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8. The Economics of Translocality – Epistemographic Observations from Fieldwork In(-Between) Russia, China, and Kyrgyzstan

Philipp Schröder

Introduction: my translocal field and epistemography

My current research project attempts to capture the ‘translocal livelihoods’ of Kyrgyz business(wo)men who are involved in the trade of consumer goods ‘made in China’. Twenty-five years after the dissolution of the Soviet empire and in times of an emerging ‘New Silk Road’ through Eurasia, I engage with a broad range of economic agents: Kyrgyz traders in Novosibirsk, who sell Chinese merchandise in one of Russia’s largest bazaars; Kyrgyz middlemen in Guangzhou, who guide their clients through the thick of Chinese manufacturing landscapes hunting for profitable wholesale deals; and, finally, Kyrgyz entrepreneurs in their nation’s capital, Bishkek, some of whom are, in addition to importing ‘raw materials’ (e.g., fabric) from China, processing these materials into consumer goods (e.g., dresses). Along these various commodity chains originating in China, my aim is to trace how ethnic Kyrgyz earn their everyday living at home and abroad within their niche of post-Socialist capitalism as well as how their senses of wellbeing and identity are shaped by the myriad flows of things, people, and ideas across the borders of nation states and the boundaries

of diverse linguistic, cultural, and other environments (see Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014).

In the following paragraphs, I want to expand the analytical gaze of economics — which is said to be about the production, distribution, and consumption of something more or less valuable — into the domain of epistemology. To arrive at an understanding of what my research ‘can know’ about current trading and other business practices in Eurasia, I will present different ethnographic vignettes that illustrate both methodological possibilities and limitations. In this way, I return to the original etymology of the term economics, which in Greek referred to the ‘rules of the house’ (*oikos* = house and *nomos* = rule/law). Examples of such vernacular house rules that came to guide my fieldwork include the management of my ambitions for participant observation among traders, the accessing of online ‘homing desires’ among younger Kyrgyz abroad, and the adjustment to differently ‘sized’ and ‘rooted’ Kyrgyz diaspora groups in China and Russia.

My contribution thus conflates two genres that conventionally are kept apart in social and cultural anthropology: so-called ‘professional ethnography’, i.e., a researcher’s (re-)presentation of the lifeworlds of his or her interlocutors as they express them, and a more self-reflective commentary on how this same researcher assesses such self-induced processes of knowledge generation. To capture this, I will employ the term ‘epistemography’, which Peter Dear (2010:131) has identified as ‘an enterprise centrally concerned with developing an empirical understanding of scientific knowledge, in contrast to epistemology, which is a prescriptive study of how knowledge can or should be made’. Returning to economics, the epistemographic notes on the following pages will provide some descriptive insights into my ways of working towards a translocal ethnography; i.e., how I accessed, selected, negotiated, and tailored information for (scientific) consumption in the different sites of my field. This will show that when mapping translocal assemblages, it is essential not only to identify (the transgressions of) factual boundaries of state regimes, social belongings, and so on, but also to reflect on how the particular house rules of a fieldworking reality, as established between interlocutors and researchers, shape the very contours of knowledge production.

Vignette 1: 'He shouldn't see us trade, it would be shameful' – lost (authenticity) in participation

Since the early twentieth century, 'participant observation' has been the key data-gathering tool of cultural and social anthropology. Located right at the heart of this discipline and its fieldwork practice, the professional identity of most ethnographers still crucially rests on engaging in long-term, face-to-face, and close relations with their interlocutors. Most significantly, this cultural proximity – in terms of knowing local traditions and languages – is commonly believed to allow deeper insights into the lifeworlds of others, but also claims to allow for more 'authentic' representations of emic views.

Clifford Geertz (1968:54) once argued that successful fieldwork is about a common fiction, which the researcher and the researched agree upon regardless of the social distances between them and their awareness of these distances. Aside from calling attention to this irony, Geertz identified such anthropological research as a 'form of conduct' (see also Schröder 2014). This again reminds us that, just like any shared narration aiming for validity, the practice of fieldwork draws on certain conventions and strategies. As the following example from Russia shows, one such rule of thumb may be that an enforced 'witnesshood', i.e., an exaggerated connection to a witness identity (analogous to victimhood), which rests on the mantra 'more participation = more authenticity', may in fact endanger the stability of field relations.

In Novosibirsk, the primary topic of my interest is trading. Mostly, this occurs in the city's main bazaar, which, as in other places in the post-Soviet sphere, is commonly referred to as the *baraholka* ('flea market' or 'rag fair'). At the time of my research, Novosibirsk's *baraholka* featured about 10,000 sellers, and with its enormous wholesale capacity it was said to supply 'the whole of Siberia' with goods. At night, when the larger-scale trading set in at 2am, busses with re-sellers from cities such as Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, and even from Yakutsk – 5,000 kilometers away – could be spotted.

