-Sayan region, situated in the exact center of the Eurasian continent and inhabited by the key ethnic groups of Eurasia, is its geopolitical, ethnocultural and biospheric heart. By and large, the future of the Earth's entire civilization depends on the region's destiny in the 21st century and the collaboration of the peoples dwelling here. [2]

The fund advocates returning to pastoralism and the philosophy called "Eurasianism," which, resurrected since perestroika, sees Russian "civilization" as a bridge between "Oriental spirituality" and "Western rationality." According to Shishin, Eurasianism should serve as the basis for international cooperation: "Russians are neither European nor Asian, but combine both heritages and are therefore ideally suited to holistic and organic thinking, ideally suited to solve global problems." But Ivanov has not found a Chinese partner to help fight against the road and the pipeline.

In 1996, Russian President Boris Yeltsin issued a decree charting a path to sustainable development. The decree states: "The idea of sustainable development is extremely consonant with the customs, spirit and mentality of Russia." According to Jonathan Oldfield, the discourse of "sustainable development" appeals to nationalists (who see it as "consonant" with the Russian "spirit") and Communists (to whom its rhetoric seems reminicient of Soviet ideologemes). "Eurasianism" is also a motley movement: some of its strands are strongly nationalistic and anti-Western, while others are more mystical or environmentalist.

"Only the Mountains Save Us"

Vassily Manyshev, deputy head of the Federal Administration of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection's Altai Republic

branch, is in charge of natural reserves. "After 1991, we had to face capitalist robber barons who wanted to enrich themselves on Nature. But for indigenous people who live here, Nature is the most important thing they have. Economics is only secondary," he declares. He boasts that a plan has been adopted to set up more nature reserves by 2010 "in order to protect the local population, so that they can go on collecting and selling pine nuts and herbs."

Lake Teletskoe

Manyshev's environmentalist rhetoric is by no means unusual in Russia. The Russian Federation is an early signatory of international iniatives for "sustainable development." Even after former Russian President Vladimir Putin shut down the State Committee on Ecology, environmentalist rhetoric has continued to cut across the political spectrum. A Communist member of the Republic's parliament condemns the ecological harm of the "so-called perestroika" and the times after; the liberals point to rocket parts that spacecraft launched from nearby Kazakstan dropped on the Altai in Soviet times. Expressions like "ecological security" and "biological integrity" belong to the newspapers' daily language.

Accordingly, Manyshev's holds cautious views on tourism development. There are, he says, enough tourists in the Altai as it is, and he is critical of the pollution that some tourists cause. "We don't want tourism on a Berchtesgaden scale, where you drive up the hill to sniff some fresh air." More surprisingly, the republic's top tourism official is not very enthusiastic about tourism either. According to Aleksandr Chekonov, the republic's tourism committee head, disrespect for nature goes against the Altai "national character." In his view, a tourist invasion would lead to "conflict at the spiritual level."

Some versions of ecological discourse concerned with the behaviour of unregulated — "savage" (dikie) — tourists are distinctly tinged with Soviet nostalgia. Ironically, these anticapitalist "disciplinarian ecologists" agree with dynamic economist Nozhkin in their preference for Chinese-style tourism development: fenced-off scenic spots with an entrance fee, with tourist groups bussed to the gate and prevented from accessing the shore elsewhere. Genrikh Sobansky, a zoologist who has lived on Lake Teletskoe for 42 years waxes lyrical: "Then the deer and bears would come back to the lakeshore." He reminisces fondly about the times when the only tourist base at the lake belonged to the Central Committee of the Trade Unions, leaving guests met arriving guests with a welcome fruit drink at the jetty, and all tours were accompanied by well-trained instructors. [3]

But opposition is not limited to the elderly nostalgics. "Only the mountains save us" from the Chinese, says Konstantin Pershin, a young entrepreneur who runs a "tourist base" on Lake Teletskoe. One of his guests, a district official and local leader of Putin's party, has no love lost for Manyshev: "What these people care about is not ecology; what they want is for things to have no master (beskhoznost')." Yet he, too, opposes the road to China. "We don't need that," he says curtly. "Yeltsin opened the borders, but they should be regulated and shouldn't be open to terrorists." The widely shared fear of "the Chinese" — in a 2001 poll, 29 percent of Russians thought that China constituted a threat to the

country — is rooted in a border dispute which lasted from 1964 to 2001 and involved a brief war in the 1960s. When the dispute was finally settled in a 2001 treaty, many Russians opposed it as a cession of territory. In the 1990s, fear of a Chinese "peaceful conquest" became a popular topic as Chinese immigration to the Russian Far Eastern regions surged and was exploited by regional politicians fanning anti-immigrant hysteria.

