



The roads of the Sayan Mountains: Theorizing remoteness in eastern Siberia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Remoteness
Roads
Mobility
Sayan crossroads
Siberia
Russia

ABSTRACT

The Sayan crossroads is a distinct cultural and economic region in the mountains of eastern Siberia. It spans three federal units in the Russian Federation: the national republics of Tyva (Todzha *kozhuun*) and Buryatia (Okinskii *raion*), as well as Irkutsk oblast (Tofalarskoe municipality). Attempts at integration by the state during the Soviet period and afterwards have privileged the construction of roads in a variety of forms to connect these areas economically with regional centers and, in turn, the rest of the country. Yet this process has been uneven and led to divergences in the economic regimes in each of the three regions that make up the crossroads. The evolution of subsistence economies, exploitation by extractive industries, and the development of tourism as an alternative source of income all differ across the three federal subunits. In turn, these divergences within the crossroads as a region point to variation in the condition of remoteness. Remoteness is an instance of relative immobility, determined by physical geography, environment, and ethnicity. And remoteness influences the function that roads play in integrating state spaces both economically and politically. In turn, this article argues for the foregrounding of the remote in the literature on mobilities in human geography, considering what the condition of remoteness allows for and forecloses in the articulation of state power and the integration of hard-to-reach areas.

1. Introduction

There is a monument on the banks of the Yenisei River in the Tyvan capital of Kyzyl marking the center of Asia—the aim of physicist Richard Feynman's romantic quest late in his life (Leighton, 2000). Despite its centrality in Asia, Tyva itself is difficult to reach, and Feynman himself never got there. There are no direct flights to Kyzyl from Moscow and most travelers to the region drive overland from Abakan, the capital of the neighboring republic of Khakassia. Further removed, in the republic's northeast, is the region of Todzha *kozhuun*.¹ Home to the reindeer-herding Tozhu people, Todzha is isolated from the state structures of the Russian Federation. Tyva was not fully incorporated into the Soviet Union until 1944, and Todzha district reflects the incompleteness of this process. Reindeer herding is still practiced extensively and a dialect of Tyvan is the first language of the region's residents.

To the north, in Tofalarskoe municipality (part of Nizhneudinskii *raion* in Irkutsk oblast and also referred to as Tofalaria), traditional livelihoods were eroded as a result of the Soviet short century (Donahoe, 2004). The resident population, the Tofalars, was forcibly settled in

their entirety by the communist state between 1928 and 1932 (Slezkine, 1994); in turn, the Soviets formed three collective farms (*kolkhozi*) in the district and placed commonly held land under state control. To Todzha's east is Okinskii *raion*, at the western extreme of the republic of Buryatia and home to the Soyots, a Turkic population that was similarly subjected to russification and buryatization in the Soviet Union. The Soyots have experienced something of a renaissance in the post-Soviet period, with a return to pastoral economies (in the form of yak herding rather than reindeer herding) and the reintroduction of native language instruction in local schools (Montgomery, 2012).

Ethnographers have argued that divisions among the Tozhu, Tofalars, and Soyots are artificial, the product of political geography rather than actual divisions among the groups. All three have historically practiced a subsistence economy based on reindeer herding; reindeer are also used for the transport of goods and peoples. This subsistence economy organized around reindeer parallels the practices in the Russian Far North, among the Nenets, Chukchi, Evenki, and other small-numbered groups (Vitebsky and Alekseyev, 2015). The groups all speak languages that are classified as part of the Turkic family (on the origins of Tofa—spoken by the Tofalars—as a Turkic language, see

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¹ *Kozhuun* refers to an administrative subunit in the republic of Tyva (Russian: Tuva). It is unique to Tyva, and elsewhere in Russia the term *raion* is most commonly used to denote these subregional areas—the equivalent of counties in the U.S. system.

Harrison, 2010). Tyvan as spoken in the republic is also a Turkic language, while Buryat is related to Mongolian. Referred to as the “Sayan Cross” by Daniel Plumley and Brian Donahoe after the shape of the region’s mountain ranges, the area where the Tozhu, Tofalars, and Soyots live has been proposed by ethnic and environmental leaders as a world natural and cultural heritage site. This designation is based on shared cultural identities and livelihoods as practiced by the three groups in Russia, as well as by the Tukha (Tsaatans) in Mongolia (Donahoe, 2004; Kalikhman and Kalikhman, 2009; Ivanov et al., 2008; Pavlinskaia, 2002).

The area also holds abundant natural resources and has limited road infrastructures linking the mountains to more economically developed parts of the respective regions. Though some development occurred during the Soviet period in terms of road construction, the tracks that exist are often unmaintained by the state today. Roads are material objects, and their materiality both challenges and reproduces a condition of remoteness that has long defined the cultures and economies of the region (Cresswell and Merriman, 2011). While the construction of roads opens up new spaces in an otherwise removed region for economic development, the resulting opportunities vary across actor and interest. While integration with the state can occur, at the same time the condition of remoteness can persist.