The majority of traders working the bazaar are 'non-Russians' and belong to different ethnic groups from Central Asia. Among them, the

Kyrgyz have the largest presence in Novosibirsk's *baraholka*, and their long-time establishment here is exemplified by the fact that the bazaar's prime restaurant is called 'Bishkek' (after Kyrgyzstan's capital). The earliest Kyrgyz traders — the self-acclaimed 'pioneers' — had already settled in Novosibirsk in the 1990s. Most of them originate from the southern regions of the Kyrgyz Republic, which, due to structural neglect and demographic pressure since the Soviet era, has been hit harder by the later transformation period than the country's northern part. Within the two decades that have passed since this first generation of migrants arrived and settled down, the Kyrgyz ethnic communities in different parts of Russia have grown. Currently, an unofficial 1 million Kyrgyz (of Kyrgyzstan's approximately 6 million total population) reside in Russia, about 30,000 of them in Novosibirsk.

Timur *aka* is one of these traders. I was introduced to him during a fieldwork trip to Novosibirsk in 2013 by a mutual Kyrgyz acquaintance of ours, who I had been in touch with since my first research in Kyrgyzstan six years before. This 'friend-of-a-friend' scenario proved to be a very fortunate door-opener for me, as I was credibly vouched for as a trustworthy interlocutor: one who meant no harm, who was not a 'Western spy', and, most importantly, who already knew about the Kyrgyz and had even 'written a book about our capital city' (see Schröder 2012).

On that ticket, I was first granted access in Novosibirsk and quickly learned more about the business that Timur *aka* and his wife Gulmira *eje* were running together. Specializing in men's underwear, it was part of their (gendered) labour-sharing agreement that Gulmira *eje* was the one to travel back and forth between Novosibirsk and Kyrgyzstan's big *Dordoi* bazaar, where she purchased their goods and sent them north to Russia via cargo. While she was considered better qualified for this task due to 'a woman's better taste in fashion', Timur *aka* was the one who opened up their selling container at 2am and who received and unloaded the cargo.

Similar to many fellow Kyrgyz traders of their generation, Timur *aka* and Gulmira *eje* stressed that 'trading is not our actual profession' and that 'life forced us to get into this'. With Timur *aka's* background in engineering and Gulmira *eje's* training to be a nurse, the two indeed belong to a category that has been described as 'accidental traders' (Sahadeo 2011). This categorization alludes to the fact that, ever since



Fig. 8.1 Novosibirsk's *baraholka*. Photo © Philipp Schröder (2017), CC BY 4.0

the later years of the Soviet Union, the shrinking economic opportunities in the empire's peripheral areas have led sizeable numbers of the local population to abandon their original professional education and instead go into trading (e.g., Yurkova 2004, Kaiser 2003, 2005). In this way, many who had envisioned working in Soviet schools or factories became 'speculators' and merchants due to the accident of the regime's 1991 collapse.

For Timur *aka* and Gulmira *eje*, Russia became a lucrative option because, in their native Kyrgyzstan, goods made in China were available at low prices, the borders in between the countries of the region were

manageably porous, and because they already had a reliable set of relatives and friends in place among Novosibirsk's Kyrgyz diaspora. Aside from such advantageous conditions of economic development (especially Kyrgyzstan's WTO membership), corruption (cheaper to pay a bribe than the actual customs tariffs), and social networks (who provided initial loans and shared local knowledge), there are matters of identification to keep in mind when doing — and when researching — business. In the self-presentations of Timur *aka* and other Kyrgyz interlocutors, any mention of their hard-earned material success, apparent, for example, in their ownership of several apartments in Bishkek and Novosibirsk, was subordinate to their subjective perceptions of belonging to a collective with distinct features and what they called their 'unique cultural mentality'.

Much has been written about the feeling of shame that such newcomers to trade and the market economy in formerly socialist countries experienced during the transformation years (e.g., Heyat 2002, Hohnen 2003). For the most part, this refers back to Socialist ideology, according to which private trade was condemned as 'capitalist exploitation' and 'criminal speculation' for about six decades. While all traders, who soon operated between the very western and the very eastern end of the former Socialist orbit, shared this background, for the likes of Timur *aka* and Gulmira *eje* there were additional stigmatizations to face. In Russia, just like the members of other ethnic minorities from the Caucasus and Central Asia, they were often derogatorily referred to as 'blacks' (Sahadeo 2012); and for a long time, such everyday racial discrimination made them feel 'as if we are a second class of people'.

During my fieldwork in Novosibirsk, however, none of these aspects caused me to reflect on when and where to approach the topic of trading with my Kyrgyz interlocutors. Ahead of my first visit to the *baraholka*, thanks to the stories I had heard from Timur *aka* and others about their challenging beginnings, about the big risks and even larger profits that seemed to be part and parcel of this place, I was excited about the moment when I would actually see them 'in action'.

In light of this, the first hours I spent in between the rows of containers that make the *baraholka* its bustling and noisy self were a disappointment. When I arrived at the bazaar, after an enthusiastic

welcome and a hurried tour of his trading spot, Timur *aka* slowed things down pretty quickly. I could see no obvious reason for that, because Timur *aka's* business was legal and registered, and he had a license with his name and picture hanging inside his container. Also, there were few customers around at the time, as I had deliberately come towards the end of the trading day. Still, Timur *aka* remained hesitant.