Since our visit, the dramatic centralization of Russian power and the hardening of statist discourse have strengthened this district official's political and ideological positions. In 2004, Putin dismantled the Russian federal model, and appointed a former police general as the Altai Republic's new leader the following year. During a March 2006 visit to China, Putin declared Russia's intention to construct two pipelines from Siberia to China. Although Altai Twenty-First Century launched a renewed fax campaign to stop the pipeline, the state gas giant Gazprom and the republic's new head signed an agreement specifying the route and construction schedule. Road construction remained taboo, however. The republic's economic development minister reaffirmed that there was no such plan "in the medium term." [4]

A Clash of Civilizations — But Not as You Expected

The story of the missing road across the Altai, this shared periphery of two putative "civilizations" ("the West" and China), casts China as the modernizing hegemon and Russia as modernization's resisting recipient. This is unfamiliar: although China, much to the World Bank's consternation, is rapidly emerging as a development actor in Southeast Asia and Africa, stories about Chinese projects tend to come from places that have long been mired in colonial and postcolonial dependency. Russia is a different story: it was China's erstwhile mentor in industrial modernization (and, of course, state socialism). Yet today, Russian views on development remain highly contentious, despite Putin's efforts to steer Russia closer to the Chinese model. In the case of the Altai road, the Chinese developmentalists' only allies, the only ones who see the seemingly obvious benefits of connecting their region to their main potential market and source of investment, are a small group of free-market modernizers who are actually more drawn to the West than to China. Their opponents, in contrast, are a broad coalition of globally connected ecologists who mobilize Western allies to oppose the road; romantic "Eurasianists" who seek to synthesize "Asian" and "Western" spirituality into a uniquely Russian environmentalism; nostalgic conservationists reminiscing about the strong hand of the Soviets; and plain anti-Chinese xenophobes.

As the Chinese party-state has adopted development as its essential legitimation tool, it understandably maintains hegemony in determining the development's meaning . In Russia, a plural articulation of development underpins competing political agendas, and even with the state's dramatic centralization of power since the time of our fieldwork, the environment remains a powerful trope: environmental assessment has been used as a tool in driving foreign oil companies from Sakhalin.

The main lesson from the case of the missing road is clear: the situation on the ground no longer corresponds to the old picture that pits the global capital's and international (read: Western) organizations' inexorable forces against local (read: non-Western) resistance. In the Altai case, we have a state — China — that, while ideologically "standing up to the West" in the name of "the developing world," pursues a development agenda based on economic rationality, openly inspired by Western models and often with little environmental regard. Yet that agenda's putative beneficiaries, whose position, though ambiguous, are conventionally seen as closer to the Western "core," are

determined to resist, invoking an array of both "old" and "new" antidevelopmentalist arguments from the arsenal of nineteenth-century nationalist Romanticism and the latest ecotechnological babble. These visions of "alternative development" are neither more local than their opponents' visions, nor are they necessarily more benign — a fact that deserves attention at a time when debates about universalist versus culturalist approaches to development are thrown into disarray by China's entry onto the stage.

Notes

[1] For a review of dominant "modernization theories" in China, see Barabantseva (2005, Chapter 4).

[2] See article here (https://www.earthisland.org/project/genPage2.cfm?generalID=205&pageID=98&subSiteID=7).

[3] Interview in Artybash, September 15, 2004.

[4] "Ministr ekonomiki Respubliki Altai: Federal'nye vlasti ne namereny sroit' dorogu v Kitay cherez plato Ukok" [Altai Republic's Minister of the Economy Says Federal Government Has No Plan to Build Road Across Ukok Plateau], Regnum September 11, 2006. See article here (http://www.regnum.ru/news/702511.html).

Pál Nyíri is senior lecturer and director of the Applied Anthropology Programme at Macquarie University, Sydney. He can be contacted at: Pal.Nyiri@mq.edu.au. His research focuses on China, migration, and tourism. His latest books are Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational Era (Routledge, 2007), and, together with Joana Breidenbach, Maxikulti (Campus, 2008). Breidenbach, Nyíri, and colleagues contribute to a blog that can be read here (http://culturematters.wordpress.com).

Joana Breidenbach is a Berlin-based anthropologist, columnist, and author of Tanz der Kulturen (Rowohlt, 2000). She is currently involved in setting up the Web-based charity platform betterplace.org (http://www.betterplace.org/). She can be contacted at: joanabreidenbach@hotmail.com.

This is an abbreviated and revised version of an article published in Development and Change 39, no. 1 (2008): 123–145.

Posted at Japan Focus on July 5, 2008.

Pal Nyiri (/authors/view/9221)
Joana Breidenbach (/authors/view/9222)