

Central Asia

Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, *Iconic Places in Central Asia: The Moral Geography of Dams, Pastures and Holy Sites*

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What can places tell us about a people? How are the ways by which places are built, inhabited, used, or imagined revelatory about cultural ideas and sensibilities? Anthropologist Féaux de la Croix presents a series of studies organized around this question, concerning the residents of the Toktogul region of the post-Soviet Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan). Central Asia is famously characterized by natural landscapes of breathtaking beauty and contrast: high mountains, lakes, rivers, steppe, desert, and oasis towns. Its people were historically divided between nomadic pastoralists exploiting alpine ecologies and sedentary city dwellers engaged in agriculture and craft. Over a century of Russian and Soviet rule resulted in the nomads being forcibly settled and modernized in many ways. The Kyrgyz are one formerly nomadic ethnic group who now have an independent republic to their name after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. A productive question to ask is, have centuries of nomadic adaptation, with the intimate forms of knowledge of pastures, mountains, water sources, climate, seasons, animals, etc., resulted in persistent ways of relating to the land? Does a nomadic past influence a kind of modern post-nomadic worldview and ethos? What would that look like?

Féaux de la Croix suggests that the Kyrgyz today indeed have a characteristic set of ways to conceive and engage with their environment, though she is careful not to essentialize mentalities nor reduce cultural repertoires to ecological adaptation. This is especially apparent when one contrasts her insights with parallel studies concerning conceptions of space of other ethnic groups in the region, particularly of historically sedentary peoples such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Uyghurs. Ex-nomads like the Kyrgyz or Kazakhs tend to sacralize landscape, imbuing it with powers, capacities, qualities, and agencies that interpenetrate human-nature-spirit boundaries. The book explores a range of sites and human activities within them to tease out Kyrgyz ways of relating to local place. It focuses on three kinds of places in the mountainous rural Toktogul region of Kyrgyzstan, which the author calls “iconic places,” because they each provoke much thought, emotional attachment, and sense of significance in the lives of the Kyrgyz in the area. The three iconic places appear to form a curious grouping, with little to do with each other: summer pastures (called *jailoos*), hydroelectric dams, and sacred sites (called *mazars*).

The author wants to argue that though these places do not directly influence each other, they need to be considered together because each is productive of local peoples’ imaginations and senses of well-being. Moreover, she claims that, “it is likely that the meanings of these iconic places ‘feed’ off and implicate each other, rather like Derrida’s *différance*. To understand the one place, it is necessary to comprehend the others” (293). This is an intriguing claim in light of the above discussion about post-nomadic

imaginaries of place and it forms the guiding idea framing the entire book. This framework enables the presentation of some nice ethnography on talk about and activity in each of those places. The integration, however, between the sites and between the chapters turns out to be weak. The book, despite its admirable intentions, reads more like a series of loosely connected site-specific studies than an interleaved, flowing, unified monograph. While various passages throughout the work do attempt to draw particular parallels with the other iconic sites, those connections are not probed in depth nor placed within a well-developed overall interpretive approach to make sense of them together.

Still, the specific explorations within each site are valuable for revealing worlds of meaning and practice in each iconic place. Féaux de la Croix shows that for Kyrgyz visiting or working at summer pastures today (as some do seasonally, but no longer as “pure” nomads), *jailoos* not only are a matter of economic value or sustainability but also sit as a crucial locus of their moral geography that evokes notions and practices of good living, health, wealth, cleanliness, beauty, and interpersonal relations. In a political context of nationalist ideologies promoted by the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani state, the *jailoo* comes to represent an entire way of being whose salutary qualities evoke an idealized collective memory of nomadic origins and thus an essential Kyrgyzness. Writing against the development and policy literatures on Central Asian mountain ecologies, she rightly demonstrates that these modern pastoralists want more than food security but a broader life of material and social well-being. A place like the *jailoo* stands for them as a unified source of life-giving qualities.

Concerning dams, Féaux de la Croix has researched and written extensively on water and hydroelectric stations for many years in Central Asia. She presents dams as sites of power not just in gigawatts but also as concentrations of vast amounts of water, capital, labor, expertise, and state interest. This may be the best part of the book, especially where the locale’s Soviet and post-Soviet dam projects are contrasted: the Toktogul Dam completed in 1974 and the Kambar-Ata dams completed in 2010 and 2016. While both represent the ambitions of high modernist states, in James Scott’s sense, the author discusses the differences in the meanings between these two sets of state-driven mega-projects, involving a Soviet pan-ethnic unity versus ethnic Kyrgyz independence, and state ownership versus privatized development. Dams enter into Kyrgyz imaginaries as objects of awe and are the subject of proverbs and poetry as the source of life and national pride.

Sacred sites called *mazars* form the center of much Central Asian pilgrimage and visitation practice, which was intensified during the Soviet era because of restricted travel outside the Soviet Union. Few observant Muslims were allowed on the Hajj to Mecca and so local sites served as a substitute, even though the seeking of spiritual blessings and healings at *mazars* are not considered orthodox Islamic practice by many Muslims. Féaux de la Croix approaches these sites as iconic landmarks in Kyrgyz moral geographies, analogous to *jailoos* and dams, that also reveal conceptions about the good life. What distinguishes *mazars* in that they are treated as having efficacy to change in a person’s circumstances (healing, pregnancy, success, encounters with spiritual beings, or even misfortune), and as possessing certain qualities of a person. They can be seen as exercising a kind of agency in human lives, and the author begins a promising line of discussion that evokes recent discussions from Bruno Latour and science and technology studies concerning the agency of things, which is unfortunately

not developed. The Kyrgyz healers and visitors appear not to have a coherent articulated cosmology concerning the power of *mazars* and thus maintain an ontological ambiguity about what makes them special or efficacious.

The above summary shows that there are meaningful threads connecting these iconic sites, but those needed to be analyzed and conceptually framed much more. The author does have a concluding discussion about how the residents of Toktogul interact with different places in different ways but across a coherently forged landscape that is nonetheless tolerant of incongruity and incommensurability (304). The book leaves out several discussions that would have contextualized this study better. One is how the imaginaries described are more broadly Central Asian or nomadic—closer comparisons with other studies would have helped. Second, it would have been good to push deeper into uncovering the ontology of the iconic places—what kinds of things, persons, powers, or agents do the Kyrgyz treat them as, what kind of world is being constituted—because the author does emphasize the importance of materiality and mentions the ontological turn in anthropology. This is a good book that is useful to academics and graduate students of Central Asia and development actors in the region for its depictions of a lifeworld that is multiply layered with lived meanings and realities.

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