This surprised me, because before, whenever we had met in his home over tea and snacks, he had not been shy about revealing his trade secrets to me (on handling customs, profit margins, etc.). Yet now Timur *aka* was far from his usual proactive self, and despite the fact that my questions did not touch on any themes that I imagined could be too delicate to discuss in this half-public setting, he responded very briefly and with a lowered voice. A final and more obvious hint was necessary for me to finally grasp the origin of Timur *aka's* distancing in the bazaar. Some days later, Timur *aka* and I had agreed that he would pick me up that night in order for me to join him for a whole working day. But about three hours before our meeting, I received a call from Timur *aka's* wife Gulmira *eje*. Obviously embarrassed about the situation, she let me know that her husband could not take me with him, because, and then she began to whisper, 'he said that you should not see them trade, especially not at night [...] this will be *uiat*'.

Uiat in Kyrgyz is governed by strong moral guidelines referring to shameful behavior and to the anxiety that someone might lose social face. At that early stage of my fieldwork, it was the first time that *uiat* was mentioned to me in regard to trading. Judging from Gulmira *eje's* words, the main issue here was not only that Timur *aka* himself would trade in front of me, but also that he would bring a foreigner to the *baraholka*, thereby exposing all his fellow traders to that shameful situation. Whereas during the day, this could be represented as a social visit among acquaintances, at night the obvious purpose of my presence would be to witness people trade.

For my further research, this incident provided me with a valuable clue about an essentialized ethnic identity, which was maintained by Timur *aka* and others from a pre-Soviet and Soviet ethnogenetic template (Jacquesson, Chapter Six). As part of this primordialist perspective, trading was depicted as unusual for those with a nomadic

heritage, like the Kyrgyz, but rather was associated with sedentary groups, such as their Uzbek neighbors.¹ Abramzon (1971:109) remarks accordingly in Soviet ductus:² ‘Despite some developments of trade and exchange with neighboring settled people [ethnic groups, P.S.], the commodity-production of the nineteenth century Kyrgyz society was in a rudimentary [*zachatchnyi*] state’.

During the following decades of Soviet social engineering, such ‘perceptions of nationally constructed imagined communities’ (Gullette 2010:132)³ were continuously reinforced, and among many Kyrgyz traders of Timur *aka’s* generation they have shaped attitudes to the bazaar as a (morally) ‘dirty place’ and given rise to statements such as ‘trade is not in our blood’. In the reasoning of my Kyrgyz interlocutors in Novosibirsk, that ethno-cultural element, framed as ‘our Kyrgyz mentality’, was felt more strongly than the repercussions of the more general Marxist-Leninist ideology, which had condemned private trading as ‘illegal, illegitimate, and immoral’ (Hohnen 2003:32). (Quite fittingly, I encountered a more welcoming environment with Kyrgyz businessmen in Novosibirsk who were active in the service sector — e.g., selling SIM cards — and who revealed considerable pride in their work when receiving me in their offices.)

In fact, this experience of the trade-shame nexus that I shared with my interlocutors marked an instance of ‘cultural intimacy’, which has been described by Herzfeld in reference to discourses on nationalism (1997:3) as: ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality [...]’.

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- 1 Drawing on earlier work, Finke (2014:45) shows that distinctions between nomads and settled groups, the latter, for example, (derogatively) labelled ‘*Sart*’, had existed prior to the Soviet period.
 - 2 Ductus refers to a characteristic way of expressing oneself, either orally or in writing: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ductus_\(linguistics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ductus_(linguistics))
 - 3 Gullette (2010:132) identifies ethnogenesis as an important tool in Soviet attempts to socially engineer group boundaries: ‘The establishment of ethnic groups, the ideological construction of those ethnicities into nationalities and the development of the nationalities policy by Lenin (which was continued by subsequent leaders of the Communist Party) eventually led to a situation where perceptions of nationally constructed imagined communities became markers of identity. Ethno-national leaders began to use Gumilev’s theory [of ethnogenesis, P.S.] to emphasize ethnic distinctiveness and their place in history’.

Translated into a methodological insight, such encounters prompted me to be sensitive about the frequency and duration of the visits that I paid to the *baraholka*. I learned as a first ‘house rule’ for the Novosibirsk site of my translocal research field that I should assess carefully which of my Kyrgyz interlocutors did not feel ashamed while trading, and which of them did. The latter, just as Timur *aka*’s example showed, may be better suited for an after-work conversation outside of the bazaar. In any case, I took Gulmira *eje*’s call — to which similar such indications were added over time from other sources — as a well-meant warning that otherwise solid relations might collapse as a consequence of trespassing too far into ‘*uiat* territory’.

Taking this concern seriously, in my estimation, meant that ‘travelling with’ my interlocutors and their goods, or aiming for an ‘apprenticeship’ in their trading containers, was far from feasible. Thus, in order to reach ‘satisficing’ ethnographic data, according to Herbert Simon’s (1956) original sense of retreating to a non-optimal but attainable solution that both ‘satisfies’ and ‘suffices’, I refrained from an overambitious ‘witnesshood’: i.e., what I understood as the eagerness to get a glimpse of something that my interlocutors thought should not be seen. I accepted this inability either to ‘follow the people’ or ‘follow the thing’, which Marcus (1995) discusses as two of the basic ‘practices of construction’ for multi-sited ethnographies, as a particularity of researching Kyrgyz trading. I expected, on the other hand, that fieldwork might have progressed differently had I researched an ethnic group with a longer historical involvement in trade, for example the Igbo traders of Nigeria, who have established institutions to bring people into trade, and who thus might have expressed more pride and appreciation for this line of work (see Abimbola 2011).