Building on this broader argument, the article explores the consequences of remoteness in the Sayan Mountains. While roads have been used to integrate the region into the state, this process is incomplete due to the challenges faced in the construction and maintenance of roads as material objects. In exploring this case, we first review extant work on roads in the discipline of geography, emphasizing themes of materiality, remoteness, and state centralization. In particular, the article advocates for a more robust theorization of the remote in human geography. The article takes the Sayan crossroads as a case study for how the evolution of road networks leads to different interactions with the remote, including linkages to the state, resource extraction, and unofficial tourism. The nature of road connections—or lack thereof—serves to underscore the maintenance of shared cultural characteristics and relations with the environment in this remote region. In synthesizing these aims, the article contributes to the literature in human geography on mobility, transportation infrastructure, and the ability and limits of the state to integrate remote areas through road construction.

We proceed as follows. First, we review existing work on the materiality of roads, with specific concern for their role as elements of infrastructure that facilitate connections between previously isolated groups and more established economic actors. To reiterate, in this discussion our aim is to enhance academic consideration of the concept of the remote. We then turn to our case study of the Sayan crossroads region of eastern Siberia, providing more detail on the area and its constituent parts. The paper’s empirical section focuses on the role of roads as mechanisms for state integration, resource extraction, and tourist mobility and offers a comparative consideration of these processes in Todzha, Tofalaria, and Okinskii *raion*.

2. Theorizing remoteness in human geography

Roads are one of a suite of spaces where human mobility is enacted (Cresswell and Merriman, 2011; Cresswell, 2010). Movement through space—mobility—is positioned against a spatial order that serves to limit such movement—immobility. Mobility and immobility are not binary categories, but rather exist on a continuum; as Adey (2006: 83) writes: “there is never any absolute immobility, but only mobilities which we mistake for immobility, what could be called relative immobilities.” Roads are a key mechanism for reducing this condition of relative immobility. At the same time, movement as enacted through roads or other forms of transportation infrastructure is facilitated or limited by a variety of practices, such as the enforcement of rules and regulations by state actors, improvement and maintenance, and the

planning and construction of new arteries. As material objects roads can be conceived, perceived, and experienced in a range of ways (Lefebvre, 1991).

Prior work in human geography on roads has positioned these vectors as both the product and productive of social relations. Mobility is a function of movement through space, but also the representation of that movement and the nature of its practice (Cresswell, 2010). The literature in geography has offered a range of conditions that complicate this movement by contesting its practice and interrogating its discursive representation; gender, youth, and the urban-rural divide all condition access to and use of roads as a mechanism for movement through space. This recent work is a notable divergence from the approach to roads as traditionally offered in transportation geography (Cresswell, 2010).

Roads also have utility for the project of state-building, a theme that has been widely discussed in the social scientific literature on roads as a political technology. Roads, and transportation infrastructure in general, are “at the heart of modern national-state projects as territorial entities” (Shaw and Sidaway, 2010: 507). The construction of roads is one of a suite of technologies that serves to make the state more legible, along with cadastral surveys, population censuses, and city planning (and this is not an exhaustive list; see Scott, 1998; Silvey, 2010). However, roads are distinct from other technologies because their benefits for state building are often couched in the economic. Murton (2017) writes of the evolving markets for goods in Nepal’s isolated Mustang province, with the importation of goods from China changing the composition of household items and lowering the cost of goods overall. When proposed to increase international connections—not necessarily, but potentially, a challenge to the nation-state—roads can face local opposition, often framed along environmental lines (Nyíri and Breidanbach, 2008; Jackson, 2015).

The review offered above should not be considered a comprehensive survey of the extensive literature on roads in human geography. Rather, we position it as a starting point for our contribution to this body of work. We are specifically interested in the use of roads to access remote areas, with further attention given to their economic and integrative roles. The concept of the remote has been arguably undertheorized in human geography. Remoteness implies distance from the object of observation (e.g. remote sensing), but also a challenge of accessibility both with respect to human mobility and the extension of state capacity. The prior literature on roads and remoteness has considered states’ attempts at modernization, development, and legibility in areas either inhabited by indigenous groups or sparsely populated—by Brazil in the Amazon and Canada and Russia in the Arctic, among others (Arima et al., 2005; Moran, 1993; Aporta, 2004; Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009; Schweitzer et al., 2017; Crate, 2009; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003). Some of this work has explicitly defined remoteness, for example, as an “overall low degree of connectedness to powerful national and global territories and sites” (Zimmerer et al., 2017: 443).

Acknowledging this prior work in geography and anthropology, we argue that remoteness is something that can be only partially addressed through the construction of infrastructure. Roads decrease distances as measured by travel time; as these times are reduced, access to markets, institutions, and other elements associated with the modern state become easier. Yet the impact of such development on the symbolic meaning of remoteness is less certain—remoteness is a lack of connection but also something more. Gibson et al. (2010) suggest that remoteness is both tangible and metaphorical—measured in distance travel times and the figurative perception of the remote as removed from the political and cultural mainstream of the state (on perceptions of travel times and state development, see also Brennan-Horley, 2015). As a relative condition of isolation, remoteness has the potential to limit collaboration and interconnectedness but also open up spaces of creativity for localized populations that are dependent on geography. In turn, remoteness can create biases with respect to technological access and transportation, though such services are often not offered in remote

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