Vignette 2: ‘My Divine Land — Kyrgyzstan’

The previous vignette illustrates that regardless of the material success they have achieved in Russia, many Kyrgyz accidental traders still present their current status as a part of post-Soviet decline. A friend of Gulmira *eje* once commented: ‘We [the ethnic Kyrgyz] had been an elite

in the Kyrgyz SSR!⁴ The Soviet Union educated us well and we were on our way to a good future... but now we have to do this!’

Eliza Isabaeva (2011) has made a fitting observation here, arguing that those Kyrgyz abroad who do not work in their actual profession — e.g., a doctor who turned into a merchant (*kommersant*) — are categorized as just ‘being in the field’ (*talaada*). Furthermore, this is understood as a term with a distinctly negative connotation: ‘Being ‘in the field’ — that is, being somewhere uncertain, unmoored from home, is often used to refer to being lost. The field is not a place of safety but is rather unbounded and dangerous, exposed to social and climactic extremes; owned — and therefore protected — by no one’ (*ibid.*:544).

I heard such reflections on the uncertainties and dangers of life abroad mainly from those who had remained behind in Kyrgyzstan and for this reason were worried about a relative or friend in Russia, or from those who were recent or illegal migrants there and thus were jeopardized by racial or administrative discrimination or even the threat of deportation. In contrast, I could not sense any such anxieties among the long-term Kyrgyz residents in Russian cities, who, just like Timur *aka* and Gulmira *eje*, had lived there for almost two decades and might even have obtained Russian citizenship. On the day when I first arrived in Novosibirsk, the friend of Gulmira *eje* who met me at the airport welcomed me with the words: ‘Well Philipp, this is our home now, this is where we live’. And, indeed, it felt like that right away, once we drove in her husband’s car into the city, continued to a modern ‘Sushi-and-Grill’ restaurant for a snack, and then had tea sitting on Kyrgyz *töshöktör* (mats) in the family’s apartment, which they had already owned for several years.

Although nowadays the likes of Timur *aka* certainly are established in Novosibirsk, all of them still remember quite well the initial stages of adapting to Siberian urban life. To a limited extent, this was a matter of language, as most of them had learned Russian during their school and university days back in Soviet Kyrgyzstan (where the knowledge of Russian was more widely spread than, for instance, in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan). Still, to be limited for the most part to speaking Kyrgyz at

4 The statement refers to Soviet policies that aimed to develop local cadres through ‘indigenization’ (*korenizatsiia*), which Northrop (2004:48) clarifies was an ‘elaborate affirmative action program’ to ‘create educated indigenous elites’.

home, while switching to Russian in any public situation, was commonly depicted as a challenging experience. Among this elder generation, the Kyrgyz language is thus regarded as providing a crucial link back towards the ancestral homeland (*ata-meken*). Furthermore, some respondents, most often men in their fifties, revealed to me romantic fantasies about their imminent return to their native Kyrgyz village, where, as one interlocutor put it: 'I would take the money I earned here to buy a tractor, then rent it out to my fellow farmers and have a quiet life'.

Novosibirsk's younger Kyrgyz provide a clear contrast to this. As regards the sons and daughters of Timur *aka's* generation, it is essential for their lifeworlds that they moved there as little children, or even grew up in Russia entirely. One notable aspect about these 'second generation' Kyrgyz is the relevance of education, which is projected onto them by their parents, many of whom — as Gulmira *eje's* friend phrased it — had been 'good specialists' during the Soviet era. For their offspring, instead of dragging them into the 'dirty *baraholka*', this parental generation is prepared to spend significant amounts of money — sometimes up to 500 USD per month and per child — for private schools, tutoring lessons and 'cultural' hobbies (such as playing the piano).

Aizhana is one of these bright, next-generation Kyrgyz. When I first met her in 2013, she was studying to become a lawyer. Equipped with a stipend from one of the more prestigious universities in the city, Aizhana was among the best in her class, admittedly in part because, as a 'non-Russian', she was determined to prove her worth and felt 'obliged' to succeed. Aizhana was certain to be well-integrated in Russia. She held Russian citizenship, and envisioned a future working for 'our government', meaning the Russian one. As is known from other diaspora contexts, the flip side of a child's successful integration might be parental anxieties about a loss of culture (e.g., language) and tradition (e.g., what is 'shameful behavior', or who should marry whom).

Although such inter-generational dilemmas have been part of my fieldwork experience, what interests me here is the setup and expression of a 'homing desire' (Brah 1996) among young Kyrgyz in Russia, i.e., their search for a place of belonging beyond simple geographic location in or outside of the Kyrgyz Republic. In this regard, for Aizhana and her peers, it is not so much language, as among themselves they predominantly converse in Russian, and it is definitely not 'working the land', that drives their attachment to Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore,

unlike Darieva (2011) has noted for 'US Armenian Americans', who consider environmental work in their ancestral home to be part of a global framework for improving the future of Mother Earth, among second-generation Kyrgyz there were no similar grand 'cosmopolitan' aspirations. And finally, although my Kyrgyz interlocutors would commonly self-identify as Muslims, only few articulated their homing desire in terms of religious ideals that were directed towards the traditional centres of Islam in Saudi Arabia (Stephan-Emmrich, Chapter Nine).

Rather than being linguistic, cosmopolitan, or religious, the charitable projections of young Kyrgyz in Russia were straightforwardly ethnic and aimed at lending a hand to the 'Kyrgyz nation' (*kyrgyz el*). Aizhana and her compatriots in Novosibirsk were vocal about the patriotic commitment they felt towards their fellow Kyrgyz, which is in line with the social phenomenon of a 'globalizing ethno-nationalism' that currently can be observed in Kyrgyzstan (Jacquesson, Chapter Six). From my early conversations with them, I learned, for example, about the work of the organization 'Manas'. Named after the main hero of the Kyrgyz traditional epic poem, this group of young compatriots offers free-of-charge legal and other support to recent migrants to Novosibirsk.⁵ I also participated in some of Manas' activities myself, such as when, in summer 2013, they collected gifts to be handed to 'respected elders' of the Kyrgyz Novosibirsk community during the celebrations for Kyrgyzstan's Independence Day on 31 August.

As regards fieldwork methodology, my involvement quite closely resembled the classic approach of face-to-face interviewing and following up via participant observation. Still, it was for quite a while that I missed a key dimension through which the Kyrgyz youth of Novosibirsk both organized social support and framed their homing desire: the internet. It was by ways of this virtual vehicle that significant diaspora resources were mobilized and the emotional attachment to an ethnic homeland found expression. For instance, this occurred in the group 'Keremet Jerim – Kyrgyzstan', which translates as 'My Divine Land – Kyrgyzstan', and is hosted on the Russian social networking website 'vkontakte.com' ('In Touch')⁶. Its members, mostly Kyrgyz who

5 <http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/25395675.html>

6 http://vk.com/edinyi_kyrgyzstan

reside in Russia, share news from Kyrgyzstan, post pictures and video files of Kyrgyzstan's landscape and of traditional food and cultural dresses, and discuss aspects of migrant life in Russia.



Fig. 8.2a 'My Divine Land — Kyrgyzstan'. © VK (2018), all rights reserved



Fig. 8.2b 'Kyrgyzstan's tallest man'. © Novosti Kyrgyzstana Kloop.kg (2014), all rights reserved

In 2014, one of the prevalent stories, both online and in personal conversations, concerned the group's partaking in the support effort for 'Kyrgyzstan's tallest man'⁷. Standing at more than 230 centimeters, Jenishbek Raiymbaev can move only with crutches and in addition suffers from diabetes and other illnesses. After a local news outlet first covered his tragic story, and captured on video how, for 100 Som (€1.50), people could take a picture with 'the giant' in a Bishkek bazaar, it was primarily through the *vkontakte* website that donations for Jenishbek's treatment were raised. In total, a sum of 20,000 Som (€300) was collected, most of it from young Kyrgyz in Russia. In a small ceremony held in a holiday resort at Kyrgyzstan's lake Issyk-Kul, Jenishbek Raiymbaev was handed this donation by a representative of the Kyrgyz diaspora.

The commentaries on this event celebrated it as proof that the Kyrgyz abroad could not only affectively but effectively reach back home. This again must be seen in light of the fact that some of these second-generation Kyrgyz might themselves only rarely travel to Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, and in contrast to their parents, many

⁷ <https://youtu.be/nOgIBtlbo8o>

young Kyrgyz like Aizhana do not imagine that they will permanently return to their fatherland. Instead, they have attuned themselves, both pragmatically and emotionally, to lead a 'better life in Russia', where higher living standards join individualized freedoms and meritocratic aspirations to shape their distinctly non-Kyrgyz social imagination. This then underlines Brah's (1996) insight that a (emotion-driven and performative) *desire for home* may be something entirely separate from a (strategically considered) *desire to return home* (see also Budarick 2011:6).

Regardless whether this concerns the present analysis of a virtual homing desire among second-generation Kyrgyz, as expressed within the online group 'Keremet Jerim – Kyrgyzstan', or perhaps the future internet-based negotiations of ethnic moralities among (extended) families that are split between two nation states, when producing my own tri-local ethnography it will be imperative to engage further with the field of 'digital anthropology' (see Horst and Miller 2012). As Kuntsman (2004) notes, aside from the opportunity to create a deterritorialized, yet still 'homey' place, 'cyberspace does not simply reflect existing off-line identities and power relations, but can silence, sublimate or exaggerate them'.⁸

When negotiating 'Kyrgyzness' abroad online, one such sensitive theme involves gender hierarchies and a widespread patriarchal quest to control female behavior and bodies. Gathered in groups such as 'Stop debauching KG [Kyrgyzstan]',⁹ cyber-vigilantes make it a matter of 'national shame' and 'Muslimness' if Kyrgyz girls upload provocative nude pictures in social networks. More violently, Kyrgyz men belonging to self-acclaimed 'patriot' groups have spread video files – to be seen by compatriots back home – of their raids through the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities, where they interrogate and chastise Kyrgyz women who they accuse of dating men of other ethnic groups.¹⁰

8 http://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/97

9 http://vk.com/stoprazvrat_kg

10 https://youtu.be/Y_t3gTt4vAQ

Vignette 3: Dungan kitchen and the Italian pub – a shallow diaspora

While the previous vignette has shown how young, second-generation Kyrgyz in Novosibirsk advance their ‘homing desires’ through social media, for those Kyrgyz who operate as middlemen in Guangzhou, the internet serves an economic function. It is not surprising that a person like Azamat, who has resided in this southern-Chinese metropolis for some years now, is involved in multiple Kyrgyzstan-oriented online communities and keeps in touch with his relatives ‘back home’ through online technologies such as Skype. Despite this, Azamat’s digital profile strongly contrasts with that of Aizhana.

To begin with, this is because Azamat is not a student like Aizhana. Fifteen years older, he perceives himself as the family breadwinner and an established business professional, which is also the capacity in which I first met him through a mutual acquaintance in Bishkek. Therefore, Azamat sees the internet primarily as a business tool, through which he can connect to clients, prepare their buying trips, and find essential information about local manufacturing sites. ‘In between my trips with these businessmen who I show around in China’, Azamat says, ‘I basically live on the internet’. To capture this in my research, I was lucky that Azamat allowed me to partially observe his online behavior – not from log files or other secondary documentation, but in person, by letting me join him in his Guangzhou apartment. There, I could quite literally look over his shoulder while he chatted with multiple clients and Chinese factory managers simultaneously, switching languages from Russian to Mandarin and back, just as he switched between the different screen windows of his laptop.

Aside from the invaluable insights I obtained about how Azamat ran his small enterprise, my sessions with him gave me a clear view of the spatial organization of the world-wide web as he uses it. Azamat lives somewhere other than Aizhana, not only geographically but also because he frequents another corner in cyberspace. While in China, Azamat forages for reliable producers and the best commodity deals

on regional e-commerce platforms, such as taobao.com (consumer-to-consumer, C2C) or alibaba.com (business-to-business, B2B). He communicates with his clients and factory representatives via specific software applications such as 'WeChat', which is an instant messenger that has most of its 400 million users in China. Knowledge of Mandarin and local search engines like 'Baidu' therefore remain key to navigating within China's state-censored virtual landscape, which is shielded from other international social communication platforms by the 'Great Firewall of China'.

Offline, parallels also emerge to an essentially different private life that the Kyrgyz in Guangzhou experience as compared to the diaspora community in Novosibirsk. By definition, in his profession as a middleman who facilitates business deals between Chinese manufacturers and his various Russian-speaking clients from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia, Azamat's primary task and skill is translating (see Introduction and Stephan-Emmrich, Chapter Nine). This translation work, if successful, bridges multiple translocal gaps among borders, languages, and forms of knowledge. Azamat thereby addresses a divide, which at first glance might be surprisingly large, given that both Russia and Kyrgyzstan share a border with China, and that all of these countries look back at a Socialist past. Yet, on the other hand, China's isolationism is historically well-documented, and from the 1960s until well into the 1980s this was related to the country's deteriorating politico-ideological relations with the Soviet Union (Karrar 2016).

Despite the so-called 'Sino-Soviet split', once Kyrgyzstan became an independent Republic in 1991 it could revive its relations with China (Tang 2000). Still, during the harsh early years of transformation, those Kyrgyz who plunged into an emerging post-Soviet capitalism did not turn first to China. One reason was that none of these pioneering Kyrgyz business people could draw on a similarly strong historic connection to China as was the case for the Dungans of Shortobe in Kazakhstan, for example (Alff, Chapter Five). As a group of Chinese-speaking Muslims, who had fled the Qing Empire in the late nineteenth century to travel to Russian Tsarist territories, Shortobe Dungans managed to reestablish links with Hui and Han Chinese business circles in the late Soviet days. Aside from a head start, the more favorable positioning of

these Dungans in the middleman-game, as compared to the Kyrgyz, goes beyond Mandarin language abilities. It entails a more intimate acquaintance with local customs in mainland China and the official status of Dungans as an 'overseas Chinese ethnic minority'.

For the Kyrgyz, on the other hand, the familiarity of shared Soviet history, Socialist values, and Russian language — plus, for some, the existence of personal networks between Central Asia and the empire's northern region due to both Soviet workforce and student mobility — made them see Russia and its burgeoning consumer market as a way out of their own collapsing national economies. As the previous vignettes have indicated, within the last two decades Kyrgyz diaspora life in Russia has become visible, vibrant, and vigorous. In Novosibirsk, for example, there exists a 'Kyrgyz Cultural Center', different Kyrgyz cargo companies and travel agencies, Central Asian restaurants, and a neighborhood nicknamed MZHK (*Mesto zhitelstvo Kyrgyzsov* or 'Place of residence of the Kyrgyz').

Nothing like this has yet appeared in China. In fact, Azamat and the other Kyrgyz I spent time with in Guangzhou do not identify themselves as belonging to a 'diaspora'. Mostly, they relate this to their small size, estimated at less than 1,000 Kyrgyz in the metropolis of 14 million people, as well as to their rather recent arrival, with reports that date the first Kyrgyz relocating there to 2006. Furthermore, with knowledge of Mandarin being so integral to success in the Chinese economy, all the Kyrgyz middlemen I encountered had studied the language, first at a university in Kyrgyzstan and then again in mainland China (often in Urumqi). This again sheds light on why my interlocutors in Guangzhou were rather young, ranging from students in their twenties to the likes of Azamat, who in their mid-30s already call themselves the 'old guys'.

Unlike in Novosibirsk, where bold weddings attended by a mix of local 'honorary' guests and relatives from back in Kyrgyzstan are examples of an extensive diaspora, in Guangzhou I found rather patchy small networks of young families. With only such weak ties to an imagined community of co-ethnics in their immediate living environment, some of the Kyrgyz there expressed enjoying this as a 'life with more freedom' and fewer worries about mechanisms of social control in regard to what a 'Kyrgyz society' would consider appropriate or shameful behavior (*uiat*). 'Here', a common joke had it among Azamat

and his friends, 'you just have to avoid being considered an Uighur [and thus a potential Turkic separatist], then you are fine in China'.

This situation opened up new avenues for the Kyrgyz of Guangzhou to integrate beyond their own ethnic group. Some therefore engaged in loose friendships with 'other Muslims', e.g. from Lebanon. 'For food', I was told, 'the closest we can find around here to our national cuisine are Dungan restaurants, so we go there'. And in early 2014, for the occasional evening out among men, the choice of Azamat and his friends was the Italian pub that had recently opened around the corner in their neighborhood.



Fig. 8.3 Zhongshanba neighbourhood in Guangzhou.
Photo © Philipp Schröder (2017), CC BY 4.0

All in all, the Kyrgyz in Guangzhou — and consequently my research — had to adapt to something that in comparison with the situation in Novosibirsk may be called a ‘shallow’ ethnic diaspora. Among China’s Kyrgyz middlemen, belonging was performed less as a distant, virtual ‘homing desire’ similar to that of Aizhana and other second-generation Kyrgyz in Russia. Rather, Azamat and his peers — partly because they had the financial means to do so — regularly travelled between China and Kyrgyzstan. Usually, they spend their summer holidays and a whole month around the Chinese New Year back home; they also return for important cultural events, such as weddings and funerals. As regards their futures, most young families like that of Azamat clearly expect to spend them in Kyrgyzstan. With fewer opportunities to actually settle down in China, where for instance they are not eligible for citizenship and consequently not able to acquire property, there are greater incentives for Azamat and his peers to try and earn their fortunes in Guangzhou now, then to invest these into Bishkek’s real-estate market or another post-China business endeavour across the border.

As for the final ‘house rule’ of my fieldwork, the previous vignette followed a switch I had to make after relocating from Novosibirsk to China: to look for less ‘Kyrgyzness’ or a coherent diaspora community in Guangzhou, and instead to follow up on the individual ‘translocal livelihoods’ of Azamat and other such middlemen during one of their frequent trips ‘back home’ to Kyrgyzstan. As regards my own positioning, both towards my interlocutors and the themes I could tackle, this substantiates George Marcus’s (1995:112) early insight that: ‘In practice, multi-sited fieldwork is thus always conducted with a keen awareness of being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation’.

Conclusion: the economics of translocality and satisficing ethnographic data

In this contribution, I made an attempt at epistemography. Lynch (2006:779) eloquently summarizes this as: ‘an empirical study of particular historical and institutional settings in which participants organize and deploy what counts, for them, as observation, experimental

evidence, truth, and knowledge'. The above pages entwined my own (researcher's) positionality with the situatedness of my interlocutors in different localities of Eurasia. From this I have identified three key house rules that shaped my fieldwork and thus the production of such a translocal ethnography.

The first of these, which debated the essentializing ethno-cultural (self-)stigmatization of trading activities among the older generation of Kyrgyz abroad, cautioned against an overambitious 'witnesshood' that might push the limits of what interlocutors consider appropriate participant observation. The second house rule may be summarized as 'go online!', and it drew attention to the role of cyberspace in regard to a 'homing desire' among second-generation Kyrgyz who have grown up in Russia. Shifting my focus to China, I entered a less intense diaspora context than I had experienced in Novosibirsk where many 'pioneers' had settled already in the 1990s. Given the Kyrgyz' shorter migration history in Guangzhou, which began only around the mid-2000s, and because of the smaller and rather dispersed nature of their social networks there, the third house rule led me to expand from the local gaze, most importantly by following up these middlemen's 'homeland connection' during their frequent return trips to Kyrgyzstan. Some of these house rules, then, relate to accepting the boundaries of knowledge production, for example as regards the observation of trading or the adaptation to a 'shallow' ethnic diaspora. Other house rules are about exploring alternative avenues by which boundaries could be expanded, for example by covering social media platforms or by meeting face-to-face when a Kyrgyz middleman residing in China spends some time in Bishkek.

What these house rules reflect as well are the dialogical experiences which I shared with my interlocutors. These involved diverse negotiations in which the eventual flow of information depended on aspects such as credible access, relative age, the location of the encounter, and, finally, on power constellations. In comparison to my previous research among young Kyrgyz males in urban Bishkek, when mutual and straightforward proofs of solidarity dominated our relatedness (Schröder 2014), the translocal assemblages of my current research comprises diverse sites and types of actors, and turns out to be more multidimensional and complex.

Regardless of whether the setting was Russia, China, or Kyrgyzstan, within the circles of business and entrepreneurship that I attempted to associate with, access depended primarily on credible long-term relationships with mutual acquaintances who vouched for me, and on the professional credentials of possessing a doctorate and being known to do scientific work on 'the Kyrgyz'. Being introduced as 'our already half-Kyrgyz professor' enabled entry into the field, which gained even further traction whenever outside of Kyrgyzstan it was remarked that 'he specifically came here [to Russia or China] to write about us'.

From there, however, my affiliation with certain groups of interlocutors evolved differently. With Timur *aka* and other first-generation Kyrgyz traders in Russia, who were ten to fifteen years my senior, I started off on a quite formal basis that was as much about the etiquette of proper hospitality within the Kyrgyz diaspora as about providing me with accurate, objective information on everyday business life. Only over time, and due to my repeated visits to Novosibirsk, did the likes of Timur *aka* begin perceiving our conversations as an opportunity for subjective self-presentation and intimate reflections on their own biographies. With the younger generation of Kyrgyz in Russia, our relative ages were reversed. As I was their senior by at least fifteen years, it was only upon my initiative that regular barriers of socializing and communication existing between members of different age-groups were lowered in order to encourage Aizhana and her peers to be vocal and expressive about their everyday life abroad. China, in that regard, proved to be an easy-going site. With interlocutors such as Azamat I shared the same position in an idealized Kyrgyz social lifecycle, that of a married family man in his thirties, which enabled us to interact on an equal level. Furthermore, because in Guangzhou there was no one 'elder' to Azamat and his peers, the degree of (re-)presenting 'Kyrgyzness' to me did not compare to that of the larger diaspora community in Novosibirsk, but was confined to dinner invitations at home with some traditional Kyrgyz dishes.

Despite the geographic distance and age differences between them, most of Timur *aka's* peers in Novosibirsk and those of Azamat in Guangzhou shared membership of what they referred to as an 'upper middle class'. The corresponding discourse of their social mobility from humble beginnings was expressed modestly, yet still it reflected a

strong confidence in their achievements. In my fieldwork practice this meant, for example, that I was not to define where, when, and for how long to meet, but that I should conform to their schedule, or that for a meaningful conversation to evolve, I needed first to demonstrate to know the basic methods and terminologies of doing business within post-Soviet capitalism. In these moments, I sensed I was not dealing with interlocutors who would be disempowered by my ability to objectify them in an ethnographic text, but more immediately I understood them to be firmly in the driver's seat during the process of data-gathering.

By considering the origins and consequences of my fieldwork's house rules, this chapter aims for more than a standard representation of my interlocutors' 'translocal livelihoods' in between three countries. Blending personal constellations with historical, cultural and other aspects of these contrasting (fieldwork) locales, in my view, allows for some rewarding insights into the very process of producing knowledge. To document how these always only imperfect and 'satisficing' results are achieved under such particular circumstances may enhance the validity of the written accounts that we offer of our ethnographic experiences. Such insights, of course, are not at all new to the anthropological discipline. They go back to early efforts at self-reflection such as those of William F. Whyte (1943), who elaborated on his ways into and around the 'Street Corner Society' of a 1930s Boston neighborhood in an impressive eighty-page appendix to his seminal study.

However, as the vignettes assembled here have shown, the ethnographic field has shifted significantly, not only with time and the dawn of new technological advancements, but also because nowadays often there is more than one fieldwork location in play. As Barak Kalir (2012) has argued recently, one of our tasks ahead will be to move beyond conceiving of migration primarily in terms of international border-crossings and state regimes that facilitate or impede these movements. Instead, to overcome such 'stagnant' fixation on the paradigm of 'methodological nationalism', we need to expand the ethnographic gaze and embed mobile trajectories within the wider context of their various translocal institutionalizations (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014).

This chapter offered some illustrations of how this occurs within personal biographies, informal networks, and social hierarchies

(e.g., of gender and generation), within imaginations of the future, and, finally, with regards to how belonging is performed and how emotional wellbeing (or discomfort) is negotiated both on the ground and in cyberspace. The house rules of fieldwork that emerge from the various instances of translation and mediation that occur among the interlocutors themselves, as much as between these and the researcher (see Introduction) are part of such institutionalizations. My contribution here emphasizes the translocal aspects of epistemography, i.e., of what can be perceived as observation, evidence, or knowledge in cases when everyone involved in a research project (the researcher included) has been engaging in multiple re-locations and re-adaptations to different national and regional contexts.

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